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VINCENZO CICOGNA: A FORGOTTEN CHRISTIAN KABBALIST¹

In the first half of the 16th century, Verona became the center of an exceptional wave of religious reformation, marked by strong spiritual and devotional overtones. One of the most obscure, yet interesting ecclesiastical figures born and raised in this city is Vincenzo Cicogna (c. 1519-after 1596). His activity bears the mark of Veronese culture of his time: he was a priest, a controversial preacher fascinated by Lutheran theology, an experienced Hebraist and the author of a commentary on the *Psalms* (Padova, 1567), doomed to be included in the *Index of Prohibited Books*. What is more surprising is that Cicogna, in the last years of his life, developed an interest in the Jewish mystical tradition and even compiled a thus far unknown booklet, dedicated to a Trinitarian interpretation of Kabbalistic materials, preserved in a manuscript in the Biblioteca Queriniana in Brescia, which I had the chance to come across recently.² The aim of the present article is to explore and analyse this newly discovered document, both in the context of Cicogna's life and thought (see § 1-2), neither of which have been carefully studied, and from the wider perspective of the history of Christian Kabbalah (see § 3-4). As will be argued, Cicogna's work constitutes a lost chapter in the development of this tradition, which sits at the crossroads between Judaism and Christianity.

¹ This article is part of a comprehensive study on the impact of the *Zohar* on Christian culture between the 16th and 19th centuries, supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and hosted at the Jewish Institute of the Freie Universität, Berlin. I warmly thank Giulio Busi, who supervised the project, for his insights on several aspects of the work, and Adriano Prosperi for his comments on the first draft of this paper.

² For a description of this documents, see *infra*, § 2.

³ G. DA RE, *I Cicogna dal secolo XV*, in «Madon-

I.

Thanks to the records of the Anagraphic Register of Verona,³ we learn that Vincenzo was the descendent of a family of Greek origin. His great-grandfather was a certain Demetrio, who moved from Arcadia to Contrada S. Salvar Corte Regia, where he is known to have lived in 1463. Demetrio had a son, Pierleonardo (c. 1467 - before 1529), who became a painter, though none of his works are known to us. Two of Pierleonardo's eleven children, namely Sebastiano (1497 - before 1549) and Girolamo (c. 1493 - before 1549), followed his steps and managed to integrate themselves with the artistic milieu of Verona, the former by teaching the art of painting to shop boys (*garzoni*) of the city, and the latter by working as a painter, embroiderer and architect. According to Vasari,⁴ Girolamo, who enjoyed an excellent reputation during his lifetime, worked in the service of the bishop of Verona, Gian Matteo Giberti (1495-1543). Giberti was the most prominent guide within a circle of learned clergymen committed to an ambitious programme of renewal of the religious life of their time,⁵ which led to the overhaul of the entire Veronese diocese. This is certainly a noteworthy fact, since Vincenzo Cicogna, who was the son of Girolamo, decided to take up an ecclesiastical career and become a priest in this diocese.

na Verona. *Bollettino del Museo Civico di Verona*», VII (1913), pp. 109-123.

⁴ G. VASARI, *Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti* (G. BOTTARI ed.), 3 vol s., Roma 1759-1760, II, p. 361 [Fra' Iocondo e Liberale e altri veronesi]: «[Giovanni Caroto] in un quadro dipinse la trasformazione d'Ateone in cervio, per Brunetto maestro d'organi, il quale la donò poi a Girolamo Cicogna, eccellente ricamatore et ingegnere del vescovo Giberti, et oggi l'ha Messer Vincenzo Cicogna suo figliuolo».

⁵ On Giberti, see A. PROSPERI, *Tra evangelismo e controriforma. G.M. Giberti (1495-1543)*, Roma

Unfortunately, not much can be said about the early phase of Vincenzo's life. We know neither when he was ordained, nor when he became acquainted with Giberti. From the few documents available to us we can only conclude that from 1544 onwards he served as rector in San Zeno in Oratorio in Verona.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that his spiritual journey had been deeply influenced by Giberti's message of reform, which demanded a return to severe and rigorous discipline, a renewed attention to the Scriptures, to patristic sources, and above all to the example of Christ's life and suffering. Cicogna's fascination with these ideals led him to embrace them to the point of becoming one of the most tenacious upholders of the "Costituzioni Gibertine" (*Giberti's Ordinances*). Indeed, he was among the few who continued supporting them after they were attacked by the "Capitolo del clero" a couple of months after Giberti's death on the 20th December 1543.⁶

Another aspect worth highlighting is the skeptical attitude of Giberti's group towards the Roman Church and the inclination of some of their members towards controversial theological issues, such as the doctrine of justification by faith, of predestination, of free will, and of grace.⁷

Cicogna was also engaged in intense preaching activity based on such themes. Brows-

ing through the documents from the exceptional heretical trial that took place in Verona in 1550, we discover that his sermons were enthusiastically attended by figures who eventually came under suspicion of heresy.

Among the confessions of some of those put to trial, we find clear evidence of his critical attitude towards the abuses of the Roman Church, of his interests for the doctrine of predestination, of his willingness to discuss topics such as the cult of saints and the justification by faith,⁸ and, finally, we learn about his unorthodox stance on the sacrament of the Eucharist.⁹

Years later, rumors about the controversial quality of his sermons were still widespread. During another trial, which took place in Brescia in 1568, one of the accused recalled how in San Zeno "si leggeva l'evangelio al modo luterano".¹⁰

However, it would appear that Cicogna, towards the end of the 1540s, changed his attitude and began preaching in a more orthodox way.¹¹ This was to the disappointment of part of his audience, who ascribed this twist to the priest's fears, which would have made him bow to the wishes of the inquisitorial commission. This at least was the opinion of the doctor in law Tiberio de Oliveto (1506-after 1557), one of the most active suppliers of controversial books in Verona, which helped in spreading reform doctrines:¹²

1969; A. TURCHINI, s.v. *Giberti, Gian Matteo*, in «Dizionario Biografico degli italiani» vol. 54, Roma 2000, pp. 623-629.

⁶ The "Constitutiones gibertinae" were approved and edited in Verona on the 22th of May 1542; Vincenzo Cicogna, together with Adamo Fumano, Nicolò Ormaneto and Giovan Battista Scali did not agree with the proposal to appeal to the Pope against their validity, see PROSPERI, *Tra evangelismo e controriforma*, cit., pp. 177, 276; R. PASQUALI, *Le Constitutiones per il clero di Gian Matteo Giberti*, in «Rivista di Storia Sociale e Religiosa» 40 (1991), pp. 231-237.

⁷ See PROSPERI, *Tra evangelismo e controriforma*, cit., pp. 275-288; S. PEYRONEL RAMBALDI, *Dai Paesi Bassi all'Italia, «il Sommario della Sacra Scrittura». Un libro proibito nella società italiana del Cinquecento*, Firenze 1998.

⁸ See L. TACCHELLA, *Il processo agli eretici veronesi nel 1550: S. Ignazio di Loyola e Luigi Lippomano (carteggio)*, Brescia 1979, p. 154.

⁹ See *ivi*, p. 136: «Pocho inanti che me appresentasse qui me fò ditto da alcuni, che poi facilmente me venivano in mente, che D. Vincentio [Cicogna] già per intanti haveva ditto che s'el corpo di Christo fosse nel hostia in quel modo ch'el fò messo in croce, bisognaria che l'hostia fosse grande come è un fondo da tinazzo».

¹⁰ A. OLIVIERI, *Simeone Simeoni 'filoratorio' di Vicenza (1570): il dibattito su charitas e paupers*, in «Quaderni di Storia Religiosa» 2 (1995), pp. 234: 225-243.

¹¹ For a discussion on whether Cicogna actually inclined towards heretical positions and then changed his mind, or whether he always stuck to Giberti's reformation message, see the two different stands taken by PROSPERI, *Tra Evangelismo e Controriforma*, cit., p. 276 and TACCHELLA, *Il processo*, cit., p. 133.

¹² See TACCHELLA, *Il processo*, cit., pp. 112-113; PEYRONEL RAMBALDI, *Dai Paesi Bassi*, cit., pp. 159-161.

