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## Marsilio Ficino and the Religion of the Philosophers

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## *Marsilio Ficino and the Religion of the Philosophers*

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This essay aims to characterize the way Marsilio Ficino thought about the relationship of philosophical reason and religious belief, and to situate his view in the spectrum of theological positions on human reason's power to cognize the divine nature and divine will. Its wider goal is to show the significance of Ficinian Platonism in the history of theology. My contention, in brief, is that Ficino is conservative and Augustinian in his theological method, but that some of his conclusions, especially on the subject of Christianity's place in the family of world religions, represent radical innovations in the history of Christian theology. I shall also discuss his theory of the sources of religious knowledge, arguing that, while indebted to Iamblichus and late ancient Platonism, it too is an innovative approach which looks forward to Romantic theories of religious experience as a precognitive source for Christian theology. The principal sources interrogated here will be Ficino's *Platonic Theology* (1469-1474) and *De doctrina christiana* (1473/74), both of which were clearly part of the same project of theological renewal.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On Ficino's theology generally see *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, ed. M. J.B. Allen and V. R. Rees, Leiden – Boston – Cologne 2002, which contains an ample bibliography.

Ficino's Platonism is broadly speaking that of late antiquity, but he has imported it into the very different world of fifteenth century Europe. This is a world that is suffering from a religious identity crisis that will in a few years lead to the Reformation and engulf Europe in centuries of religious war. Ficino's Platonism is very much part of that crisis, and one of his goals is to use Platonism to dramatically reshape Christianity. In particular his goal is to rethink the relationship between Christianity and the other great world religions, to break down the narrow, dogmatic barriers imposed in late antiquity that separate Christianity from other forms of religious wisdom. This leads to a new kind of Christian apologetics that, unlike the Christian apologetics of the medieval period, does not seek in any straightforward way to demonstrate the falsity of other religions and the truth of Christianity. Instead it aims, in the light of Christian truth, understood as a final, plenary revelation of metaphysical reality, to reform Christian belief and praxis in his own day as well as the beliefs and practices of other world religions, revealing them all as dim and partial and corrupt visions of the tremendous universal reality glimpsed by Plato and unfolded in the divine humanity of Christ.

The strategy used here will be to bring out the unique features of Ficino's theology by plotting his position along a continuum whose endpoints I shall label "Philosophical Religion" and "Traditional Religion." I hasten to add that these endpoints are more like Weberian *Idealtypen* than positions actually occupied by historical thinkers. Most theologians in the classical and post-classical world, pagan, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, would fall somewhere in between the two extremes.

The concept of philosophical religion will be readily grasped by students of the ancient world familiar with the theologies of the Presocratics, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and

the Neoplatonists. Those theologies take as their point of departure the need for philosophical and scientific reasoning to revise and correct vulgar, anthropomorphic beliefs about the action of the divine in the world.<sup>2</sup> What is less often appreciated is that the ancient kind of philosophical religion continues to thrive in disguised forms even after the triumph of the dogmatic monotheisms of Christianity and Islam that occurred between the fourth and seventh centuries of our era. Forms of it can be found in the *falsifa* movement in medieval Islam, which lasts roughly from the ninth through end of the twelfth century.<sup>3</sup> It is found again in the so-called Averroism of Western universities, a phenomenon that lasts from the thirteenth through the seventeenth century.<sup>4</sup> It has a final stage with the subversive Socinian, Spinozist and Deist theologians of early modern Europe.<sup>5</sup> After that it is fashioned by the Enlightenment, and above all by Kant, into a weapon used to destroy dogmatic Christianity entirely, and to deliver us into the post-Christian and post-religious world inhabited by the great majority of Europeans and many persons in other Westernized nations today.

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<sup>2</sup> In general see Sarah BROADIE, *Rational Theology*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, ed. A. A. LONG, Cambridge 1999, 205-224; M. L. WEST, *Towards Monotheism*, in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, ed. Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede, Oxford 1999, 21-40; Malcolm SCHOFIELD, *Theology and Divination*, and José KANY-TURPIN, *Theories of Religion*, both in *Greek Thought: A Guide to Classical Knowledge*, ed. J. Brunschwig and G.E.R. Lloyd, Cambridge (Massachusetts) 2000, 498-510 and 511-21, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> See *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman, London 1996. Particularly illuminating are Lenn E. GOODMAN, *Avicenna*, updated edition, Ithaca 2008, and Oliver LEAMAN, *Averroes and his Philosophy*, Oxford 1988.

<sup>4</sup> See Stuart MACCLINTOCK, *Perversity and Error: Studies on the 'Averroist' John of Jandun*, Bloomington 1956; E. P. MAHONEY, *Two Aristotelians of the Renaissance: Nicoletta Vernia and Agostino Nifo*, Aldershot – Burlington, 2000; Luca BIANCHI, *Studi sull' aristotelismo del Rinascimento*, Padova 2003, James HANKINS, *Humanism and Scholasticism*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. James Hankins, Cambridge 2007.

<sup>5</sup> The most detailed guide is found in Jonathan ISRAEL, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity*, Oxford 2001.

The frontal attack on dogmatic religion that is characteristic of the Enlightenment *philosophe* and his epigones would, however, have been alien to the kind of pre-modern philosophical theologian described here. In general, philosophical theologians accept that whatever form of traditional religion is current will always be the dominant one, for the simple reason that most people are not and cannot be philosophers. In general philosophical theologians accord traditional religions the usual respect given in the premodern world to immemorial tradition; they may even think that the traditional religion contains some deeper truths hidden under its symbolic disguises of myth and cult. The typical view of thinkers like Plato or Cicero or Alfarabi or Maimonides is that the common people are always going to need a form of religious law and understanding appropriate to their mental and moral development, and that traditional religion can serve a useful social function if properly regulated by the wise. The unphilosophical require religious law and fear of punishment to regulate their behavior. They require myth, cult, liturgy and rituals of various kinds to communicate to their limited understandings something of the divine nature. The philosophical on the other hand have a rational understanding of divinity and do not require laws, customs and rituals to regulate their behavior and guide their understanding. For them, as for Socrates, real knowledge leads ineluctably to goodness, properly understood. Philosophy has its own soteriological potential, its own power to grant happiness, that is not available to the unphilosophical.<sup>6</sup> The wisest course is to conform outwardly to the beliefs of the multitude, but philosophy allows one to remain free inwardly. *Intus ut libet, foris ut mos est.*

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<sup>6</sup> See BIANCHI, *Studi*, capitolo secondo.

