TREADING THE PATH OF *PRISCA THEOLOGIA*: FICINO'S CHRISTIAN-PLATONIC ALLURE FOR PAGAN PRACTICES

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Abstract. Thanks to the works of Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) in the Renaissance, the idea of an ancient theology of the Gentiles that foreshadowed Christianity spread throughout Europe. Yet, underlying the notion of *prisca theologia* there was not a single and unified doctrine, but diverse philosophical-religious conceptions that can be traced back to different pagan cultures (such as Chaldea, Egypt, and Greece). More importantly, these traditions included a series of practices that the Western Church regarded with suspicion or openly condemned, such as talismanic magic and theurgy.

As both a devoted priest and philosopher, Ficino found himself irresistibly drawn to these primordial prophets of Christianity and their magico-theurgical rituals. However, by treading the path laid out by figures like Zoroaster, Hermes, and Orpheus, he grappled with the challenge of reconciling ancient pagan practices with his Christian faith. As a result, his reinterpretation of Christian theurgy took on an increasingly eclectic character, incorporating elements from Jewish thought and possibly significant Eastern Orthodox theological concepts of his era. Our paper explores this fascinating tension at the heart of Ficino's intellectual journey, an internal conflict that reveals the complex interplay between philosophical-theological speculations and pagan practices in early modern Christian Europe.

Keywords: Marsilio Ficino, *Prisca Theologia*, Renaissance Philosophy, Christianity, Theurgy, Magic, Epiclesis, Neoplatonism, *Orphic Hymns*

The beginning

During the councils of 1438 and 1439, Georgios Gemistos 'Plethon' (1355-1452) had brought back to the Western world the idea of an ancestral philosophical-religious doctrine handed down by the 'Chaldean' Zoroaster to the great masters of Greek philosophy, Orpheus, Pythagoras, and Plato.[1] In those encounters with the Byzantine scholar, the intellectual elite of the Latin West was deeply fascinated by the mention of highly prestigious works by authors like Zoroaster and Plato, thought to have been lost for over a millennium. About fifteen years later, a young Florentine intellectual set out to follow in Plethon's footsteps, translating, studying, and

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interpreting the records of ancient wisdom. The protagonist of this unprecedented undertaking was Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), son of Cosimo de' Medici's (1389-1463) personal physician. The powerful Florentine politician and the scholar of Byzantium were acknowledged by the humanist as the two fundamental inspirers of Ficino's conversion to Platonic theology[2] and consequently of the broader revival of Platonism that impacted European culture from the fifteenth century onward.

Already in the 1550s, we find Ficino's first formulations of *prisca theologia*, within the orations *De laudibus Philosophiae* and *De laudibus Medicinae*.[3] In those early works, the young philosopher linked ancient pagan wisdom to Christian medicine and religion, a pattern that would prove key throughout his output. He also showed an early interest in the practical and therapeutic implications of pagan magical-astrological knowledge. In 1456, he completed his transcription of the Hermetic *Asclepius*[4], a work traditionally attributed to Apuleius, in which philosophical elements are combined with the technical aspects of magic and theurgy. Around the same years, Ficino translated into Latin the *Orphic Hymns*,[5] a collection of invocations to the gods likely written in Asia Minor around the 2nd-3rd century, but at the time considered the work of Orpheus, whom he would later deem the oldest theologian in Greece. We will return later to the concerns that prompted Ficino not to publish the translation, but from the outset of his intellectual career, his unorthodox interests elicited thoughtful admonitions from his spiritual mentors, who guided him away from pagan superstitions and toward the safer path outlined by Western patristic literature.[6] One can clearly sense this ambivalent pool in Ficino himself: the tradition of the Western Church on one hand, and the ancestral pre-Christian tradition of the ancient theologians on the other. At this time of his life, the attraction to Hermetic wisdom was simply too strong to be ignored.