Those gluttons [*i.e.* Cicogna and Alberto Lino]¹³ used to preach the truth, but now, out of fear, they are wavering [...] they used to preach according to our opinions, then they started preaching otherwise.¹⁴

This statement was confirmed by the confession of yet another heretical suspect, Bernardino Culcitario:

I used to attend his sermons with pleasure, because he was preaching according to my opinions [...] But one day, more or less one year ago, I heard him delivering a sermon in which he was talking about praying for the dead; I didn't like his words, so from that moment on I didn't want to go to listen to him again.¹⁵

Other signs of his alleged conversion would be both the doctrinal positions which he maintained in his first published work, a collection of sermons on the Eucharist, which appeared in Venice in 1556,¹⁶ and his collaboration and friendship over the following years with figures such as cardinal Carlo Borromeo (1538-1584), one of the leaders of the Counter-Reformation,¹⁷ and the bishop of Padua, Nicolò Ormaneto (c. 1515-1577), who brought Cicogna with him to Milan around 1564 and entrusted him with the implementation of the Tridentine decrees in the women's monasteries of the city.¹⁸ Moreover, be-

fore leaving for Milan, on the 9th of December 1563, Cicogna was invited by the clergy to give the welcoming speech for Bernardo Navagero (1507-1565), upon his entrance in Verona as its newly elected bishop.¹⁹

However, Cicogna's issues with the Inquisition were not over. His second book, the previously mentioned *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, was inscribed in the *Index of Prohibited Books* in 1580, 1583, and 1596. As we shall see, two of his later works were censored as well.²⁰ In 1570, his name shows up again during the trial in Brescia²¹ and three years later, we find him serving a six month period of imprisonment in Rome.²² He was finally prohibited from "publishing or even composing anything related to theology in the future", as is written in a letter preserved in the Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith;²³ an assessment that condemned his writings to centuries of silence and dust, far from the curious eyes of scholars and historians.

2.

We don't know the grounds on which the Inquisition persecuted Cicogna's *Enarrationes* and his following literary production with such vehemence. It is nevertheless hard to overlook a feature common to his mature activity, name-

¹³ Another Veronese cleric deeply influenced by Giberti's reformation ideals; for biographical information on this figure, see TACHELLA, *Il processo*, cit., pp. 132-133.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 141: «Quei giotoni i predicavan prima la verità, ora per paura vano scaramuzando [...] prima i predicavano secondo le opinioni nostre et dopo i predicano altramente».

¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 128: «et io lo udiva volentieri perché el mi satisfaceva secondo le mie opinioni che io veniva [...] ma un giorno che puol esser circa un anno lo sentii far una predica nella quale el parlete del pregar per li morti, et per causa de quella predica la quale non mi piacque non ho mai più voluto andar ad ascoltarlo».

¹⁶ V. CICOGNA, *Sermones VII, quibus universam de sanctissimo Eucharistiae Sacramento materiam complectitur*, Venetiis, apud Andream Arrivabenum, 1556. This text was republished six years later, together with eight new sermons (*De novissimis*

septem Christi verbis VI; De Christi suppliciis I; De Christi sepulcro I).

¹⁷ An interesting document attesting the relation between the two is a letter from Cicogna to the Cardinal dated 12th of July 1567 (Milano, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, ms. F 110 inf., c. 367).

¹⁸ See C. MARCORA, *Nicolò Ormaneto Vicario Generale di S. Carlo*, in *Memorie Storiche della Diocesi di Milano*, vol. VIII, Milano 1961, pp. 262, 279; TACHELLA, *Il processo*, cit., p. 129.

¹⁹ The *Oratio in adventu Navagerii* was printed in Venice in 1564. The following year, Cicogna wrote as well the funeral oration upon the death of the same Navagero (*In funere B. Navagerii*), see S. MAFFEI, *Verona Illustrata (Parte Seconda)*, Verona 1731, p. 422.

²⁰ See *infra*, § 2.

²¹ OLIVIERI, *Simoene Simeoni*, cit., p. 233.

²² See DA RE, *I Cicogna*, cit., p. 119.

²³ Archivio della Congregazione per la Dottrina

ly his increasing interest in the exegetical Jewish tradition, both rabbinical and, in a later phase, mystical.²⁴ His ventures in this field were supported by a good knowledge of the Hebrew language, of which Cicogna gives proof in the *Commentary to the Psalms*, by resorting time and again to the etymology of Hebrew words to unveil the meaning of biblical verses.

For instance, to better understand the relationship between happiness and the act of walking implied by the first verse of *Psalms* 118, which reads: *Beati immaculati in via, qui ambulat in lege domini* (“Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord”), Cicogna deems necessary to detect the root of the Hebrew word for “blessed”, or “happy”, i.e. אֲשֶׁר, which he identifies with the three letters of the verb יָשַׁר, i.e. “to go straight ahead”, “to proceed in a successful way” (*prosperare progredi*). Once this etymological connection has been established, it becomes clear that happiness has to be conceived of as the result of a prosperous progression; but this prosperous progression is possible only to those *who walk in the law of the Lord*. The Veronese priest agrees with the words of the Psalmist, to the extent that he claims that nobody who walks outside the path of the Scripture, regardless of his wealth, can attain the “vera beatitudo”,²⁵ not even those who dedicate their entire lives to the study of philosophy. All “human wisdom” (*humana sapientia*), maintains Cicogna, is to be considered “inimica” (a significant stand against the pretensions of profane

learning), since it deprives the “field of the soul” (*agellus animi*) of its life-giving dew, namely the “blessing wisdom of God” (*beatificans illa Dei sapientia*). This position is backed again by an etymological connection between the word תּוֹרָה (*Torah*), properly meaning “doctrine”, and the verb יָרָה (*iaculari*), i.e. “to shoot”, which can be linked as well to the act of raining (*impluere*) and bedewing (*irrorare*).²⁶

As we can deduce from the above, what drove Cicogna to the study of the Hebrew language was not just a philological or erudite interest, but rather the idea that the path to happiness and truth is concealed in the words of the Scriptures and is accessible only to their truthful interpreter, i.e. to the one who is not driven by a pure intellectual curiosity, but who humbly opens his heart to God’s words, and for this reason gets to know (*cognoscere*) – and not only to “rejoice in”, as taught by Augustin – God itself *propter ipsum Deum*.²⁷

However, the depth of the holy language is not confined to the roots of words. A more concealed layer of meaning is indeed enclosed in each of its letters. On this assumption, Cicogna decided to insert within the text of the commentary on *Psalms* 118 twenty-one small paragraphs dedicated to the symbolic explanation of each element of the Hebrew alphabet.²⁸ From “Aleph”, the first and most noble letter and the symbol itself of divinity,²⁹ to “Tav”, conceived of as a symbol of the Law of God³⁰ and of the happiness within the reach of the one who walks and

della Fede, *Index Protocolli G*, ff. 306r-317v, quoted by E. ESZENYI, *Lessons from Angelology*, in «*Journal of Cognition and Neuroethics*» 3 (2015), pp. 158-173: 161.

²⁴ A subject worth investigating would be the connection between Cicogna’s hebraistic interests with the figure of Johann van Campen (1491-1538), the well-known professor of Hebrew at Leuven and the author of an important commentary to the *Psalms*, who was invited by Giberti to Verona to give lectures on biblical books to a small group of Giberti’s friends and learned Jews. On Van Campen’s stay in Verona see P. SALVETTO, *Tullio Crispoldi nella crisi religiosa del Cinquecento. Le difficili “pratiche del viver cristiano”*, Brescia 2009, pp. 81-143.

²⁵ Cf. V. CICOGNA, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, Padova 1567, ff. 16v-18v.

²⁶ Cf. *ivi*, ff. 18v-19r.

²⁷ Cf. *ivi*, ff. 20v-21r.

²⁸ *Ivi* f. 16r: «Cum haec littera prima sit earum litterarum, quibus decantatissimum et primum illud sacrum Dei nomen in divinis libris contentum אֱלֶפֶת scribatur, ea in alphabeto quoque principem obtinuit locum, atque ea potissimum causa princeps seu dux a Rabbiniis appellatur: ut his appellationibus divinitas significetur, quae est rerum omnium principium. Nam ut reliqua alphabeti elementa ab Aleph initium habent, et ab ea tanquam a duce suo pendere videantur, ita ab ipsa divinitate initium habere omnia, et ab eo veluti a suo duce pendere, significatum est».