Many philosophers, to be sure, are more hostile to and critical of traditional religion than this. Some, like Epicurus and his follower Lucretius, see popular religion as a corrupting influence, an expression of human ignorance; sometimes they see it as discredited by political authorities, who try to exploit religious fear to ensure compliance with their laws. The effect is to distort the nature of true religion. Some philosophers, like Plato, want to reform popular religion from behind the scenes, as it were, instrumentally, in order to make it more benign; some of the Italian *spirituali* of the sixteenth century would also fall into this camp. But for the most part explicit hostility to traditional religion among philosophers is an esoteric attitude, reserved for members of the philosophical school or for potential converts, and not communicated to the unenlightened. Socrates' fate was a warning of what would happen if the truth were enunciated too clearly to the uninitiated. Reaching the truths of philosophy required many years' study under a master and many years of moral preparation before such truths would be clear to those aspiring to wisdom.<sup>7</sup>

Aspiring philosophers would eventually discover through *askesis* and contemplation a divine nature very different from that of traditional religion. They would discover that God was a physical or metaphysical principle, eternal and unchanging, who functions as an integral part of the natural order. In Aristotelian theology – the version of theism most attractive to medieval adherents of philosophical religion – God is a being of pure activity who therefore acts as a final cause for all other beings, which are all in some degree in potency; he also serves as a first efficient cause of natural changes, and his nature can therefore be known from his effects, as it is necessary and immutable. It is owing to patterns of causal necessity that human reason is able to cognize God and nature. Religious

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<sup>7</sup> Pierre HADOT, *Philosophy as a Way of Life, Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold Davidson, Oxford 1995.

philosophers understand the traditional gods as simply names for the true god of the philosophers or for his effects in nature; god is one but has many names. Their understanding of natural law also supplies them with moral truths and a rational compulsion to live in accordance with nature and nature's god.

The god or gods of traditional religion, by contrast, are more anthropomorphic and act in history.<sup>8</sup> Stories can be told about them. In the case of Judaism and Christianity, a narrative can be told about their interactions with the human race and with individual lives. In philosophically sophisticated versions of traditional religion, such as the Islamic tradition of *kalam* or the nominalist theologies of the fourteenth century, God is a totally transcendent Creator God, creating the world in time *ex nihilo*, about whose reasons for creation we know nothing, and whose design in nature is purely contingent, being completely dependent on his will. His creation therefore tells us nothing about his nature. Even apophatic approaches to him are worthless since the radical contingency of the created order precludes reading it off as an expression of the divine. Our only source of knowledge about God comes from his own self-revelation in sacred scriptures or personal religious experience. The approach to God in traditional religion is more affective and emotional than rational; the believer relates to God as though he were a human being, a father or a lover or a friend; he experiences love and fear and the desire to please Him or to avoid his wrath. Knowing God means reading the Scriptures and discovering his will through prayer, not seeking to understand his function in

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<sup>8</sup> On the tension between the metaphysical/rationalistic and the historical/traditional strands in Christian theology, see the illuminating essay of Georg WIELAND, *Plato oder Aristoteles? Überlegungen zur Aristoteles-Rezeption des lateinischen Mittelalters*, «Tijdschrift voor filosofie», XLVII, 1985, 605-630; another version of this paper appeared in English with the title *Plato or Aristotle—A Real Alternative in Medieval Philosophy?* in J.F. WIPPEL, ed., *Studies in Medieval Philosophy: Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*, vol. XVII, Washington (D.C.) 1987, 63-83.

nature through philosophical argument and speculation. Serving God means participating in rituals and observing commandments whose justification may or may not be evident to the believer.

It bears repeating that what is being attempted here is the elucidation of ideal types, types which would describe perfectly no single historical theologian in the classical or in post-classical traditions. Most would lie somewhere between the extremes. Avicenna, Maimonides and Aquinas would be more or less in the middle of the continuum, as theologians who accept the guidance of revelation but also accept that revelation can and should be interpreted by philosophy, especially where the latter can produce demonstrative proofs. On the other hand most of ancient pagan philosophers of the Presocratic, classical and Hellenistic periods would be close to the pole occupied by philosophical religion. One could also situate at that pole later thinkers like Alfarabi, Averroes, and Western Averroists like John of Jandun, as well as radicals like Pietro Pompanazzi. Such men defer officially to traditional religion as to a law with which one may not agree but is nevertheless bound to respect. Toward the opposite pole, that of traditional religion, one could place Augustine, most orthodox Christian theologians in antiquity, and most Franciscan thinkers of the Middle Ages, for example William of Ockham, as well as the Renaissance Platonists Nicholas of Cusa and Marsilio Ficino.

This last name will be a controversial one with many modern students of Ficino, some of whom would still like to see him as a crypto-pagan or a proto-Enlightenment figure. What criteria then allow one to situate Ficino at the more traditional part of the continuum? The most important one in my view is Ficino's understanding of the sources of religious



belief. For Ficino, religious belief comes to us from two sources, from within, through the soul, and from without, through the Word and revelation.

An inner religion of the soul sounds vaguely Plotinian, and Ficino's philosophical writings are certainly soaked in Plotinian themes. But Ficino's conception of the mode in which religious belief is present to mankind is not Plotinian. Belief in or awareness of the divine is not a cognitive state achieved only or mainly through a process of thought. It is also implicit in our natures as ensouled beings. For Ficino, all people, Christian or non-Christian, are naturally religious.

