The interpretation of the Renaissance has been the object of many studies and has sparked many heated discussions about its relationship with the Middle Ages. All of this controversy has promoted a better understanding of both the Renaissance and the medieval era as historical moments closely connected and yet clearly different. A typical feature of the Renaissance is harmony, which is expressed in art and also as a life-ideal whose patterns were sought after in classical culture. A considerable discrepancy existed between this ideal and reality, however. The desire for equilibrium and for artistic and intellectual serenity was jeopardized by the crisis of traditional values.

The Renaissance brought forth a new conception of the human being, a revaluation of his activity in the world and, accordingly, a redefinition of his relationship to God. The ideal of an active and productive life and the admiration for the performance of human action according to the values of a merchant society was often felt to be in contradiction with traditional Christian ethics. A rift arose between the endeavor to reach worldly success and the anxiety for the salvation of the soul. The actions of man were no longer turned only toward God, approximated on the model of Franciscan asceticism that found its exemplary literary representation in the *Divina Commedia* by Dante, but toward searching for his goal in the world itself, which often forced him to refrain from the traditional moral values. Therefore, man had to be “half beast and half man,” as Machiavelli imagined the perfect prince to be.

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* This paper was previously published with some changes in Hebrew in *Pe'amim* 2005 (104): 65–78.


Within a Christian (neo)platonic philosophy, one tried to find a new synthesis that would offer a solution to the crisis of the traditional hierarchy of values. Particularly important in this context was the work of Francesco Giorgio (or Giorgi or Zorzi) Veneto.\(^3\)

Francesco Giorgio Veneto (Venice 1466–Asolo 1540) was one of the outstanding personalities among the Italian kabbalistic scholars, whose influence extended far beyond the Italian borders. Descending from a Venetian patrician family, Giorgio Veneto entered the Franciscan Order in 1480. His philosophy combines the mystical tradition of the Franciscans with the Hermetic-kabbalistic thought of Pico della Mirandola and the magic-neoplatonic philosophy of Marsilio Ficino.\(^4\)

After Ficino’s Latin translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* in the year 1463, Hermetic tradition was released from the ban, which the medieval Church had issued because of its magic subject matter, and became part of the Renaissance culture. On the authority of leading Fathers of the Church, particularly Lactantius and Augustine, the authorship of the Hermetic writings was ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus.\(^5\) He was considered to be a wise Egyptian priest who had lived in pre-biblical times, a law-giver and a teacher of old wisdom. This wisdom was passed down, in an unbroken chain, to Plato. From Hermes arose one ancient theology (*prisca theologia*), an extra-biblical wisdom that foresaw the coming of Christianity.\(^6\) In the Florentine “Accademia Platonica,” Giovanni Pico della Mirandola connected Hermetism with Kabbalah, which was interpreted according to Christian theology, and Hermes was paralleled to Moses.\(^7\)

Francesco Giorgio Veneto was deeply influenced by the thought of Ficino and Pico. But Francesco Giorgio Veneto, who possessed a

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7. Ibid., 84–86; 108–112.