²⁹ It is the first letter of the first holy name of God that appears in the Scriptures, i.e. אֱלֹהִים and from which all other letters come from, as God is the beginning and the cause of all things.

³⁰ It is the first letter of the word *Torah*.

persists in it. The latter is a mystery that “*Tav*” concealed as well in its original figure. As stated by Saint Girolamo, this letter was in fact once cross-shaped, a token of the cross of Christ, namely the peak of all knowledge and wisdom.³¹

It is then safe to say that Cicogna’s desire to explore the lore of Jewish wisdom was partly fostered by the belief that the doctrines of the Old Testament were in harmony with Christian truths and that a reconciliation between these two traditions was possible. If this programme, in its general outlines, might have reflected some of the utopic visions circulating among members of Giberti’s circle,³² it is nevertheless true that Cicogna expanded on it afterwards. In fact, in his following works, his philological quest for the theological mysteries of the Scriptures winded up assuming a metaphysical twist, as Cicogna came to think that a proper understanding of the Scriptures would allow man to overcome his “corrupted nature”, which prevents him from seeing

the essence of the divine and from reaching the perfect *beatitudo* (which can not be obtained by knowing that God exists, *quod sit*, but only by knowing his very nature, *quid sit*). The study of the law of God becomes then a way out from this world of darkness, a path along which the souls can free themselves from their “corporeal prison” (a clearly Platonic image) and can eventually enjoy the light and splendour of the Godhead.³³

The most fascinating fruits borne by this new approach are two voluminous books, written between the 1570s and the 1580s.³⁴ The first of these offers a Christological interpretation of the sayings of the prophets.³⁵ The second one, similar in its structure to the first, is a collection of names and attributes of God, arranged according to a Trinitarian scheme.³⁶

Both works were first censored, then thought to be lost. It was only during a visit to the Biblioteca Queriniana in Brescia that I had the chance to come across two voluminous manu-

³¹ *Ivi*, ff. 188v-189r: «Thau est ultimum alphabeti hebraici elementum, et eorum primum, quibus sacrosanta Dei lex et doctrina scribitur, quod est תורה id quod non sine maximo mysterio factum est, significatur enim divinam hanc doctrinam tantae esse excellentiae, ut qui eam perfecte assecutus fuisse videatur, vix primordia illius attigerit, propterea ultima alphabeti littera in principio divinae Legis apponitur [...] Haec quoque littera Crux Christi deliniatur antiquitus enim littera Thau crucis figura, id D. Hieronimo attestante, scribebatur, qua certe cruce qui insignitus est, Diaboli potestatem, et mortem liber evadit, cuius cognitionem si quis assequitur, gloriari poterit se ad totius scientiae et sapientiae apicem pervenisse, ut cum D. Paulo gloriari possit, se nihil scire, nisi Iesum Christum, et hunc Crucifixum».

³² See OLIVIERI, *Simeone Simeoni*, cit., pp. 234-236; G. CONFORTI, *Villa del Bene: iconografia e inquietudini religiose nel Cinquecento. Gli affreschi della loggia e dell’Apocalisse*, in «Annuario Storico della Valpolicella» 20 (2003-2004), pp. 99-120: 112.

³³ Cfr. Brescia, Biblioteca Queriniana, cit., ms. A.II.13, f. 1v.

³⁴ More precisely, they can be dated between 1572 and 1585, as proved by the dedication addressed to Pope Gregory XIII preserved in the Archivio della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede, see ESZENYI, *Lessons from Angelology*, cit., pp. 160-161; we also know that Cicogna sent these two books to Cardinal Giulio Antonio Santori (1532-

1602), see *ivi*. A third work (c. 1587; likely the last of Cicogna’s literary activity), preserved in a manuscript of the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, GRI, ms. 86-A866 (*Angolorum et Daemonum nomina et attributa passim in divinis scripturis contenta ad patrum sententiam explicata*), is entirely dedicated to biblical angelology and demonology. This work has been analysed by E. Eszenyi in her PhD dissertation (*On Perfect and Imperfect Angels: A Catholic Reformer’s Angelology from the Late-Sixteenth Century Veneto*, University of Kent, 2014) and in several articles, see for instance *Lessons from Angelology*; and *Angels as the Manus Dei: Evidence in art and angelology*, in «Acta Academiae Artium Vilmensis» 80/1 (2016), pp. 71-80.

³⁵ Brescia, Biblioteca Queriniana, cit., ms. A.II.12 (*Oracula quatuor et viginti centum ex Moyse et prophetis, reliquis atque libris sacris excerpta*).

³⁶ Brescia, Biblioteca Queriniana, ms. A.II.13 (*Attributa diuinarum personarum patris, Filij et spiritus sancti, passim in divinis scripturis contenta*). It would be interesting to investigate Cicogna’s Trinitarian speculations against the background of the theological stand taken both by other prominent figures of Giberti’s circle and by popular eretical movements widespread in the Veneto region, for which see D. CANTIMORI, *Anabattismo e neoplatonismo nel XVI secolo in Italia*, in «Rendiconti della classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche della R. Accademia nazionale dei Lincei» s. VI, 12 (1936), pp. 533-544.

scripts, containing these writings.³⁷ While leafing through the second one, what stood out, besides the dazzling list of terms collected by Cicogna,³⁸ were the annotations that run in the margins of almost every page.³⁹ Surprisingly, several of them provide Kabbalistic evidence in support of the author's claim that the puzzling scriptural descriptions of God's affections, emotions, and even limbs, have the function of manifesting and making understandable aspects of the inner – and invisible – structure of the divine.⁴⁰

Well aware of the peculiarity of his newly found passion, Cicogna decided to add at the end of his work an appendix that extends over 36 folios, stuffed with densely annotated inserts.⁴¹ At the very outset of this booklet, which he titled *Sephirot drew out from the Maareket and the Pardes Rimmonim, translated into Latin and explained*,⁴² Cicogna tries to clarify to his readers what Kabbalah is and why it is worth studying. To carry out this task he doesn't use his own words, but rather the words of a *proper divinus* philosopher, as he states, who happened to be the forerunner of Christian Kabbalah: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494).

A lengthy quotation from the well-known *Oratio de Hominis Dignitate*⁴³ takes up the first two pages of the booklet. It is the passage in which Pico explains that Kabbalah is a mystical and secret explanation of the Law of God that Moses received on Mount Sinai and that he handed down to posterity on condition of silence – an injunction that would be respected until af-

ter the Babylonian exile, when Ezra decided to commit these teachings to writing, out of fear of losing them. Pico then goes on to explain how Ezra gathered all the wise men of the time and compelled them to communicate their knowledge of the mysteries of the Law, and how these communications were then collected by scribes into seventy volumes. Finally, the Count of Mirandola explains how it was possible to find in these books “not so much the Mosaic, as the Christian religion”, since in them, among other doctrines, were to be found evidences “of the mystery of the Trinity, of the Incarnation of the Word and of the divinity of the Messiah”.

Cicogna seems to firmly believe Pico's mythic reconstruction, including the story of the seventy books. As a matter of fact, he even recalls that once, in Venice, a converted Jew told him that the Kabbalistic treasure mentioned by the Count of Mirandola still existed. More than that, this obscure character claimed to know that all these volumes had been given as a pledge to Pietro Quirino, bishop of Concordia, who was looking after them with great care.⁴⁴ We would be curious to know more about the bishop's Kabbalistic collection, and so was the Veronese priest, who tried twice or thrice to visit Quirino at his place, to no avail:

I've tried to visit him twice or thrice at his place, but since I've always found the bishop deeply suffering from gout, I had to give up with the greatest disappointment.⁴⁵

³⁷ I would like to thank Dr. Carlotta F.M. Sticco (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano), for having drawn my attention to these two volumes.

³⁸ All of them are analyzed and explained through patristic, rabbinic and mostly Greek philosophic sources.

³⁹ There are clear pieces of evidence for the fact that these marginal annotations were meant to be inserted in the definitive version of the text.

⁴⁰ We don't know whether Cicogna had any knowledge of Kabbalistic doctrines beforehand, even though it appears unlikely, since he doesn't make any reference to them in his previous published books.