When I say religion, I mean that instinct which is common and natural to all peoples and which we everywhere and always use to think about providence and to worship it as the queen of the world. Assuredly we are led to this piety by three main causes. Firstly by a certain as it were natural sagacity infused in us by providence itself; then by philosophical reasons establishing the providence of the architect from the very order of his edifice; and lastly by words of prophecy and by miracles.<sup>9</sup>

In every place and time men speak and drink because it is natural, but they speak and drink at different times and places, and in a different order, since the order for doing so is established by opinion rather than by nature. Similarly, God is adored among all

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<sup>9</sup> Marsilio FICINO, *Platonic Theology*, ed. and tr. Michael J. B. Allen, James Hankins et al., 6 vols., Cambridge (Massachusetts) 2001-2006, p. 293 (Book 14, chapter 9, paragraph 2): "Cum religionem dico, instinctum ipsum omnibus gentibus communem naturalemque intellego, quo ubique et semper providentia quaedam, regina mundi, cogitatur et colitur. Ad quam certe pietatem causis praecipue tribus inducimur. Primo quidem naturali quadam, ut ita loquar, sagacitate ab ipsamet providentia nobis infusa; deinde philosophicis rationibus ex ipso aedificii ordine architecti providentiam comprobantibus; postremo propheticis verbis atque miraculis." All citations hereafter will be by book, chapter and paragraph number of this edition.

peoples in every century, although not with the same rites and in the same ways, because it is natural [for man to adore Him].<sup>10</sup>

Our religious nature is a natural fact, what today might be called a biological universal. Religion is “the affinity of the soul for God.”<sup>11</sup> Ficino even claims, strikingly, that it is religion, not reason, that is the specific difference of man, separating him from the animals, for the latter have some kind of reasoning capacity but no religious sense. “Worshipping the divine is as natural to men almost as neighing to horses or barking to dogs.”<sup>12</sup> Man without religion is a monster.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately religious belief and behavior is caused by God, who informs each human soul with a natural desire for himself and a natural vision of himself.<sup>14</sup>

Ficino’s understanding of the nature of religion probably comes from the *De mysteriis* of the late ancient Platonist Iamblichus. This was a text Ficino knew well and translated into Latin around 1488.<sup>15</sup> In that work Iamblichus is defending theurgy against the ‘rationalist’ attacks of Porphyry. In the course of his defense, Iamblichus says

You say first, then that you ‘concede the existence of the gods’: but that is not the right way to put it. For an innate knowledge about the gods is coexistent with our nature, and is superior to all judgement and choice, reasoning and proof. This

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<sup>10</sup> *Platonic Theology* 14.10.10: “Ubique et semper loquuntur homines atque bibunt, quoniam est naturale, sed aliis temporibus atque locis alio ordine loquuntur et bibunt, quoniam operationis ordo opinione constat potius quam natura. Similiter apud omnes gentes omnibus saeculis adoratur deus, quia naturale est, quamvis non iisdem sacris ac modis.”

<sup>11</sup> See Jörg Lauster, *Marsilio Ficino as a Christian Thinker: Theological Aspects of his Platonism*, in Allen and Rees, *Ficino*, 45-69 at 51.

<sup>12</sup> *Platonic Theology* 14.9.1. “Cultusque divina ita ferme hominibus naturalis, sicut equis hinnitus canibusve latratus.” Compare also *De doctrina christiana*, cap. 1.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> See note 16.

<sup>15</sup> P. O. KRISTELLER, *Supplementum Ficinianum*, 2 vols., Florence 1937, I, cxxxii.

knowledge is united from the outset with its own cause, and exists in tandem with the essential striving of the soul towards the Good.

Indeed, to tell the truth, the contact we have with the divinity is not to be taken as knowledge. Knowledge, after all, is separated (from its object) by some degree of otherness. But prior to that knowledge, which knows another as being itself other, there is the unitary connection with the gods that is natural <and indivisible>. We should not accept, then, that this [the existence of divinity] is something that we can either grant or not grant, nor admit to it as ambiguous (for it remains always uniformly in actuality), nor should we examine the question as though we were in a position either to assent to it or to reject it; for it is rather the case that we are enveloped by the divine presence, and we are filled with it, and we possess our very essence by virtue of our knowledge that there are gods.<sup>16</sup>

If we possess a natural knowledge of divinity, a tendency to atheism can best be explained physiologically. Ficino believes that a body with a proper balance and mixture of humors will naturally support the desire for and knowledge of God. Atheism is explained as a malign *habitus* of unbalanced melancholic humors: intellectuals tend to be atheists only because of their natural proclivity to melancholy. Ficino believes there is a religion common to all men in sound health that does not therefore require argument or demonstration.<sup>17</sup> We

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<sup>16</sup> IAMBlichus, *On the Mysteries*, translated with an introduction and notes by Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon and Jackson P. Hershbell, Atlanta 2003, 11-13 (= IAMBlichus, *De mysteriis* 1.3). For an account of the dispute between Iamblichus and Porphyry see the introduction to this edition, xxvi-xxxvii. Ficino comments specifically on this passage at *Platonic Theology* 12.4.5, where he argues for our pre-conscious knowledge of divinity: “Just as an everlasting and essential desire for good is innate in the soul, so too is a natural and everlasting vision of the truth, or rather a kind of touching, to use Iamblichus words, a touching which is prior to and more outstanding than all knowledge and argumentation.” I am grateful to Prof. John Dillon, who pointed out to me the significance of the Iamblichus passage for Ficino’s theory of religion. For Ficino’s use of Iamblichus’s soteriology, see Christopher CELENZA, *Late Antiquity and Florentine Platonism: The ‘Post-Plotinian’ Ficino*, in Allen and Rees, eds., *Marsilio Ficino*, 71-97

<sup>17</sup> See James HANKINS, *Malinconia mostruosa: Ficino e le cause fisiologiche dell’ateismo*, «Rinascimento» n.s. 47 (2007), 1-23.

have a natural belief that there is a god, a divine providence, a moral law. As we can see things in nature because of the light of the sun, as we can see the sun in the light of the sun itself, so we can see divine truths and God himself via the light of God in our minds; we are drawn to him because of the love of God naturally in our hearts.<sup>18</sup> If we do not see clearly the existence of God and of the moral law, it is because of physical or moral impediment, a blindness of spirit. Belief in God is essentially prephilosophical, a position which resembles Friedrich Schleiermacher's religion of intuition and feeling.<sup>19</sup> Philosophy and contemplation can help improve our vision, but moral purity is much more helpful. Philosophy can help us actualize and verbalize the prephilosophical intuition of God implicit in our natures but we do not need philosophy to know and love God. Philosophy can help us grasp the connections, find unities, and see the divine patterns and order in nature, soul and mind, but to hold a firm belief that there is a God and to enjoy Him hereafter does not require philosophical training.

That surely is why there is no proof of the existence of God anywhere in the eighteen books of Ficino's theological masterpiece, the *Platonic Theology*, or in Ficino's apologetic work, the *De christiana religione*. There doesn't need to be, because if we are healthy, we are already aware in our souls that God exists. Ficino does not try to argue the atheist out of his atheism but would advise him to live a more humorally balanced life. Eat more red meat, drink red wine, get more sunlight, wear richly colored clothing, listen to livelier musical modes, says Ficino to the atheist. Spend more time with your friends; you'll get over it. To

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<sup>18</sup> *De Christiana religione*, cap. 3, Marsilio FICINO, *Opera Omnia*, Basel 1576, anastatic reprint, Torino 1983 (hereafter *Opera*), I, 33. References are to the page numbers of the reprint.