In 1463, Ficino translated into Latin the first fourteen treatises of the collection of texts that would become known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*.[7] According to his *Argumentum*, Hermes was the first among Gentile philosophers to rise above sensory constraints in his exploration of the world, opting instead for metaphysical contemplation of the divine. The Egyptian sage was then allowed to explore the mysteries of God, demons and soul, paving the way for humanity's later supersensible speculations. Elsewhere, other sages followed his example. Thus, the *prisca theologia* of the Gentiles was born as a parallel tradition to the Sinaitic Revelation:

> Following him, Orpheus obtained the second position in ancient theology; Aglaophemus was initiated into the sacred rites of Orpheus; Aglaophemus was succeeded in theology by Pythagoras, whom Philolaus followed, the teacher of our divine Plato. Thus, one school of ancient theology, harmonious in all respects, was marvellously formed by six theologians, beginning with Mercury, and brought to perfection by the divine Plato.[8]

In 1464, Ficino showed an early interest towards the four-lettered divine names across cultures, particularly regarding their numerological and symbolic meanings. It's interesting to note that on this theme, later expounded in its magical aspects, he was already appealing to Orpheus and Hermes.[9] Five years later, Bessarion (1403-1472) sent him a copy of his *In calunniatorem Platonis*, in which the Greek cardinal championed

Platonic philosophy and asserted its compatibility with Christianity. Ficino wrote him back enthusiastically, fully endorsing the Christian-Platonic synthesis and their shared admiration for the 'divine Plato'.[10]

The following years were significant for Ficino on both a personal and literary level. Having obtained priestly ordination in 1474, in about a decade he composed some of his most important works and translations. In *De Christiana religione* (1476 and 1484) and *Theologia platonica* (1482) Ficino revised his genealogy of wisdom, choosing the 'Chaldean' Zoroaster as the original theologian.[11] Decisive was the influence of the *Chaldean Oracles* and their erroneous attribution to the Persian magus Zoroaster by Michael Psellos (c. 1018-1096) and Plethon. Ficino's choice could also be partially ascribed to the typical Renaissance fascination with the biblical Magi, the Zoroastrian priests who came from Chaldea to celebrate the birth of Christ. That event heralded the sacred canonisation of Zoroastrian learning, as well as its reconciliation with the Judeo-Christian tradition under the divine aegis of the Messiah.

Being himself a medical doctor and a priest, Ficino always maintained a keen interest in the well-being of the human body and soul. Combined with his eclectic interests, this holistic attitude favoured his peculiar approach towards magical, astrological, and theurgical therapies. From 1481 to 1489, Ficino wrote and published his famous trilogy of Platonic medicine *De Vita*.[12] It is especially in its third book, *De vita coelitus comparanda* (On obtaining life from the heavens), that he made extensive use of the knowledge of the ancient theologians, particularly concerning their ancestral healing practices and remedies. While preparing the last two books of the trilogy, he had devoted himself to an in-depth study of Porphyry (c. 234-305), Iamblichus (c. 245-325), Synesius (c. 373-414), Proclus (c.412-485) and Psellos, intending to explore their demonological, magical, astrological and theurgical conceptions. All his Neoplatonic works and studies converged in 1497 in the publication of a vast *prisca theologia summa*, commonly known as *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum*, from the translation/paraphrase of Iamblichus's apologia of theurgy that opens the collection.[13] Aside from the aforementioned authors, and a few of his magical works (including his Hermetic translations), here we also find Proclus' short treatise *De sacrificio et magia*, extracted from a larger text titled *Πρόκλου Περὶ τῆς καθ' Ἕλληνας ἱερατικῆς τέχνης* (On the Hieratic Art according to the Greeks).[14] The original Greek title is interesting because, like the work of Iamblichus, it traces ancient priestly wisdom back to theurgy (the 'hieratic art'). For the importance of these sources for Ficino's ideas on theurgy and demonology, about which we're going to elaborate more in this paper, it is therefore worth pointing out a few introductory remarks.

The word 'theurgy' (from θεουργία, 'divine activities') designates a series of rituals meant to facilitate the manifestation of the gods, who of their own will could then channel purifying, divine influences to the theurgist in view of his final deification. It thus differs from theology ('discourse on God') for its practical focus, from natural magic as its rituals are addressed to the divine, and from demonic magic in that it does not involve incantations designed to *manipulate* higher entities. The post-Plotinian Neoplatonists had a complex theory of magic, which included prophecies and theurgical operations performed within an enchanted nature populated by divine and/or demonic intermediaries. Although pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (5th-6th centuries) employed

the term 'theurgy' in reference to Christian sacramental rites, since Augustine's time the Western Christian Church had condemned theurgical rituals as demonic, rejecting the salvific function attributed to them by the Neoplatonists.[15] Yet, it was precisely these authors who provided the theoretical-philosophical foundation for the concluding book of the trilogy *De vita.*