⁴¹ Brescia, Biblioteca Queriniana, ms. A.II.13, ff. 263r-299r.

⁴² See *ivi*, f. 263r (the title in Latin reads *Sephirot ex libris Maharechet et Pardes Rimmonim deprompta, latinitati donata et explicata*).

⁴³ See PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA, *Discorso sulla dignità dell'uomo* (ed. by F. BAUSI), Parma 2003, pp. 125-131. The same passage, as stated by Cicogna himself, appears also in Pico's *Apologia*, see *Id.*, *Apologia. L'autodifesa di Pico di fronte al Tribunale dell'Inquisizione* (ed. by P.E. FORNACIARI, Firenze 2010), pp. 24-30; cfr. also *ivi*, pp. 176-193.

⁴⁴ Brescia, Biblioteca Queriniana, ms. A.II.13, f. 263v: «Ut autem, quod ego de his libris sciam, referam, cum Venetiis essem, intellexi a quodam viro ab Hebraismo ad Christianismum converso, septuaginta hos libros cum aliis reperiri penes Reverendissimum Episcopum Concordiae Quirinum, quos loco pignoris pro septem mille aureis detinebat, et summa diligentia custodiebat, a quo obtinui, ut saltem videre eos mihi liceret».

⁴⁵ *Ivi*, ff. 263v-264r: «Sed cum bis terque domum illius accessissem, et semper invenissem epi-

As we shall see, despite this missed opportunity, Cicogna managed to get his hands on some of the most interesting and “up-to-date” Kabbalistic works available in Italy during his time.

3.

Pico’s account of the origin and meaning of Kabbalah, as useful and reliable as it appeared to Cicogna, was missing a crucial aspect. In the long extract from the *Oratio*, not a word was to be found on the nature and function of the *sefirot* (the attributes of God), the issue around which Cicogna’s interest for Kabbalah revolved. He had to fill in this gap by himself.

As in his previous works, the Veronese priest decides to begin his explanation with an etymological observation.⁴⁶

The term *sefirot* (sing. *sefirah*), he writes, comes from the verb *saphar*, i.e. “to survey” (*recensere*), “to count” (*numerare*) and “to tell” (*narrare*) and it simply means “numbers” (*numeri*), or “enumerated things” (*enumerata*). However, these “numbers” are countless and without limits and their presence is ubiquitous. They can be detected in every word and name, in each expression and letter, even in the strokes that indicate vowels and accents. Hidden everywhere, they appear to be the secret source of the life of God and of the infinite meaning of His Law, which our limited intellect is incapable of grasping. As the Psalmist wrote: *Quoniam non cognovi literarum* (*Ps. 71,15*); a verse that in the Hebrew original reads: *כי לא ידעתי ספרות* (*For I know not the numbers thereof*), i.e., according to Cicogna, “*novi, quod non possint enumerari tua enumerata, nempe divina attributa*”.

scopum graviter podagra laborantem, meo desiderio frustratus discessi».

⁴⁶ *Ivi*, f. 264r: «...ad sephirot venio, quod est nomen plurium et numeros seu enumerata significat, a verbo *saphar*, quod recensere, numerare et narrare sonat. De quibus habetur *psal. 70* iuxta vulgatam editionem: *quoniam non cognovi literaturam*, ubi in textu hebr. est: *non cognovi sephirot*, idest: novi quod non possint enumerari tua enumerata, nempe divina attributa. Sic enim latine vox sephirot interpretari licet, quae sunt penitus innumerabilia».

⁴⁷ *Ivi*: «Post Christi itaque adventum et Evan-

To Cicogna, then, Kabbalah is the tradition that transmits the key to understanding and deciphering the lush sefirotic texture that lies beneath the words of the Scriptures. One book in particular, he maintains, was profoundly appreciated by the Kabbalists and venerated as a shrine of mystical treasures, namely the *Zohar* (even though Cicogna confuses the name of the text itself with that of its author). To Cicogna’s mind, this collection of Kabbalistic interpretations of the Scriptures dates back to the age of the Apostles:

The Kabbalist Zoar flourished around the time of the Apostles, after the advent of Christ and the spread of the Gospel, and after the destruction of Jerusalem and the captivity and dispersion of the Jews.⁴⁷

This is not a surprising statement. The belief in the antiquity of the *Zohar* was a common feature among Christian Kabbalists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, who never called into question the attribution of its authorship to Simeon bar Iochai, a Tannait Rabbi of the 2nd century CE. As a matter of fact, the development of a philologically oriented Zoharic criticism would begin only in the following century.⁴⁸

Cicogna manages to exploit the ancient dating of the *Zohar* to create a parallel between its contents and the doctrines of the Gospels:

The Kabbalist Zoar [...] wrote a book about the secret of the Law, in which it is possible to find many things in support of the evangelical truth and of the Catholic faith.⁴⁹

Interestingly, Cicogna decides not to linger on the *Zohar* any longer. He seems to be

gellii invulgationem, necnon post eversionem Hierusalem, et Hebraeorum captivitatem et dispersionem, sub ipso fere Apostolorum tempore, Zoar Cabalista floruit».

⁴⁸ See the forthcoming study R. EBGI, *The Impact of the Sefer ha-Zohar on the Christian World. 16th - 19th Centuries*.

⁴⁹ Brescia, Biblioteca Queriniana, ms. A.II.13, f. 264r: «Zoar Cabbalista [...] de arcanis legis librum conscripsit, in quo videre licet permulta quae evangelicae veritati et fidei Catholicae faveant».

satisfied with having identified this book as the vessel of sefirotic wisdom and having stressed its proximity to the evangelical message in terms of content and epoch. To illustrate the doctrine of the *sefirot* he thought it more useful to rely on two other Kabbalistic works, both surely more accessible than the *Zohar* itself.

The first one was the *Maareket ha-Elohut*, an anonymous booklet written between the 13th and the 14th century. This work, which played a considerable role in the history of Kabbalah in Italy in the 16th century, was printed twice in the span of two years (Ferrara 1557, Mantua 1558), together with the commentary by the prominent Spanish Rabbi Yehudah Hayyat and with another commentary, which Hayyat himself called *Perush Zulati*.⁵⁰ The second one is Rabbi Cordovero's masterpiece, the *Pardes Rimmonim*.

Cicogna conceived of these two books as streams flowing from the thriving source of Zoharic wisdom. And rightly so, since both of them could be considered as attempts to present the scattered and sometimes rather inconsistent speculations of the *Zohar* in a systematic fashion.

To introduce his reader into the Kabbalistic lore, Cicogna deemed it necessary to translate and comment upon a selection of passages from these two books, thus making them available in Latin for the first time, as he proudly stated.

As a matter of fact, this claim is only partially true. The *Maareket ha-Elohut* had already been translated in the 15th century by Flavius

Mithridates, the well-known Jewish apostate who managed in a few years (if not in several months) to translate a whole Kabbalistic library for Pico della Mirandola. Parts of the Latin version of the *Maareket*, whose title reads: *De ordine vel proportione vel serie vel consideratione divinitatis*, are still preserved in a manuscript in the Vatican Library.⁵¹

However, no prior translations of Cordovero's *Pardes* are known to exist and we will have to wait almost another eighty years for a second Latin version of passages from it.⁵²

As is well known, the *Pardes Rimmonim* was written in 1548 in Safed and printed for the first time in Cracow/Nowy Dwor in 1591. Since it is likely that Cicogna composed his Kabbalistic abridgment before that year, we may presume that he had access to a manuscript copy of the book. As a matter of fact, evidence of an early presence of this volume in Italy is offered by Menahem Azariah Fano (1548-1620), one of the most influential Italian Kabbalists of his generation, who first sponsored Cordovero, and only later in his life converted to Sarugian Lurianism. In a page of the preface to his *Pelah ha-rimmonim* (Venezia, 1600), Azariah declares that Cordovero, through a pupil of his, has sent him a copy of the *Pardes*.⁵³ According to this account, given that Cordovero died in 1570, his masterpiece was by that time already circulating in Italy.