<sup>19</sup> See *Friedrich Schleiermacher's Reden Ueber die Religion*, kritische Ausgabe, ed. G. Ch. Bernhard Pünjer, Braunschweig 1879, based on the third edition of 1821; see especially the second speech, "Ueber das Wesen der Religion." A not dissimilar view is found in J.-J. Rousseau's famous *Profession de foi du vicaire savoyard* in book IV of the novel *Émile*, where *sentiment* and the *coeur* are seen as natural sources of religious knowledge.

the young atheist in the grip of what the young fellow thinks is a demonstrative argument against God's existence, Ficino says: wait. Wait until you're older, and you'll see things much more clearly and holistically once the riot of passions in your body subside.<sup>20</sup>

The natural belief that men have in God also explains why Ficino's *Platonic Theology* is so different in structure from medieval theological *summae*, which typically are ordered on Neoplatonic principles. The medieval *summa* ordinarily begins from the apex of the metaphysical hierarchy, beginning with God and his attributes, then moves down through angelic to human nature; it then follows the flow of the divine creative act back to its source by treating the redemption of human nature, understood as that nature's return, via reason, love and grace, to the source of its being.<sup>21</sup> Ficino begins instead with what is known *quoad nos*, i.e. with our material bodies, and ascends through five grades of reality to God. He then descends again to the level of soul and discusses its nature and species before passing on to his immortality proofs.<sup>22</sup> His system thus follows a psychological or heuristic rather than an ontological or generative order. It starts with the pre-conscious knowledge of God and of our own nature that we already possess in our souls, and works inwards and upwards from there. It can afford not to start with God because it does not aim to establish preambles of faith like Aquinas, i.e., truths known to natural reason that must be established antecedently to deriving truths that are specifically Christian. Ficino does not believe that there *are* in fact any truths that are rational but not religious. All truths of which the human mind is capable are always already embedded in a faith of some kind, either the inner revelation of Himself that God

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<sup>20</sup> HANKINS, *Malinconia mostruosa*, 18; see also *Platonic Theology* 14.10, passim; *De Christiana religione*, cap. 3 = *Opera* I, 33.

<sup>21</sup> See M.-D. CHENU, *Introduction à l'étude de saint Thomas Aquinas*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, Paris 1993.

<sup>22</sup> For the structure of the *Platonic Theology* see my "Outline of Ficino's *Platonic Theology* in the Allen-Hankins edition, vol. VI, 319-326.

makes to man via man's soul, or the outer revelation that God makes through the voices of other men and preeminently through Christ, the Word of God.

This brings us to Ficino's second, external source of religious belief: revelation. Unlike most philosophical theologians Ficino accepts the idea of a revealed theology – and again he might have appealed to Iamblichean authority<sup>23</sup> – but unlike scholastic theologians he does not build his own theology on a selection of key sentences or dogmatic utterances from revealed texts which are treated as first principles of a system. He does not understand Revelation as doctrine, but on a kind of metaphysical consciousness, a light shining in the mind. He does not produce a minimalist, rational theology founded on philosophical first principles in the manner of an eighteenth-century Deist. Ficino can be described, to borrow a term from modern epistemology, as a theological coherentist. To quote H. H. Joachim's version of this, "Truth in its essential nature is that systematic coherence which is the character of a significant whole." In other words, a belief is justified if and only if it is part of a coherent system of beliefs. In Otto Neurath's boat metaphor, our little ship of beliefs is already at sea and requires us to fill what ever leaks occur and make whatever repairs and adaptations are necessary to keep it afloat. To vary the metaphor with one of Quine's, our beliefs form an interconnected web and the structure hangs or falls as a whole. Philosophical reason can make our beliefs more coherent but cannot itself provide a foundation for those

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<sup>23</sup> See IAMBlichus, *On the Pythagorean Way of Life: Text, Translation and Notes*, by John Dillon and Jackson Hershbell, Atlanta (Georgia) 1991, especially pages 52-57 [Chapter 6]. Ficino also translated this text, which circulated privately in his circle but was never published: see P. O. KRISTELLER, *Marsilio Ficino and His Work after 500 Years*, Firenze 1987, 136.

beliefs.<sup>24</sup> What creates belief is the way that the whole web of beliefs makes sense of nature, history and our lives as rational and moral beings.<sup>25</sup>

Coherentism is typically contrasted with foundationalism, which justifies beliefs in terms of indubitable first principles, Platonic ideas, empirical facts or clear and distinct innate ideas like self-existence. The operative metaphor for foundationalism is building a consistent set of beliefs as a superstructure upon a foundation of indubitable first principles in the manner of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes or Leibniz. True, primary and necessary first principles (such as the principle of non-contradiction, that the whole is greater than the part, that a thing cannot both be and not-be at the same time) or innate ideas (the consciousness I have of my own existence as indubitable) serve as starting-points and conditions of valid reasoning. So for the coherentist, justification of beliefs is holistic, whereas for the foundationalist it is linear and has reliable starting points.

Ficino is a theological coherentist in that he believes all religious beliefs justify themselves in terms of other religious beliefs and not in terms of foundational truths of unaided natural reason. In this respect he resembles Augustine, one of his great models, who in the *Confessions* taught that it is grace and love that guide the intellect to truth and allow

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<sup>24</sup> In a striking formulation at the end of the *De Christiana religione*, cap. 37 = *Opera* I, 77, Ficino writes: “Fides, ut vult Aristoteles, est scientiae fundamentum; fide sola, ut Platonici probant, ad Deum accedimus. ‘Credidi’ inquit David ‘et propterea sum locutus.’ Credentes igitur propinquantesque veritatis bonitatisque fonti sapientem beatamque vitam hauriemus.” (“Faith, as Aristotle would have it, is the basis of knowledge; by faith alone, as the Platonists prove, we approach God. ‘I believe’, said David, ‘and it is on that account that I speak.’ It is by believing and approaching the fountain of truth and goodness that we imbibe the life of wisdom and blessedness.”) Compare also Ficino’s argument to (ps.) Plato’s *Second Letter* in *Opera* II, 532, a key passage where faith is declared to be a precondition for the salutary operation of reason; the passage is based on Proclus, *Platonic Theology* 1.2, ed. Saffrey-Westerink, I, Paris 1968, 8f.