Precisely because he was a Christian priest, philosopher and physician, Ficino regarded the six ancient theologians as sublime teachers and ideal models to follow. However, *prisca theologia* had been originally transmitted, preached and practiced by pagans of remote antiquity and, as such, it was intrinsically linked to disciplines such as magic, theurgy, divination, medicine and astrology, whose status was controversial and subject to debate among Church authorities in the 15th century. In other words, resorting to the divine doctrines and practices of Zoroaster, Hermes and Orpheus entailed an inescapable confrontation with potentially heretical ideas. Not only that. Expressions like *prisca theologia*, *pia philosophia* or *philosophia perennis* all hide the fact that these ancestral philosophies and theologies also had a practical side, no less important, and in fact, complementary, to the theoretical one.[16] This is exactly the topic of our paper. We will let the themes of magic, theurgy, and divine names guide our analysis through some of the most representative works of Ficino.

The search for a *prisca magia naturalis*

Magical wisdom was a key aspect of *prisca theologia*. As an art that combines medical skills with stellar virtues, natural magic was for Ficino a true astrological medicine. It was by joining, or rather, reuniting, the earthly sphere with the celestial dimension that it was possible to obtain benefits superior to traditional cures. The model was, of course, that of the ancient Chaldean, Persian and Egyptian priests, whose sophisticated knowledge of the stars was essential for the proper care of their patients' bodies and souls. It is easy to glimpse in these descriptions the likes of Hermes, Zoroaster, or Orpheus, ancestral authorities who served as guarantors of the very permissibility of magic. Significantly, even *Picatrix*,[17] the famous pagan treatise on astral magic often referenced by Ficino, alluded to the intimate link between magic and wisdom: not only was it attributed to the "wise philosopher, the noble and honoured Picatrix",[18] but in its chapters one finds continuous references to rituals practiced by sages, among whom Hermes was named.[19] To fully master this art–whose use was dictated by a genuine therapeutic necessity–one had to be a profound connoisseur of nature and the occult correspondences that run through it. Alongside this noble form of magic, however, *Picatrix* also included a number of disturbing and damaging rituals (such as coprophagy, cannibalism, animal sacrifices, and mutilations), which as a Christian priest he could never approve.[20] In fact, Ficino strongly opposed an ungodly use of natural magic, such as that carried on by those who, moved by mere curiosity, performed prodigies for their own sake, harmful to the health of the body and the salvation of the soul.[21]

Alongside these two types of natural magic, however, the wisdom of the ancients often mentioned two disciplines, demonic magic and theurgy, whose reconciliation with Christianity was much more complicated. On the one hand, operations with demons were obviously intended to obtain otherworldly privileges in

pursuit of earthly purposes; theurgical rituals, on the other, required the mediation of spiritual entities who, despite presenting themselves as angels or gods, could eventually turn out to be demons. Ficino took great care to explain that his astrological magic was simply imitating the stars and attracting their virtues,[22] legitimate and natural operations, even recommendable for the well-being of soul and body. However, as each planet was endowed with a rational mind and harboured peculiar forces that the sage wished to draw upon himself,[23] the origin of the planetary 'intelligences' must be clarified. Were they to be understood as mere metaphorical expressions of natural forces? Or were they rather divine entities, angels, spirits or demons?

This question must have worried Ficino who, it will be recalled, studied at length demonology in the platonic tradition.[24] Generally considered intermediaries between God and men, *daimones* had taken on various meanings and had been identified, for example, as gods, as spiritual messengers, as benign or malignant entities. Still in 1497, regarding the way in which pagan savants captured influences from heaven, Ficino confided that Orpheus "had dedicated many of his hymns not only to the celestial gods, but also to demons and demonic men, and had added particular fumigations for each."[25] The possibility that such a procedure was comparable to those described in the *De vita* is confirmed not only by the similarity between the operations, but also by the fact that in a letter, dating perhaps to 1484, he reported the Platonists' view that:

> As many gods as there are in the sky, that is stars, so many legions of demons there are around the earth, and in each legion there are as many demons as there are stars in the sky. And there are twelve leaders of demons just as there are twelve signs in the Zodiac. Moreover, some demons are of Saturn, others of Jupiter, and others of Mars and the Sun.[26]

By distinguishing between good and evil demons, he might have hoped to affirm the legitimacy, within the confines of the Christian religion, of the worship of good *daimones* or angels. But it was a delicate issue. While some theologians accepted the existence and veneration (*dulia*) of planetary angels,[27] the Church viewed with suspicion any magical operations aimed at entities endowed with intelligence. It was believed that evil demons, prone to acting through deception and illusions, could confuse humans by appearing in divine form. Ficino was certainly aware that he was treading into dangerous territory.

A more viable solution was to show how his magical rituals made use of purely natural elements, without involving otherworldly intelligences. Afterall, any kind of addressative magic potentially directed at spirits, demons and/or gods faced the opposition of the Church.[28] This was an issue that pertained either to the realm of causality or to that of semiotics.[29] In the first case, the act of magic was permissible if it could be interpreted as causing the descent of natural astral influence. In the second case, any magical action that made use of signs (such as words, images, symbols, etc.) was to be condemned as demonic, since it was inevitably directed at intelligent beings. With the construction of astrological images (or talismans), a further degree of complexity can be added to the discussion.

Astrological natural magic or demonic astro-theurgy?

In his *De vita coelitus comparanda*, Ficino paid special attention to the popular talismanic remedies, objects crafted from stone or metal, and inscribed with astrological characters or images during propitious celestial moments, intended to harness various celestial benefits. In truth, in the proem of the third book, he showed a cautious attitude about images, even in terms of their medical use.[30] In pointing out that he was merely reporting every therapeutic indication recommended by the ancient sages,[31] he somewhat distanced himself from them (though he admitted that he had wanted to wear one in his youth[32]), endorsing rather the use of natural medicines prepared in accordance with the heavens. As for their theological lawfulness by means of natural celestial influences, the most authoritative source remained Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274). Favourable to the medicinal use of natural remedies charged with astral virtues, the Scholastic philosopher was, however, firmly opposed to artificial characters carved on talismans, as signs capable of opening a channel of communication to higher intelligences and thus attracting demonic entities.[33]

Ficino could not, nor did he wish to, legitimise the use of dangerous demonic operations, but he also did not want to renounce the talismanic magic recommended by ancient and modern sages. In trying to reconcile Christian and pagan sources, he found himself at an impasse: were these natural operations aimed at capturing celestial energies, or were they demonic-theurgical rituals directed at planetary intelligences (spirits, demons, gods)? Ficino would have vouchsafed the former option, but the text left open the possibility that it was the latter, with the inevitable risks of incurring in malignant demons. Wishing to affirm only what was approved by the Roman Church, he ended up in a position of equivocal ambiguity. On the general virtue of talismanic medicine, he confessed his suspicion that it might prove "to be mostly vain,"[34] "useless".[35] While not denying their efficacy categorically, he remained open to the possibility that talismans might well have some power, although they remained less effective than the other astrological remedies he recommended.[36]

In his excursus on the importance of talismans, Ficino reported various customs related to talismans from other cultures, including the Chaldean magi and the Egyptians,[37] a detail that was perhaps meant to suggest their legitimacy, as Zoroaster and Hermes supposedly came from Chaldea and Egypt. In this context he brought as an example the biblical episode of the golden calf, reinterpreted astrologically as a receptacle suitable for capturing the favourable influences of Venus and the Moon.[38] Also significant was the idea, taken from *Picatrix*,[39] that in antiquity, and especially among ancient Egyptians, people favoured making images in the shape of a cross, as this form was better predisposed to receive star rays. For Ficino the primordial efficacy of the cross was clearly an anticipation of the power that Christ would later bestow upon it.