Even though we have no proof of any connection between Azariah (or members of his cir-

⁵⁰ Both of these commentaries were perused and extensively quoted by Cicogna in his work. The *Perush Zulati* (i.e. *commentary other than mine*) was printed in full in the Ferrara edition (the Mantua one presents only an abridged version of it). Its author has been identified with Reuven Zarfati, one of the most important Italian Kabbalists of the 14th century, see E. GOTTLIEB, *Studies in the Kabbalah Literature* [Heb.], ed. by J. HACKER, Tel Aviv 1976, pp. 357-369.

⁵¹ See Roma, BAV, ms. Chig. A.VI.190.

⁵² Namely the passages translated in Athanasius Kircher's *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (Roma 1652-1654) and in Ciantes' *De sanctissima trinitate* (Roma 1664), which were considered, up until now, to be the first instances of *Pardes*' translation into Latin. On Kircher's perusal of Cordovero's book, testified by the marginalia in his hand in the manuscript of

the *Pardes* today at the Vatican Library (BAV, ms. Neofiti 28), see D. STOLZENBERG, *Egyptian Oedipus: Athanasius Kircher and the Secrets of Antiquity*, Chicago-London 2013, pp. 170-171. For a detailed analysis of the booklet by Ciantes, see EBGI, *The impact*, cit. It is worth noticing that the *Pardes* was referred to even by JOHANNES BUXTORF (1564-1629) in his *Bibliotheca rabbinica* (1696), p. 122; there, however, no Latin translation of part of the book is to be found.

⁵³ See G. BUSI, *Libri ebraici a Mantova. I. Le edizioni del XVI secolo nella biblioteca della Comunità ebraica*, Fiesole 1996, pp. 97-98, n. 112; ID., *L'enigma dell'ebraico nel Rinascimento*, Torino 2007, pp. 118.9. On the exceptional impact of the *Pardes* among Italian Jewish Kabbalists, see M. IDEL, *Major Currents in Italian Kabbalah between 1560 and 1660*, in *Essential papers on Jewish Culture in Re-*

ele) and Cicogna, we may assume that the Veronese priest was acquainted with a network of Jews interested in the Kabbalistic lore and well aware of the latest developments in the field.

Without a doubt, such translations provide interesting and valuable information on the circulation of works that offer a Zoharic understanding of Kabbalah among Christians. But Cicogna's exegetical approach is even more interesting. In order to shed some light on it, we shall go back to the booklet's introduction, where Cicogna deepens his account on the nature of the *sefirot*.

4.

The notion of *sefirot*, as we have already discussed, is linked by Cicogna to the characterization of God's attributes as countless and limitless. However, it is possible to identify an original cluster of ten primary "numbers" capable of encompassing all *sefirot* in a single tree-shaped structure. Needless to say, the number ten, "numerus absolutissimus", was not chosen at random:

They set up the tree according to the number ten, because it is the most perfect number and all numbers, although they are infinite, depend upon it, which is the image of the Godhead.⁵⁴

To look at this peculiar tenfold image of the divine, continues Cicogna, means to look at God's back, as Moses did on Mount Sinai (cf. *Ex.* 33, 21-2). For the Veronese priest, this swiveled revelation had been captured on paper, in two drawings that we can admire in the Brescia

manuscript, depicting ten *sefirot* traditionally distributed along three columns – three on the left, three on the right and four in the middle –, encircling a man who turns his back to the reader. Cicogna declares that he copied these images from an ancient scroll given to him by a most learned Rabbi; more importantly, he confesses that in this *arbor divinitatis* are embedded all the sacraments of the Christian faith.⁵⁵

To prove this assumption, he presents a sophisticated and original interpretation of the sefirotic tree as a spatial representation of the relationships between the three Persons of the Trinity, creating a parallel between the Kabbalistic and the Christian visions of the Godhead.

As a matter of fact, the effort to detect a Trinitarian pattern underneath the Kabbalistic configuration of the divine has been a crucial issue that all Christian Kabbalists had to deal with. The very possibility of winning Jews to Christianity depended on the success of such an endeavor. As Pico della Mirandola stated in one of his *Conclusiones*:

Every Hebrew Kabbalist, following the principles and saying of the science of the Kabbalah, is inevitably forced to concede, without addition, omission, or variation, precisely what the Catholic faith of Christians maintains concerning the Trinity and every divine Person, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁵⁶

But how to combine and match a tenfold structure to a threefold one? The different answers offered to this question contributed to shaping the history of Christian Kabbalah and to marking its main orientations.

naissance and Baroque Italy, ed. by D.B. RUDERMAN, New York-London 1992, pp. 349-351.

⁵⁴ Brescia, Biblioteca Queriniana, ms. A.II.13, f. 264r: «Denario autem numero arborem constituent, quod is numerus absolutissimus sit, et omnes numeri, etiamsi infiniti sint, ab eo dependeant, quod est divinitatis simulacrum».

⁵⁵ Cicogna confesses that the vision of such drawings moved him to tears, because he immediately realized that the doctrine alluded to therein could serve as a perfect tool to convert even the most pertinacious of Jews, see *ivi*, f. 266r: «Hanc ego figuram a doctissimo rabbino Venetiis in vetustissima pergamena delineatam accepi, simulque tum dei

providentiam, tum hebreorum [-] non sine lachrimis admiratus sum, qui per sanctissimae trinitatis et fidei christianae hostes et impugnatores certissima argumenta tradiderit, quibus eorum pervicacia confundatur et vincatur, veritas vero catholica de unitate divinae naturae et divinarum personarum trinitate, necnon de christi divinitate in humanitate, magis magisque corroboretur».

⁵⁶ S.A. FARMER, *Syncretism in the West. Pico's 900 Theses (1486). The Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems*, Tempe 1998, pp. 522-3 [11>5]: «Quilibet hebreus cabalista, secundum principia et dicta scientiae Cabalae, cogitur inevitabiliter concedere de trinitate et qualibet

Despite the importance of this issue, it has not received much scholarly attention.⁵⁷ I shall not try to fill in this gap right now; my intention is to draw attention to two main trends that were developed by some of the most prominent Christian Kabbalists of the Renaissance, mainly characterized by their different ways of understanding the nature of the *sefirot*.

According to the first one, the sefirotic tree mirrors the essence of divinity. The sefirot are part of the divine structure and it is therefore possible to find correspondences between them and the Persons of the Trinity. One of the most common features of this line of interpretation is to detect a Trinitarian pattern in the first three *sefirot*, namely *keter*, *chokmah* and *binah*.

This exegesis is hinted at already by Pico della Mirandola in several of his Kabbalistic conclusions, as for instance in thesis 11>20, which reads:

If the Kabbalists turn their interpretation to this word, <תן>, which signifies “then”, they will be

greatly illuminated concerning the mystery of the Trinity.⁵⁸

A number of texts could have suggested this *conclusio*, even though its most likely source is a passage from Recanati’s *Commentary to the Daily Prayers*,⁵⁹ where it is said that the word תן indicates the ten *sefirot*. For on the one hand, the letter ת, whose numerical value is seven, would indicate the last seven *sefirot*, whereas the three letters (א, ה, ו) that form the word *alef*, would stand for the first three.⁶⁰ At the same time, since א hints at the idea of “unity”, due to the fact that its numerical value is “one”, it doesn’t come as a surprise that Pico found this Kabbalistic mystery particularly suitable for a Trinitarian interpretation.⁶¹

Similarly, in thesis 11>33, Pico maintains that “we are perfectly admonished as to the mystery of the Trinity” by the word ושא, i.e. man, which is attributed to God, “when he is called a *man of war*”.⁶² As Menahem Recanati recalls, “according to the view expounded by our sages

persona divina, patre, filio, et spiritu sancto, illud precise sine additione, diminutione, aut variatione, quod ponit fides catholica christianorum».

⁵⁷ From a methodological perspective, it would be useful to follow the approach adopted by M. IDEL (*Kabbalah New Perspectives*, New Haven-London 1988, pp. 136-153), which enabled him to offer a preliminary survey of the history of the kabbalistic doctrines of the *sefirot*.

⁵⁸ Farmer, *Syncretism*, cit., p. 528: «Si interpretationem suam adverterint Cabaliste super hac dictione, <תן>, quae significat tunc, de trinitatis mysterio multum illuminabuntur».

⁵⁹ As it has been convincingly argued by G. Corazzol, see M. RECANATI, *Commentary on the Daily Prayers. Flavius Mithridates’ Latin Translation, the Hebrew Text, and an English Version*, ed. with an Introduction and Notes by G. CORAZZOL, Torino, 2008, pp. 145-147.