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan KVANVIG, *Coherentist Theories of Epistemic Justification*, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (revision of September 2007), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justep-coherence/>

the intellect to abide in truth. Only love can help the reason find truth and only love gives stability to the truths of reason. *Non intratur in veritatem nisi per caritatem.*<sup>26</sup> This does not mean that either Ficino or Augustine are fideists or existentialists making self-authenticating leaps of faith. They are reasoners who accept the guidance of faith and use that faith to elaborate a holistic, meaningful understanding of God, nature and the soul. Their beliefs authenticate themselves by their hermeneutical power. In Augustine's *Confessions* his acceptance of Christianity was a like a light being switched on: a light which suddenly made sense of nature and human history, and revealed the influence of grace upon Augustine's own path through life. Unlike Aquinas, Augustine and Ficino do not believe that there are truths of reason, harmonious with but distinct from truths of faith. They do not, like Descartes or Leibniz, want to reason outward *more geometrico* from truths of reason to truths of religion. Faith is the medium of their reasoning rather than its goal.

This means that Ficino's method in theology is strikingly different from that employed by the great scholastics or the great systematic thinkers of the seventeenth century. Despite his heavy doctrinal debts to Aquinas, Ficino does not imitate his method by trying to elaborate a structure of belief articulated by a chain of logical demonstrations. Instead, Ficino's dominant method is to bring his reader to see (*cernere*) how powerful his holistic metaphysical architecture is in accommodating our religious and psychic experience. His method is to show how harmoniously each element fits into the whole: how, for example, trinitarian patterns can be found through nature, the soul and mind.<sup>27</sup> As the example suggests, his method is reminiscent of that used by Augustine in the early books of the *De Trinitate*. Doctrines such as the Trinity, the hypostatic union of the divine nature in Christ,

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<sup>26</sup> AUGUSTINE, *Contra Faustum* 32.18, in *PL XLII*, c. 507.

<sup>27</sup> See for example *De Christiana religione*, cap. 14 = *Opera I*, 49.



the identity of essence and existence in God and the analogy of being are shown to cohere in satisfying patterns, in a way that excites belief and love. Though Ficino's *Theology* incorporates a great many specific arguments, many of them formally valid, his theological system as a whole engenders belief more because of its aesthetic attractions, the delight it causes by showing the place and significance of our experiences in larger patterns, rather than through strict logical demonstrations. It 'fits', it makes sense of a wide range of experience, it is beautiful and congruent with prestigious religious and philosophical authorities.

When it comes to refutation, Ficino uses the same holistic procedure. His main opponents in the *Platonic Theology* are the Arab philosopher Averroes, the Aristotelian commentator Alexander of Aphrodisias, and various materialists, principally Epicurus and Lucretius, all of whom threatened in different ways the doctrines of Providence, personal immortality, and rewards and punishments, which Ficino takes to be the core beliefs of true religion. But his approach is not straightforwardly to offer refutations, which would require establishing common first principles. This would be Aristotle's or Aquinas's approach but it is not Ficino's. Ficino begins the *Platonic Theology* (1.1.) by constructing a hierarchy of ancient philosophical positions, from the most benighted and earth-bound, like those of Democritus, Epicurus and Lucretius, to the most sublime, that of Plato. In each case he does not offer arguments against the inferior philosophies but tries to show that they are incomplete: that there are realms of psychic and noetic experience that are left unexplained by atomism or Stoic materialism or Aristotelian metaphysics. He repeats the same move at the beginning of Book VI. When dealing in more detail with the arguments of Lucretius against immortality, Ficino (using a skeptical method) shows that there could be alternative

explanations for the evidences of mortality advanced by Lucretius, and that there are other phenomena not covered by his theory.<sup>28</sup> He takes his counterarguments from Aristotle, Thomas, the Stoics and Arab philosophers indifferently so long as they can be used to shake confidence in Lucretius' arguments. He focuses on our psychological experience of knowing, on the effects of sickness on the body, on the phenomena of memory and self-consciousness, on our feelings about death or on the natural tendencies of human behavior in the mass – all to show that Lucretius' arguments are not exhaustive explanations and that Christian Platonic understandings of these same phenomena might do as well or better. In short, his arguments are overwhelmingly dialectical rather than formally demonstrative or apodictic. He often appeals to the beauty and goodness of the doctrines taught by Christian Platonists and the ugliness and ill consequences of the doctrines he opposes in a way that would utterly discredit him with an Anglo-American analytic philosopher. Yet Ficino, surprisingly to our ears, identifies his method as peculiarly Platonic and vastly superior to the logic-chopping argumentation of scholastic Aristotelians.

Ficino's adoption of this method in theology was probably dictated in part by the historical situation of Christian theology in the later fifteenth century. Since the fourteenth century, nominalist theologians, using Ockham's razor and the doctrine of the contingency of creation, elaborated a powerful form of the older scholastic distinction between the absolute and ordained power of God. They used this seriously to undermine the project of natural theology that thirteenth century theologians like Thomas and Scotus had inherited from the Muslims and Maimonides. There were still plenty of Thomist and Scotist theologians after

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<sup>28</sup> See James HANKINS, *Ficino and Lucretius*, forthcoming in the proceedings of the conference *The Rebirth of Platonic Theology. For Michael J. B. Allen*, sponsored by the Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento and the Villa I Tatti.

the fourteenth century to be sure – the institutions of the Church and the religious orders made sure of that – but their arguments did not carry much weight in philosophy faculties, which were dominated by Averroists and other secular Aristotelians. The nominalists in their own theology argued for a radical reduction in scope for the exercise of reason. Doctrines like the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the hypostatic union of human and divine natures in Christ, and the Trinity were indemonstrable, and some were indeed positively contrary to reason; they had to be believed on the basis of faith alone. The type of apologetic outreach practiced by Thomas, where philosophical truths of reason are proven as preambles to showing non-Christians the superior harmony of Christian faith with reason, was pronounced to be impossible by the nominalists. The Averroists came to the same conclusion by showing that the philosophy of Aristotle, understood simply as what unaided reason teaches, was incompatible with central Christian doctrines such as creation from nothing and immortality. For both nominalists and Averroists pagan philosophy was not a preparation for the Gospel, an antechamber to Christian faith as Augustine had believed; it was potentially a positive obstacle to religious belief. There is an unbridgeable gap between God and human reason that can only be filled by faith.