More controversial was his interest in talismanic operations involving mundane objects animated by celestial, if not demonic, forces. Although the ambition was to write a treatise on medicine, however *sui generis*, the writing of *De vita coelitus comparanda* stemmed from the reading of a passage by Plotinus (*Enneads* IV.3.11) that on the surface had little to do with therapeutic purposes. What must have struck Ficino most was the technique of the ancient sages of channeling the World Soul into 'sympathetic' objects,

thereby drawing favour from heaven. Above all, he did not miss the obvious parallels between the Plotinian passage and the similar descriptions formulated in the *Asclepius*.[40] In the Hermetic treatise, in fact, the Egyptian *priscus theologus* presented his pupil Asclepius with the theurgical technique (*telestikê*)[41] through which it was possible to channel spiritual entities into the statues of the gods in order to animate them and produce prodigious effects, such as prophetic messages and the cure of diseases. Although demons were invoked within them, these material effigies were composed of "plants, stones and spices […] that have in them a natural power of divinity. And this is why those gods are entertained with constant sacrifices, with hymns, praises and sweet sounds in tune with heaven's harmony [...]."[42] This unique amalgamation of *symbola* and *synthêmata*–material objects and signs that were believed to embody the essence of divinity–met precise ritual requirements designed to make an earthly entity (such as a statue) resemble the divine.[43] In this way the theurgists believed they were fostering the manifestation of the god to whom the ritual was addressed, and thus the reception of his influence.

As a magico-religious practice inherited from the *Chaldaean Oracles*, theurgy was for Ficino intimately connected to *prisca theologia*. Its ritual techniques, which involved the ascent to the divine, or rather, the descent of the divine, represented the ideal culmination of the philosophical-religious path.[44] What is more, it constituted the priestly art par excellence, practiced by Zoroaster and Hermes, and later witnessed by the Platonists Iamblichus and Proclus.[45] However, knowing that it was condemned by ecclesiastical authority, Ficino preferred to remain relatively cautious. Although he avoided mentioning the word 'theurgy,' the nature of his astrological remedies had demonic-theurgical elements, for such were the sources he used. It was on the basis of Iamblichus, Synesius, and Proclus that he could assert that through materials conforming to higher beings one "can receive forces and effects which are not only celestial, but even daemonic and divine."[46] From these "Intelligences which are above the heavens"[47] he believed derived even more abundant and beneficial influences than merely natural ones. Yet, while affirming that people can "through the celestials reconcile the super-celestials to us or perhaps wholly insinuate them into us," he soon retreated with a cautious "but this last matter I leave to them" (i.e., the theurgists).[48]

With material receptacles animated by higher powers, Ficino struggled to identify the exact nature of the forces involved. After recounting the operations of the magi-priests on the basis of the accounts of Hermes and Plotinus, he defined such worldly deities as "a life or something vital from the Anima Mundi and the souls of the spheres and of the stars or even a motion and, as it were, a vital presence from the daemons," or "something divine and wonderful".[49] In Chapter XX he had instead attributed such energies to the spirits of the stars, which could coincide with the forces of the celestial bodies (in *Picatrix* and *Enneads*) or with demons (in the *Asclepius*).[50] Since Plotinus was described by Ficino as a follower of Hermes regarding astromagical/theurgical practices, this seems to suggest a general endorsement of Hermetic spirituality by both Plotinus and Ficino. And that the two ancient sages were equated is made explicit by the concluding lines of the work, when Ficino admitted to referring "to Hermes, or rather to Plotinus."[51] A statement that should perhaps be put in relation to the one placed at the end of the proem, where he addressed the reader

confessing that "from now on, then, let us speak with Plotinus, but in such a way that we will still be taking even greater care of you. In all things which I discuss here or elsewhere, I intend to assert only so much as is approved by the Church."[52] The scenario grew even more entangled when his interest in the theurgical art intertwined with the study of divine names.

Theurgy, divine names, and epiclesis (I): The Kabbalistic front

It will be recalled that as early as the 1460s, Ficino became interested in divine names through confrontation with the authorities of *prisca theologia*. While Dionysius was for him the Platonic-Christian source *par excellence*, Ficino also gradually approached alternative paths, which led him toward what we might call Jewish '*prisca theologia*'.[53] Already in the *De Christiana religione* he mentioned that Jesus would perform miracles through the secret pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton.[54] He also returned to the same topic in the *Argumentum in Cratylum* (1484), which constitutes his clearest treatment of the *scientia divinum nominum*.[55] According to Ficino, the science of divine names was among Jews the highest form of knowledge, superior even to the written laws of Torah. It was knowledge that God conferred directly into the minds of the patriarchs, Moses, prophets, and pure-minded or divinely inspired holy men.[56] The divine names, moreover, were concealed in their scriptures, to the extent that only a few were able to find them, pronounce them, and through them perform miracles.