⁶⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 300-301 (I have put into square bracket the gloss by Mithridates): «Post orationem davidis dicitur canticum moiseos quod incipit AZ, idest tunc, canet moises et cetera. Ubi sciendum quod intencio sapientum nostrorum in libro sepher abahir est quod dictio AZ indicet omnia encia et sic dicunt ibi az vocabis et dominus exaudiet. Si az vocaveris, dominus exaudiet. Quidnam est תן? Docet quod non datur licencia legendi seu invocandi

ipsam aleph solam sine duabus licteris coniunctis cum ea que sedent primo in regno. Aleph enim sola sic scribitur א. Et cum suis duabus licteris primo habentibus locum in regno sic scribitur הןא. [Itaque ipsa cum illis constituunt trinitatem que indicatur in littera א que scribitur in dictione az quare nulla numeratio sine alia vocari debet]. Secunda autem lictera que est zain ת, que habet in numero septem, indicat septem verba remanentia ab ipsis decem. Et hoc est quod scribitur az canet moises. Quasi dicat decem numerationibus canet moises».

⁶¹ Another interesting Trinitarian interpretation of the letter *alef*, as representing the first three *sefirot* and at the same time their unity, is found in a passage of Mithridates’ latin version of the anonymous commentary on the *Maareket ha-Elohut*, see *Comentum voluminis de proportione divinitatis*, ms. Vat. Ebr. 191, f. 50v: «Item scias quod quamvis tria entia superiora contineant omnem virtutem et omnem rem, tamen non locuntur aliquo nutu de ipsis tribus nisi de septem predictis. Et ideo domini cabale faciunt de tribus entibus caput unum et rem unam».

⁶² FARMER, *Syncretism*, cit., p. 534: «Per hanc dictionem <ושא>, quae scribitur per Aleph, Iod et Scin, et significat Virum, quae deo attribuitur cum dicitur Vir belli, de trinitatis mysterio per viam Cabalae perfectissime admonemur».

in the book *Sepher Abahir*, the expression ׂא hints at the first three beings”,⁶³ i.e. at the three upper *sefirot*. In the *Bahir*, in fact, the meaning of these three letters is explained through a tale in which *alef* (equated to “the beginning”), *iod* (described as “the second after *alef*”), and *shin* (connected to the concept of “repetition”, *teshuvah*, which stands for *binah*) correspond to the three beautiful dwellings of a king, who at a particular moment decided to gather them “and made a house out of them, and one name out of the three names”.⁶⁴ Moreover, Pico could have found in at least another Kabbalistic text translated by Mithridate these equations: א / *keter*, ׂ / *chokmah*, ׂ / *binah*.⁶⁵

This approach was to be endorsed by well-known authors such as Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522) and Francesco Zorzi (1466-1540).

The German Hebraist, in a passage of his *De arte cabalistica* (1517), in an attempt to describe the innermost nature of the divine, and

its strive to jump out of its solitary darkness and reveal itself, offers an articulated argument in which the first three *sefirot* are described as the result of a process of emanation that takes place *in divinis*, i.e. within the Godhead;⁶⁶ in other words, as the three Persons of the Trinity. So the first three *sefirot*, while representing three distinct stages of the intradivine life, are at the same time “one”, since each of them is contained in the abyss of the divine “absolute essence”:

[...] The infinity of the three highest numbers of the Kabbalistic tree, which you [i.e. Christians] usually call the three divine Persons, is the most absolute essence, since it is drawn back into the abyss of darkness.⁶⁷

Similarly, Francesco Zorzi in his *De Harmonia Mundi* (1525) envisioned the relations between the first three *sefirot* as perfectly mirroring the “production” of the Son from the

⁶³ RECANATI, *Commentary to the Daily Prayers*, cit., p. 304: «Dominus vir belli. Secundum quod exposuerunt sapientes nostri in libro sepher abahir quod dictio his, ׂא, indicat tres encia prima».

⁶⁴ Cfr. *The Book of Bahir. Flavius Mithridates' Latin Translation, the Hebrew Text, and an English Version*, ed. by S. CAMPANINI, with a Foreword by G. BUSI, Torino 2005, pp. 137-138 [25/17*]: «Dixit rabi Emorai quid est quod scribitur dominus vir belli? Dixit ei Mor Rahamai filius Bibine petas a me rem simplicem. Audi mihi consulam tibi. Paradigmaticos rex habebat edes pulchras et unicuique imposuit nomen, et omnes in se erant una pulchrior altera. Dixit dabo filio meo hanc edem que vocatur aleph. Etiam hanc que melior est et vocatur jod, etiam hanc que bona est et vocatur scim. Quid nam fecit, congregavit omnes tres simul et fecit ex eis unam domum et ex omnibus fecit unum nomen. Dixerunt ei quo usque verba tua clausuris? Dixit eis filii mei aleph principium est jod secundum ab eo, xin continet totum mundum. Quare enim xin continet totum mundum, quia scribitur in dictione תשובה idest reiterationis».

⁶⁵ Cfr. *Comentum voluminis de proportione divinitatis*, ms. Vat. Ebr. 191, ff. 47r; 52v (for the identification between *alef* / *keter*, and *iod* / *chokmah*); 52r (for the identification between *shin* / *binah*).

⁶⁶ J. REUCHLIN, *De arte cabalistica*, Hagenau 1517, f. 62v: «At ubi se [i.e. the en sof] ita ostenderit, ut sit aliquid et revera subsistat, tum Aleph tenebrosus in Aleph lucidum convertitur [...] et appellatur

tunc quidem Aleph magnum quando exire cupit et apparere omnium rerum causa per Beth proxime est sequentem literam [...] Sic reperies literam hanc scilicet Beth facientem res omnes, quapropter Aleph eandem uti propinquissimam et foecundiorum literam sibi recipit, nominaturque אא pater omnis generationis et productionis. Deinde assumptum Beth, rursus ablegat in universitatem entium ex infinito ׂא finem suum consequi desiderans, quare finale literam Nun coniungendo Beth generat בן, id est filium, quae prima est productio in deitate, ac principium alteritatis, unde cognominatur אשׂא, i.e. principium tametsi est secunda emanatio ex infinitudine, hoc est, secunda Cabalistica numeratio, per quam omnia facta sunt [...] hoc modo primus effluxus sit secunda numeratio, quia terminus generationis est filius. Restat tertio medium inter Aleph et Nun, quod est Iod, nota sancti nominis יי cuius ambos characteres si alternis vicibus nomini ׂב intertextueritis erit בינה, intelligentia, prudentia seu providentia scilicet emanatio in divinis tertia, cui attribuitur Adonai, spiritus...». For a comment on this passage, see W. SCHMIDT-BIGGEMANN, *Geschichte der christlichen Kabbala. 15. und 16. Jahrhundert*, Band 1, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 2012, pp. 198-199.

⁶⁷ REUCHLIN, *De arte cabalistica*, ff. 62r-v: «Infinitudo ipsa trium summarum Cabalisticarum arboris numerationum quas vos treis in divinis personas appellare consuevistis absolutissima essentia quum

Father and the “production” of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son together.⁶⁸

That being said, Christian theologians and philosophers who followed this approach were well aware of the difficulties inherent to it, due mainly to the fact that to establish a precise parallel between three of the ten *sefirot* and the Persons of the Trinity, would mean to leave unaccounted for the seven remaining aspects of the divine.

Pico, for instance, seems to detect different Trinitarian patterns within the sefirotic world. In his Kabbalistic thesis 11>6, he attributed to each Person of the Trinity one of the three four-letters name of God (יהוה to the Father, יהוה, i.e. the *tetragramaton*, which for Pico is as well the *nomen Messiah*,⁶⁹ to the Son, and אדני to the Holy Spirit). According to a Kabbalistic commonplace, these names correspond to the first, sixth, and tenth *sefirot*.⁷⁰ It doesn't appear to be far-fetched, then, to elicit from this *conclusio* a parallel between the Father and *keter*, the Son and *tiferet*, and the Holy Spirit and *malkut*. This is not evidence of Pico's inconsistency, but rather of the fact that it would be wrong to assume the existence of a fixed correspondence between each Person of the Trinity and a single *sefirah*.⁷¹ Christian authors such as Pico could have hardly conceived of the “Father”, the “Son” and the “Holy Spirit” as simply equal to a degree of the Kabbalistic divine realm, whe-

reas it would be acceptable for them to identify in turn the activities and the powers of the three Persons of the Trinity with different aspects of the sefirotic tree.