In this context it is understandable that Ficino (like earlier Italian humanists) felt the need, not only for a philosophical alternative to Aristotle, but also for a new method in theology entirely, a neo-Augustinian approach that would favor meaning and coherence over demonstrability and the priority of religious experience to reason. It was similar to the theological method of Cusanus before him and Pico della Mirandola after him, forming an alternative to the philosophically impoverished fideism of Savonarola and the failed Thomism embraced by many if not most of the theological authorities of the Catholic

Church. It looks forward less to the Deism of the eighteenth century than to the Romantic theologies of Rousseau and Schleiermacher.

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So far Ficino has been made to sound like a very traditional figure indeed, at least in terms of the contrast outlined earlier between philosophical religion and traditional religions. But there are two respects in which Ficino is something of a revolutionary figure in the history of Christianity. The first, as we have seen in the previous section, is his universalizing and naturalizing of the sources of religious belief, a tendency that points forward to Rousseau and the theologians of the Romantic period like Schleiermacher. The second is his attitude to non-Christian revelation and the veridical status of other faith traditions.<sup>29</sup> As already explained, Ficino does not embrace natural theology of the Thomistic sort, which holds that there are truths of religion that can be independently demonstrated by reason. But he does believe in what can be called natural religion: that all individuals of sound constitution naturally believe in God, Providence and morality (the *comunis religionis veritas*)<sup>30</sup> and, furthermore, that God has given all peoples at all times and places some kind of religious revelation.<sup>31</sup> The historical forms of religion – paganism, Brahmanism, Zoroastrianism, Hermetism, Orphism and Judaism – as well as more recently phenomena like Christianity

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<sup>29</sup> In general see James HANKINS, *Religion and the Modernity of Renaissance Humanism*, in *Interpretations of Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Angelo Mazzocco, Leiden 2006, 137-153.

<sup>30</sup> *De Christiana religione*, cap. 3 = *Opera* I, 33.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, cap. 4 = *Opera* I, 34. I use the expression ‘natural religion’ in Rousseau’s sense of a set of religious intuitions or *sentiments* taught directly by nature or by God through nature; not in Hume’s sense of a set of religious truths demonstrable using natural reason alone. The latter I would prefer to call natural theology. The distinction is an important one, though often neglected in the literature on the history of theology.

and Islam, all capture that revelation in different degrees.<sup>32</sup> Their holy men had visions of hidden spiritual realities vouchsafed them by God, visions beyond the sight of ordinary mortals which were communicated to their followers and encoded in religious practices and myths. These visions and revelations, as Christopher Celenza has recently pointed out, were not achieved by the natural power of reason as in Plotinus, but came from divine sources, in a manner more typical of post-Plotinian Platonism.<sup>33</sup> Contact with the divine empowered weak human souls to pass beyond their normal sphere, remit their presence in the body and gain a glimpse of the utterly real, the *ontōs ὄν*, in Plato's phrase. Unlike in ancient Christian apologetics, the sources of this revelation were not what Moshe Idel calls unilinear: they are not all derived (or 'stolen') by the founders of world religions from an original unitary revelation to Abraham. The sources of religious traditions are multilinear.<sup>34</sup> They descend from a number of sources mostly independent of Judaism: Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus and Orpheus principally, each representing one of the three continents known to the premodern world. There are multiple shadowy revelations of theological wisdom among the pre-Christian ancients but only one unitary truth, descending from the Father of Lights. The philosophers like Pythagoras, Philolaus and preëminently Plato who built their insights on the materials provided by the ancient theologians, combined with their own contemplative experience, were thus elaborating what we can call *revealed philosophies*. For example, the

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<sup>32</sup> This would place Ficino's theory of religious doctrine in the class of what the Yale theologian George Lindbeck called the 'experiential-expressive model'; see his *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, Louisville (Kentucky) 1984, 16, 30-32.

<sup>33</sup> Celenza, *Late Antiquity*, especially 79-84.

<sup>34</sup> Moshe IDEL, *Prisca Theologia in Marsilio Ficino and in Some Jewish Treatments*, in Allen and Rees, *Marsilio Ficino*, 137-158. But for a passage where Ficino emphasizes Plato's and the Platonists' debts to the Jews, see *De Christiana religione*, cap. 26 = *Opera* I, 59.

ancient theologians, with God's help, were aware of and gave names to the Divine Logos, Christ, who revealed the Divine Nature in the world.

Orpheus called this [full image of God and super-full exemplar of the world] 'Pallas', born from the head of Jove alone; Plato called him the son of God in his letter to Hermias; in the *Epinomis* he called him *logos*, i.e. reason and word, saying: 'Logos, the most divine of all things, adorned this visible world.' Mercurius Trismegistus often mentions both the true Son of God and the Spirit. Zoroaster also attributes to God an intellectual offspring. These men spoke according to their ability, and with the help of God. But God alone understands this and he to whom God shall wish to reveal it.<sup>35</sup>

The dependence of these revealed philosophies on God guaranteed that they remained fundamentally sound – unlike the philosophy of Aristotle, dependent on merely human reason, and thus unable to provide an authentic pathway to the divine.

Ficino thus presents a new way of understanding the role of pagan philosophy in Christian thought that offers a sharp contrast with the role of Aristotelian philosophy in medieval Islamic and Christian theology. Its role is not to establish preambles of faith, or to provide independent confirmation of Christian doctrines, or to corroborate Christian

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<sup>35</sup> *De Christiana religione*, cap. 13 = *Opera* I, 48: "Hanc [the *plena Dei imago et exemplar mundi superplenum*] Palladem appellavit Orpheus, solo Iovis capite natam; hunc Dei patris filium Plato in Epistola ad Hermiam nominavit; in *Epinomide* nuncupavit *logon*, id est, rationem ac verbum dicens: *Logos* omnium divinissimus mundum hunc visibilem exornavit. Mercurius Trismegistus de vero et filio Dei ac etiam de spiritu saepe mentionem facit. Zoroaster quoque intellectualem Deo prolem attribuit. Dixerunt isti quidem, quod potuerunt, et id quidem adiuvante deo. Deus autem hoc solus intelligit et cui Deus voluerit revelare." See also Ficino's argument to Plato's *Second Letter*, in *Opera* II, 532, where he says "Rursus mysteria eadem per divinam revelationem accepta in Platonem transfusa fuisse, et per Platonis exhortationes in homines similiter affectos posse transfundi." In the same passage Socrates *daimonion* is said to have been a vehicle of divine revelation. For the conception of Pythagoreanism as a revealed philosophy, see the *De vita pythagorica* of IAMBlichus cited above, note 20.