Following and expanding on a cue from the Greek theologian Origen on the virtues of *nomina divina* in Hebrew–their original language–Ficino argued that the power of divine names was contained in their original composition.[57] Here Ficino boldly likened the magical use of divine names to theurgical rituals: just as statues were constructed in accordance with the higher spiritual spheres in order to have their essence channeled to the earthly plane, thus allowing wonders of various kinds, in the same way, the linguistic structure of divine names imprisoned within them a celestial force which, when pronounced by a man of pure soul, emanated divine gifts on the earthly plane, thus creating ideal conditions for performing miracles and healing people's souls and bodies. The sources referenced here by Ficino were again Plato, Plotinus, Iamblichus and the *prisci theologi* Hermes and Zoroaster.

It is worth noting that in the same years Yohanan Alemanno (c. 1435-1504), a Jewish intellectual and Hebrew teacher of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), supported similar theurgical conceptions in his Kabbalistic-Hermetic approach: "Whenever he wanted to perform signs and wonders, Moses would pray and utter divine names, words, and meditations until he had intensified those emanations. The emanations then descended into the world and created new supernatural things. With that Moses split the sea, opened up the earth, and the like."[58] Although it is difficult to say with certainty who influenced whom, in the *De vita coelitus comparanda* Ficino reported the opinion of a Sephardic intellectual through the likely (direct or indirect) mediation of Alemanno himself. The passage noted by the Florentine philosopher is particularly interesting, as it relates an astromagical, or astro-theurgical, procedure to create an anthropomorphic metal talisman capable of predicting the future.[59] Clearly, an operation that bears a striking resemblance to the ritually animated statues in the *Asclepius*.[60]

At yet another juncture, he recalled the therapeutic power of King David's songs, which could deliver Saul from the torments of demons through divine mediation.[61] If the above is true, it is easy to imagine King David singing and intoning divine names, or one would not explain divine intervention through the power of natural magic alone. Unless this was for Ficino the way out of the impasse. Afterall, in the concluding lines of the *De vita coelitus comparanda* he finally admitted the possibility that 'gifts' even higher than the World Soul could flow on the magician or priest.[62] Rather than attempting to search for the legitimacy of theurgical practices in the Bible or in Dionysius, it seems that the Ficinian strategy was to circumscribe astromagical remedies to the natural realm only. While acknowledging that divine gifts could fall to man, he considered them precisely that, 'gifts,' and not virtues obtained through the coercive actions of the magician, who under no circumstances could bend the divine will.

Theurgy, Divine Names and Epiclesis (II): the *Orphic Hymns* and the Eastern Christian Heritage

In the 1450s, Ficino started translating the ancient mythological-poetic hymns of Homer and Hesiod, hoping to uncover traces of the sacred supposedly held within these divinely inspired texts. He soon gravitated towards Orpheus, a mythological, almost divine figure whom he regarded as the oldest theologian of Greece and the original author of the *Orphic Hymns*. In a way, Ficino considered him the Gentiles' David and his poems his psalms. Sometimes, the Florentine philosopher even performed Davidic psalms along with *Orphic Hymns* on his lyre, evoking such wonder that his friend Naldo Naldi (1439-1513) compared him to Orpheus himself.[63]

These hymns, composed within the context of the Orphic religious tradition and its rituals, contain invocations to the deities to honour their function within the world according to Orphic cosmology.[64] Even though they are not purely Neoplatonic, their content was highly influenced by this school of thought and then influenced the following Neoplatonic tradition. Their sacred yet pagan context also seemed to invoke demonic powers. Aware of this duality, Ficino translated the *Orphic Hymns* into Latin but shared only select chants in private circles. However, it is contradicting and intriguing that he did not hesitate as much as with other ancient wisdom texts and hymns. Despite being a devoted Christian, Ficino followed Plethon in performing pagan hymns.