Unfortunately, due to the lack of systematic works dedicated to this issue by Christian Kabbalists, scholars have either ignored the problem or quickly jumped to inaccurate conclusions, thereby overshadowing some of the most delicate theological implications of the encounter between Christian thinkers and Jewish mysticism. A comprehensive study on this specific subject would help grasp the true nature of this fascinating, but as yet still not well understood, cultural phenomenon.

The second approach is based on the idea that the *sefirot*, although conceived of as perfect entities laying even above the angelic orders, are nevertheless not an organic part of the Godhead. This was claimed by Giuseppe Maria Ciantes (1602-70), a Dominican preacher who contributed considerably to the development of such a line of interpretation. In his booklet *De sanctissima Trinitate ex antiquorum Hebraeorum testimoniis evidenter comprobata*, written in Latin and printed in Rome in 1667, Ciantes maintained that the sefirotic world corresponds to the world of intelligences, i.e. “of the first and most perfect beings that God took out from non-being and brought into existence”. As perfect as they are, the ten *sefirot* are nevertheless created

sit in abyssu tenebrarum retracta». As stated by Reuchlin, this “absolutissima essentia” corresponds to the *En sof*, which Pico himself had considered to be the “abstract and uncommunicated unity” of the *sefirot*, see FARMER, *Syncretism*, cit., p. 520 [11>4]: “Ensoph non est aliis numerationibus connumeranda, quia est illarum numerationum unitas abstracta et incommunicata, non unitas coordinata”.

⁶⁸ F. ZORZI, *L'armonia del mondo*, a cura di S. CAMPANINI, Milano 2010, p. 1812: «Omnes qui de Trinitate loquuntur, facile conveniunt, quod Filius et verbum [...] tenet medium inter personas illius sanctissimae Trinitatis, in qua est Pater prima radix omnium pullulationum tam in divinis, quam in creatis, et est Spiritus sanctus productus a Patre et Filio, et nihil producens in illa sanctissima Trinitate, est quoque filius persona media productus quidem a Patre, atque simul cum ipso Spiritum sanctum aeterno effluxu producens. Quam doctrinam non solum Christiani omnes profitentur, sed etiam se-

cretiores Hebraeorum theologi, qui docent חכמה hocma, quod sapientiam significat, emanare a fonte supremo, vel a radice superexcaelsa pullulat, quam ipsi vocanti בתר עליונה cheterhaliona, a quibus duobus fontibus, vel a primo fonte, et flumine ab eo procedente producitur illud tertium, quod ipsi בינה bina nuncupant, quod nos proprie interpretantes prudentiam, sive intelligentiam dicere possumus, intelligentiam utique illam, de qua in Ecclesiastico dicitur: *Et spiritus intelligentiae replebit illum*».

⁶⁹ FARMER, *Syncretism*, cit., p. 526 [11>15].

⁷⁰ *Ivi*, p. 522: «Tria magna dei nomina quaternaria, quae sunt in secretis cabalistarum, per mirabilem appropriationem tribus personis trinitatis ita debere attribui, ut nomen יהוה sit patris, nomen יהוה sit filii, nomen אדני sit spiritus sancti, intelligere potest qui in scientia cabalae fuerit profundus».

⁷¹ On this issue, see G. BUSI, R. EBGI, *Pico della Mirandola: Mito, Magia, Qabbalah*, Torino 2014.

beings, therefore they do not dwell within the Godhead, but below it: “Above them nothing else exists but God, the first cause, called *En sof* [i.e. the unfathomable core of the divinity]”. From this perspective, the three Persons of the triune God do not have equivalents in the sefirotic structure, but rather they exist in the form of “three lights” (*ob vocum indigentia!*) that sparkle in their enigmatic distinction in the infinite darkness of the *En sof* itself: “These [three] lights are called *En sof* [...] and they are one Light, one Substance, and one Root which is hidden in the infinite”.⁷² That triune Light which, according to another influential Christian Hebraist, Giulio Bartolucci (1613-1687), the well-known author of the *Bibliotheca magna rabbinica*, is alluded to by the *lux vera* of the Gospel of John (1,9), *quae illuminat omnem hominem venientem in hunc mundum*.⁷³

⁷² Ciantes believed that this peculiar doctrine had been handed down by the Holy Prophets and was afterwards embraced by Rabbi Simeon Ben Yochai, the alleged author of the *Zohar*. As a matter of fact, its origin is way more recent, since it was actually outlined in Spain during the 13th century in few pseudo-epigraphic texts (attributed to R. Hai Gaon and to R. Hammai). see G. SCHOLEM, *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala*, Berlin 1962 [engl. tr. *Origins of the Kabbalah*, Princeton 1987, pp. 349-354]; G. VAJDA, *Recherches sur la philosophie et la kabbale dans la pensée juive*, Paris 1962, pp. 179-181; M. VERMAN, *The Books of Contemplation. Medieval Jewish Mystical Source*, New York 1992, pp. 114-119. Ciantes became acquainted with the doctrine through the texts of prominent Kabbalists such as David R. Meir Ibn Gabbai and R. Moses Cordovero. Scattered literary evidences of this theory are to be found, as early as in the 16th century, in several Christian Kabbalists prior to Ciantes, even though none of them developed it in a systematic fashion. Interestingly, already in the fourteenth century Profiat Duran stated that an erroneous understanding of the kabbalistic doctrine of the three primordial lights had brought to the formulation of the Christian Trinitarian doctrine; see Y. DWECK, *The Scandal of Kabbalah: Leon Modena, Jewish Mysticism, Early Modern Venice*, Princeton 2011, p. 165.

⁷³ G. BARTOLOCCI, *Bibliotheca Magna Rabbinica*, pars IV, Roma 1693, p. 232. Bartolucci, who mentions Ciantes as the main upholder of this doctrine, unlike Ciantes himself, parallels these lights to the

There can be little doubt that Cicogna belongs to the first category of Christian Kabbalists,⁷⁴ even though his use of the *sefirot* took a form all of its own. The Veronese priest was actually the first to offer an analytic discussion dedicated to the precise correspondences between these two visions of the divine.

To his mind, the entire sefirotic tree, in its essence, is a field of living and dynamic forces that display a number of systolic movements, structured according to triadic patterns, between the three distinct Persons of the Trinity and their ineffable unity.⁷⁵

Starting from the central column, the first structure that he detects is the one formed by *ke-ter*, the primordial source of the divine energy,⁷⁶ which corresponds to the Father, *tiferet*, the heart of the sefirotic structure, which represents the Son, and *yesod*, the fundament, which alludes to the Holy Spirit; finally comes *malkut*, the

three highest *sefirot* (following Reuchlin’s exposition, see *supra*, n. 66). On Bartolucci, see S. CAMPANINI, *Wege in die Stadt der Bücher. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der hebräischen Bibliographie (die katholische bibliographische „Dynastie“ Iona-Bartolucci-Imbonati, in Reuchlin und seine Erben. Forscher, Denker, Ideologen und Spinner*, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 2005, pp. 61-76.

⁷⁴ That doesn’t come as a surprise, given that his interpretation of the sefirotic doctrine was heavily influenced by the *Maareket ha-Elohut* (see in particular ch. 3), where the Godhead is clearly identified with the sefirotic world, see IDEL, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, cit., p. 138.

⁷⁵ As Cicogna clearly states, for instance, in this passage of his work (cfr. Brescia, Biblioteca Queriniiana, ms. A.II.13, f. 266v): «Id ipsi cabalisti exemplo multarum scintillarum docent quae uno ictu exiliant neque alia prior aut posterior fuerit, sed omnes simul et uno eodemque momento temporis sint enatae [ita ut decem iste sephirot unum Deum et trinum significant] distinctionem porro divinarum personarum facile percipere poteris si quemlibet ternarium consideraveris».