doctrines with the prestige of ancient philosophy. Its role is not to establish rational criteria that allow us to decide when religious teachings and texts need to be interpreted allegorically, as in Al-Ghazzali and Maimonides (or later in the natural philosophy of Galileo). Ficino's idea is that the best pagan philosophers were doing *exactly the same thing* that Christian theologians were doing, that they were enjoying *exactly the same vision* as their Christian counterparts like St. Paul or St. Augustine. The grace of illumination was given them all. Their wisdom differed in degree but not in kind from Christian wisdom. Ficino even indulges in a kind of syncretism of theologians, retailing speculations of Eusebius that Hermes Trismegistus and Musaeus, Orpheus's son, might be the same man as Moses; and Ham, son of Noah, might be the same man as Zoroaster.<sup>36</sup> Unlike Thomas Aquinas, Ficino makes no theoretical distinction between natural and divine prophecy: there is no cognitive difference between the Judaeo-Christian prophetic tradition and the prophecies of figures like Pythagoras, Diotima, Socrates, Epimenides, the sibyls, the Delphic oracle and the prophet Mohammed.<sup>37</sup> Therefore (as Pico would later try to do) their vision can be incorporated into a reformed Christian theology, corrected and clarified by Christian revelation, enriching the whole and making it greater than the sum of its parts. The pagan philosophers were no longer representatives of a tradition that had been superseded by Christian revelation, elaborating a rival vision of reality that threatened Christian belief. In fact they could give us the same kind of guidance in our own search for sublime wisdom that the greatest Christian theologians and mystics could give us – or Sufi mystics for that matter.

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<sup>36</sup> See IDEL, *Prisca Theologia*, especially 150-56.

<sup>37</sup> See James HANKINS, *Ficino, Avicenna and the Occult Powers of the Rational Soul*, in *La Magia nell'Europa moderna, Atti del Convegno, Firenze 2-4 ottobre 2003*, ed. F. Meroi and E. Scapparone, Firenze 2007, 51.

This makes Ficino sound tolerant and ecumenical, but to make that claim would be a serious distortion of the texts. Enthusiastic as Ficino was about the wisdom of the ancient theologians, confident as he was about their continued utility to modern Christians, he made it clear that the historical religions of the world, as actually reduced to dogmatic claims and practices, were all seriously flawed. Like Schleiermacher, he constructed a kind of hierarchy of religions that put vulgar pagan superstitions on the lowest level, Islam, Judaism and other monotheisms on a higher plane, and Christianity at the apex.<sup>38</sup> In his apologetic treatise *On the Christian Religion* he did not refrain from what would be today perceived as violently anti-Islamic and anti-Semitic comments, and this should not be ignored. But Ficino is also implicitly and explicitly critical of the Christianity of his own day, especially the ignorance and corruption of priests.<sup>39</sup> He believes there is a core of theological truths found in each of the great modern monotheisms, all of which believe, correctly, in creation, the creation of angels in the beginning, and the creation of individual souls in time.<sup>40</sup> His goal is to build on this common experience of religious truth, and to use Platonic theology to heal all the faith traditions of the world under the umbrella of a reformed Christianity.

Ficino's theological coherentism and his belief in natural religion leads him to embrace a new kind of apologetic approach which does not rely on establishing common rational principles with non-Christians. Instead he uses a kind of historical argument, modelled on Eusebius' *Praeparatio evangelica*. In the *De christiana religione* he argues that

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<sup>38</sup> See Friedrich SCHLEIERMACHER, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, Edinburgh 1928, repr. London 1999, 34-44. In the *De Christiana religione* 22 = *Opera* I, 55, Ficino repeats the traditional view that the Jews had only a superficial understanding of the Old Testament, but Christ and his disciples 'with lyncean eyes' taught the deep meaning of the Divine Mind. The same passage claims that the later Platonists only understood their own ancient theologians in the light of Christian revelation.

<sup>39</sup> See *De Christiana religione*, preface = *Opera* I, 31.

<sup>40</sup> *Platonic Theology* 18.1, ed. Allen and Hankins, VI, 64-65.



Christianity has to be true because otherwise there can be no earthly explanation for why it has succeeded.<sup>41</sup> Unlike Judaism and the gentile religions, it was not in its origins a religion of a people that can enforce belief through social pressure or political power; unlike Islam, it was not the religion of a mighty military nation, spread at the point of the sword. The founders of Christianity did not deceive anyone about how hard it was to embrace, both intellectually or morally.<sup>42</sup> Its very difficulty, the extreme demands it makes, shows that in pre-Constantinian times people could not have embraced it for any reason other than its truth: it did not teach “comfortable doctrine,” as the Puritans used to say. No Christian teacher tricked anyone or was tricked for profit; far from profiting, Christ’s disciples endured the worst of sufferings for the love of God. The inherent goodness of Christianity is shown by the exemplary behavior and holy teaching of the early disciples – they had no vile superstitions like the Jews, no obscene fables about the gods like the Gentiles, they endorsed no abominable license like the Muslims. Ficino says:

[Christianity] doesn’t command that the adversaries of its own faith and law be killed as the Talmud and the Koran commanded, but rather that they be instructed by reason or converted by speech [or prayer] or tolerated with patience. ... [The Christian] exercises the virtues with ardor, not for the sake of ambition or pleasure or human tranquillity but only for love of God, and he despises this world to achieve life in the next.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *De Christiana religione*, cap. 9 = *Opera* I, 42-43.

<sup>42</sup> *De Christiana religione*, cap. 5 = *Opera* I, 34-35. Ficino’s source for this argument may be ORIGEN, *De principiis* 4.2.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, cap. 8, *Opera* I, 11: “... neque adversarios fidei legisque suae interfici iubet, quemadmodum iussit Talmut et Alcoranum, sed vel ratione doceri vel oratione converti vel patientia tolerari. ... Virtutes praeterea non ambitionis aut voluptatis aut tranquillitatis humanae, sed Dei solius gratia ardentem exercet, totumque hunc mundum pessundat et pro nihilo habet, ut mundum alterum consequatur.”

