

The Roots of the Renaissance

The rediscovery of ancient learning which led to the Europe-wide phenomenon of the Renaissance is a fascinating story. **Two historical events** in particular were of fundamental importance: the fall of the city of Constantinople (now Istanbul) to the Turks in 1453 and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, the same year that Columbus sailed to the Americas, and after them the Moors by 1505. The resulting **movement of exiled peoples and cultures** – Hebrew and Islamic culture from Spain and Greek culture from Constantinople – to other parts of Europe resulted in a **spread of learning**, which concentrated itself in the cities of northern Italy and in Florence and Venice in particular.

It was here that progressive thinkers and philosophers, among whom were **Giovanni Pico della Mirandola** (1463-94) and later **Francesco Giorgi** (1466-1540), began to reformulate their own Christian culture under the combined influence of the Greek philosophy of Plato and Pythagoras, and the Jewish tradition of Cabala, a traditional religious doctrine, passed orally through generations.

The influence of Cabala

Cabala, meaning tradition, referred to the practice of two activities. The first concerned a complex system of numerology or codes passed to the Hebrew people by Moses enabling them to decipher hidden meanings about the origins of God within the Hebrew alphabet. His work in this direction was part of a **spirit of reform** that was spreading through the progressive minds of the clergy and that would lead in northern Europe to the phenomenon of the Reformation led by Martin Luther.

Cabala's other, more dangerous, use was to 'capture the powers of superior things', or the power of spirits and angels. Though this sounds a lot like magic, Pico della Mirandola claimed that this kind of Cabala was good and holy – a **'white' magic** that had nothing in common with the 'black' magic that attracted demons. In this white magic of Christian Cabala we see the beginnings of a new attitude of man to the world – **man as the operator on nature**, whose mission was to discover the secret laws of God's universe and rise to the heights of the angels in his understanding. We see this attitude clearly in Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, a founding text for the new philosophy of Humanism that would spread around Europe in the following century. Christian Cabala was one necessary component of this mission; another was the philosophy and mathematics of the Greeks.

Francesco Giorgi's De Harmonia Mundi

Francesco Giorgi was profoundly interested in Cabala, a tradition that he connected to numerological theories derived from Plato and Pythagoras regarding the harmony of the world and of humanity. For Giorgi, the harmony that the creator had given to each level of the universe was based on number and on the numeric laws of proportion, a theory he derived partly from the Neoplatonist reasoning of Marcilio Ficino.

According to Ficino, the macrocosm of the universe was reflected in the microcosm of anyone of its parts. In this way, for example, the levels of the universe and its architectural order were reflected in the fixed social hierarchy of society.

Giorgi was also partly responsible for reversing the medieval superstition that some of the stars and planets had malign influences. Saturn, in particular, and its associated humour of **melancholy**, had been feared and despised in medieval times. However, during the Renaissance, through a re-evaluation of Aristotle and Plato – both of whom had argued that melancholy was the temperament of great men – it took on a more positive meaning.

Melancholy became regarded as a state of profound inspiration and even genius, an idea that was to have significant repercussions in Renaissance aesthetics. Shakespeare's Hamlet, for example, dramatically embodies the figure of an inspired melancholic genius.

Influence on the Elizabethans

The works and theories of Christian Cabalists like Pico and Giordano Bruno constituted the **dominant philosophy** of the Elizabethan age and were probably familiar to many educated Elizabethans.

They were all present in the vast library of **John Dee** (1527-1608), a mathematician and alchemist and for a time one of Elizabeth I's closest advisors, serving as her official astrologer. Dee's house became an important meeting place for intellectuals of the time. Dee managed to preserve many ancient scientific works that had been scattered when Catholic churches and monasteries were ransacked during the Reformation. His own library of more than 4,000 books, one of the largest of its kind in Europe, was frequented by the most important courtiers, poets, navigators, mathematicians and historians of the time but was burned to the ground during the Counter-Reformation.

TIME IN MOTION

1 Lab Use the Internet to find out more about John Dee. Work in small groups and look for information on one of the following:

- Dee's life and death
- Dee's practices in alchemy and occultism
- Dee's astrological system.

Melencolia, by Albrecht Dürer (1514)



John Dee, work by unknown artist (ca 1594)