⁷⁶ See *ivi*, f. 269v: «Propterea וָס id est non et nihil appellatur. Unde etiam וָס וָס dicitur. וָס etiam unde sonat quia eius iste est de quo propheta: Unde veniat auxilium mihi (Ps. 120,1). Quando itaque a cheter omnes sephirot accipiant et ista in omnes influat, וָס dicitur, unde omnes accipiant. Et in hoc etiam divinarum personarum distinctio demonstratur».

unity of this triad, which indicates the descent of the Son of God, through the Holy Spirit, into the body of the Messiah.⁷⁷ To Cicogna, the mystery of this quaternary is concealed as well in one of the names of God, the tetragrammaton יהוה, in which *yod* corresponds to *keter*, the first *he* to *tiferet*, *vav* to *yesod*, the second *he* to *malkut*, i.e. the Messiah, in which the whole mystery of the Trinity converges in its unity and embodies itself in the figure of the Redeemer.⁷⁸

However, this structure can be also configured in a different way; if we start from the bottom of the tree, *keter* becomes the symbol of the unity of the triad, composed by *malkut*, *yesod* and *tiferet*. The same pattern can then be applied to the *sefirot* that stand on the right-hand side and for those on the left.

Moreover, switching from a vertical perspective to a horizontal one, it is possible to count six more triadic groups, by combining the *sefirot* of the middle column with those belonging to the right and left side.

The first one will then be composed as *keter-chokmah-binah*. Interestingly, to Cicogna, *binah*, the third *sefirah*, usually considered to

be the equivalent of the Holy Spirit, corresponds to the Son (according to an exegesis offered in the *Perush Zulati*, in fact, he interprets it as *ben yah*, i.e. Son of God),⁷⁹ whereas *chokmah*, usually considered to be the equivalent of the Son, represents the Spirit:

הַחִכְמָה *chokmah*, namely “wisdom”, which in the first place corresponds to the Holy Spirit, is called *spiritus sapientiae* by Isaiah (Is. 11,2).⁸⁰

The second one is composed as *tiferet-chesed-hod*; the third one as *yesod-netzach-pachad*; finally, *malkut* is here the unity of this trinitarian structure.

In turn, starting from the bottom, the first triad appears to be the one composed as *malkut-netzach-hod*, the second one as *iesod-chesed-pachad*, and the third one as *tiferet-chokmah-binah*, with *keter* being their point of convergence.⁸¹

What Cicogna is unfolding before our eyes is a mostly original map of the invisible geography of the supercelestial realm, divided into six main sefirotic paths, along which the unifying energy of the divine can travel both upwardly and

⁷⁷ See *Ivi*, f. 278v: «Decimam et ultimam ex sephiroth malcut appellatam per quam dei regnum insinuatur ad ipsum messiam deum et hominem merito referimus».

⁷⁸ *Ivi*, p. 267v: «Quae omnia in literis tetragrammaton יהוה animadvertuntur. *Iod* enim ipsis cabalisticis assertoribus patris personam refert, id est *cheter*; ה he vero tipheret filium significat a patre genitum, *vav* id est spiritus est sanctus, propter sex ista precipua numera, apud Isaiam numerata, *vav* dictus. Ultima vero he, ה, est malcut, [-] et Davidis filius [ex duplici natura consistens, divina et humana] et ita habes in hac figura totum sanctissimae trinitatis in unitate substantiae mysterium cum hipostatice unione divinae naturae cum humana».

⁷⁹ *Ivi*, f. 271v: «Haec ex Maharecet de tertia sephirha quam binah id est intelligentiam appellant, quod Deus non sit agens quoddam naturale sed qui agat et in primis se ipsum intelligat quam Zulati interpretatur dei filius, id est ה בן יד id est Ben Iha, ex quo patet cabalistas in divina ista essentia et natura [-] personam patris in *cheter*, qui sit ingenuus et personam filii in ipsa intelligentia qui sit genitus».

⁸⁰ *Ivi*, f. 264v: «הַחִכְמָה *chokmah*, idest sapientia quod ad spiritum sanctum in primis spectat, qui ab Esaia Spiritus sapientiae nuncupatur (Is. 11, 2)».

As for several Christian Kabbalists (see *supra*), for Cicogna as well this triad is particularly suitable to represent the three Persons of the Christian Trinity, see *Ivi*: «Hae autem tres sephiroth praecipuae sunt in divinitatis arbore, quae personarum divinarum trinitatem in unitate substantiae aptissime nobis referunt».

⁸¹ *Ivi*, ff. 266r-266v: «Tu vero christiane lector, cui datum est nosse mysteria regni dei (Lc. 8, 10), in primis in hac figura observabis numerum denarium ipsarum sephiroth, quibus sive ascenderis, sive descenderis, ter ternarium numerum conficies, et ad unitatem pervenies. *Cheter* corona, *tipheret* pulchritudo, *iessod* fundamentum, trinitatem constituent, et in unitate desinunt malcut regnum, si vero ascenderis, et a malcut regnum inceperis, trinitatem constitues et pervenies ad unitatem *cheter* coronam. Idem consequeris si collaterales sephiroth accipias, et per istas vel ascendas vel descendas, per istas enim descendendo pervenitur ad malcut, regnum, et ascendendo ad *cheter*, coronam. Idem etiam resultat si medias sephiroth cum collateralibus coniungas, nempe *cheter*, *cochma* bina, et rursus *tipheret* *chesed* *hod*, et iterum *iessod* *nezac* *pachad*; superest malcut, unitatem in trinitate constituens. Quod si a malcut incipias, ipsa cum *nezac* et *hod* trinitatem fa-

downwardly, from the source of all things (*keter*) to the messianic vessel of all divine powers (*mal-kut*) and vice-versa,⁸² a geography that offers a compendium of all the celestial forces and of several Christian dogmas (such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, the divinity of the Messiah).

Now, we can understand Cicogna's fascination with the Kabbalistic wisdom better and especially with the Zoharic sefirotic interpretation of it. On the one hand, the scheme of the ten *sefirot* offers him an organizing principle, according to which he can easily connect the numberless names and attributes of God within a tenfold structure and eventually within the Trinitarian pattern that lies underneath.

On the other hand, he is finally able to prove the authentic affinity between Judaism and Christianity, achieving one of the major objectives of his literary production since the printing of the *Enarrationes*.

For these reasons, this booklet should be considered a lost chapter in the history of Christian Kabbalah and, more specifically, an important document for the history of the reception of Zoharic materials in Christian milieu.

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SUMMARY

This contribution provides an overview on the life and works of the Veronese priest Vincenzo Cicogna (c. 1519 - after 1596). Our analysis will focus in particular on a thus far unknown text by Cicogna, preserved in a manuscript in the Biblioteca Queriniana in Brescia, dedicated to a Trinitarian interpretation of Kabbalistic materials (mostly drawn from the *Maareket ha-Elohut* and the *Pardes Rimmonim*, but with references to the *Zohar* as well). As will be proved, a study of this highly original work allows us to shed light on a new chapter in the history of Christian Kabbalah.

KEYWORDS: Vincenzo Cicogna; Christian Kabbalah; Zohar.

ciunt, et iterum iessod chesed pachad ac tertio tipheret, choemha binha et ad unitatem cheter pertinges. In hac itaque figura sexies ternarius numerus repetitur, senarius autem numerus divinitatis est symbolum, ut in ternario personarum divinarum trinitatem, in senario earundem unitatem intelligas».

⁸² To Cicogna's mind, this sophisticated model could be used as well to describe the angelic world, arranged according to the nine Dionysian hierarchies, each one corresponding to one specific *sefirah*, all of which converging towards their common source, i.e. the higher *sefirah* (*keter*), see *ivi*, ff. 267v-268v.

In his last work (see *supra*, n. 34), Cicogna describes the analogy between the sefirotic scheme and the angelic realm as following: «Ut autem quae de novem Angelorum ordinibus diximus apertiora fiant, hanc figuram arboris sephirot Heb. proposuimus, in qua perspici potest, quomodo omnes Angelorum ordines in Deum prospiciant, illi [-], et ab illo accipiant et accepta sibi invicem communicent, et communicata nobis impertiant [-] colimus» (GRI, ms. 86-A866, f. 6v). These words are then followed by a drawing in which the nine lowest *sefirot* are being represented visually by winged angelic heads.