Ficino's conclusion is that only the power of God could have founded Christianity and caused it to spread so widely. To those who ask what has happened to the miracles of the early Church, Ficino admits that miracles do happen and that they do help confirm the truth of religion. But to establish the truth of Christianity it is not necessary that miracles be continually repeated. In fact Ficino sees them as an inferior form of proof, a kind of violent or coercive proof.<sup>44</sup> A miracle is God hitting us over the head with the truth, but as a good Augustinian Ficino thinks it is better to come to Christian truth through reason, aided by grace, because the nature of man, though weak, is free, and God is more exalted by the free assent of human beings to his Truth, by love freely given.

As in other humanist works of the fifteenth century, there is an implicit contrast here between the Christianity of the early Church on the one hand – actuated by pure love of God, filled with contempt for this world and love of the next, spreading its message through reason and holy example – and modern corrupt Christianity, kept in existence only by the temporal power of the Church and the prince. Ficino has a vision of what Christianity could be that is higher and finer than the historical Christianity practiced in his time. This vision was most famously captured in the religious practices depicted in Thomas More's *Utopia*, written 32 years after Ficino's apologetic tract and (as I have argued elsewhere) in dependence on Ficino's theology.<sup>45</sup> Ficino in 1474 is calling for Christians to reform their own theology and praxis along lines similar to those advocated by Pico della Mirandola twelve years later. Of course Ficino lived in a period when theological orthodoxy was a good deal more fluid than it was to become after the Council of Trent, when all sorts of things seemed possible that

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., cap. 10, *Opera* I, 44-45.

<sup>45</sup> HANKINS, *Religion*, 144-145.

later became impossible following the outbreak of the Protestant Reformation and the reorganization of Catholicism into one Christian confession among many.

We can conclude that Ficino was not, after all, an advocate of philosophical religion in the manner of Aristotle or Alfarabi or Spinoza; he does not see himself as in possession of a higher truth radically distinct from the convictions of ordinary Christians and other believers. He was clearly tempted that way, but he resisted the temptation, and for more reasons than his fear of the Inquisition. Ficino does not think that there is or should be a higher, esoteric philosophical religion, a universal religion of the enlightened, immeasurably superior to the merely symbolic/dogmatic religions of the historical faith traditions. He does however believe that if Christianity reforms itself under the guidance of his Platonic theology – which is in fact an amalgam of Plato, Plotinus, the later Neoplatonists, Avicenna and Thomas Aquinas – that it can be remade into the universal true religion of peace and love that it originally was, placing contemplation and true knowledge above mere compliance with law and force, and therefore (though of course he doesn't dare say this openly) making the contemporary Church with its Vanity Fair of graces for sale, its legalistic dogmatic formulas and its theological thought-police effectively unnecessary. This new, enriched and reoriented Christian Platonic theology would have then have the moral and intellectual resources to absorb the partial visions of Judaism and Islam and pagan henotheisms, preserving the best things in them and discarding the false and inferior things.

Ficino's ecumenism is thus a militant ecumenism. He is not trying to convince Christians to abolish the boundary between their own faith tradition and other faith traditions. Like Cusanus, he finds Christian truths in other faith traditions, but his goal is to bring all the world to Christ, the idea and model of the virtues, the living book of truth sent by heaven.

The New Testament is the final and complete revelation of God's truth. Ficino claims that the truths of the Christian religion are more universal and explain more of human experience of the world and of the divine, and are therefore more authoritative than other faith traditions. The Jews should abandon their stubborn adherence to the Old Law and the Muslims their heretical confusions about true religion.

But though Ficino's is a militant ecumenism, it is still ecumenism. It still contains a vision of world religions that moves well beyond the simple binary oppositions of late ancient and medieval Christianity, that sees other world religions as nothing but relics of past dispensations or heretical, demon-inspired deviations from God's revealed truth. It seeks to convert through reason and love and not through force. Like Cusanus, Ficino asserts that God speaks through the Koran as well as through the Bible, even if the voice of God is sometimes lost on Muslims.<sup>46</sup> Ficino even goes so far as to say that God may have intended the multiplicity of religions in the world, that "such variety, regulated by God, generates a kind of marvelous beauty in the universe."<sup>47</sup> The highest king of all (an epithet for God from Plato's *Second Epistle*) desires more to be honored in some fashion or other, however foolish, than not to be honored at all; the imperative to honor God is more important than that he be honored by this or that set of gestures or rituals. God does not condemn as impiety the effort of any human cult to honor him, although he gives his approbation only to the highest cult of all, Christianity. Those who pay him the highest honor, indeed the only persons who

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<sup>46</sup> *De Christiana religione*, cap. 12 = *Opera* I, 47, and cap. 36 = *Opera* I, 102-4.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, cap. 4, *Opera* I, 34: "Idcirco divina providentia non permittit esse aliquo in tempore ullam mundi regionem omnis prorsus religionem expertem, quamvis permittat variis locis atque temporibus ritus adorationis varios observari. Forsitan vero varietas huiusmodi ordinante Deo decorem quendam parit in universo mirabilem. Regi maximo magis curae est re vera honorari quam aut his aut illis gestibus honorari. ... Coli mavult quoquo modo, vel inepte, modo humane, quam per superbiam nullo modo coli."

honor him sincerely, are those who venerate him with zeal by means of action, goodness, truth-telling, understanding to the best of their ability, and love. These are the persons who truly worship the God revealed in Christ, as Christ himself taught.<sup>48</sup> Ficino, in short, despite his militancy, is advocating a far more inclusive vision of religious truth than was ordinarily found in the historical Christianity of the fifteenth century. We can certainly quarrel with Ficino's view that Christians historically have behaved better than Jews or Muslims and it is hard not to be repelled by the anti-semitism that disfigures the *De Christiana religione*. But the idealized form of Christianity he holds up, of a religion of tolerance that seeks to persuade by reason and by the example of love for God is one that we can still admire.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.: "Illi igitur Deum prae ceteris, imo soli sincere colunt, qui eum actione, bonitate, veritate linguae, mentis claritate, qua possunt, et charitate qua debent, sedulo venerantur. Tales vero sunt, ut ostendemus, quicumque ita Deum adorant, quemadmodum Christus vitae magister eiusque discipuli praeceperunt."