Gemistos, too, was interested in hymnic poetry. He edited and altered the *Orphic Hymns*, creating sometimes even new poems. It seems that Plethon worked with the *Orphic Hymns* as he prepared to compose his hymns to accompany his *Laws*.[65] In his *Laws*, Plethon describes the praying principles of his renewed religion. In this, he prayed three times every day, in a way similar to Ancient Egyptians,[66] Proclus,[67] and Emperor Julian (331-363),[68] figures closely related to the tradition of *prisca sapientia*. However, the time for the prayers was not strictly fixed as the Christian *Canonical Hours* or Islam's *Salah*. He is not much more demanding on the place: prayer can occur in temples or any place not contaminated by human bones and excrement, and the supervision of a priest or someone chosen by the priest is necessary. Plethon's practices seem to criticise the Christian tradition of settling an altar on martyrs' relics and the solitudes of *Hesychasm*,

the orthodoxy of the Christian East.[69] *Hesychasm* is a tradition of Christian mysticism which aims to unite with God (*theosis*), which demands constant esoteric prayer, with the inner repetition of the Jesus prayer in a state of solitude and quietness.[70] Despite his criticism of Christianity, Plethon's rituals, *per se,* are highly influenced by the Liturgy and the Scriptures. The ritual also contained movements and postures derived from pagan and Christian originals. He used his composed hymns set in Byzantine ecclesiastical music–at least to some degree, combining with ancient Greek musical elements–in his prayers.[71] It is crucial that, according to him and his practices, every prayer should start and end with an invocation.

Following Plethon, Ficino used to pray with psalms three times a day, too, as he claims in a letter from May 1490 to Ermolao Barbaro (c. 1453-1493).[72] Singing was central to Ficino's philosophy; he sang in rituals and expected to purify his soul and heal his and his friends' bodies and spirits. He writes in his *Platonic Theology* that:

> To start with, the philosophy of Zoroaster (as Plato testifies) was nothing other than wise piety and divine worship. The disputations of Mercury Trismegistus too all begin with prayers and end with sacrifices. The philosophy of Orpheus and Aglaophemus is also entirely concerned with praise of the divine. Pythagoras used to start his studies of philosophy with the morning singing of sacred hymns. Not only in speaking but in thinking too Plato taught us in every single matter to begin with God; and he himself always began with God.[73]

And Ficino himself always began with God. Especially when he spent a part of his life in the Monastery at the Angeli, "Ficino harmonised on his Orphic lyre ancient Platonic *sententiae* with monastic hymns to Christ's resurrection", as Lackner states.[74] So, it sounds unlikely that Ficino was negative about using the *Orphic Hymns* solely because they were pagan.

The peculiarity of the *Orphic Hymns* and the source of Ficino's fear seem to be their epicletic content. Epiclesis (*ἐπίκλησις*), the invocation of one or several gods in the context of a ritual, was a significant aspect of both Christian and Ancient Greek religions.[75] Ficino's stance about epiclesis was highly regulated by his Christian beliefs and empowered by his close touch with Eastern Christianity.

In Christianity, epiclesis is a central part of the Eucharist. Especially in Eastern traditions, the Eucharist cannot be fully completed without a distinct part of the Liturgy devoted explicitly to the invocation of the Holy Ghost. This matter was debated at the Ferrara-Florence Council. In Western liturgical practice, the epiclesis is typically found before the Words of Institution in the Eucharistic Prayer. Still, the emphasis remains on the words spoken by Christ as the transformative moment. Western theologians viewed the Words of Institution as directly linked to Christ's command and, therefore, considered them as the moment when the transformation occurred. Nevertheless, for the East, the invocation was a fundamental part of the legitimacy of the mystery, too. Nicolas Kabasilas (c. 1319-1392), a prominent theologian one generation before the Council, addressed this difference in an era with heightened political and religious tensions between East and West, claiming:

> Here in the Liturgy, we believe that the Lord's discourse does indeed make operative the mystery, but through the medium of the priest, his invocation,[76] and his prayer. These are not operating absolutely in themselves or under any circumstances, but there are many requirements, without which they do not change what relates to them.[77]

Invocation played a role in Western Christian rituals as well; yet many rites that could have been invocation-centred such as exorcisms, were not formally established and standardised until the Council of Trent (1545–1563) and the publication of the *Rituale Romanum* in 1614.[78]

Plethon participated in this Council, which allowed him to spread his personal opinion alongside the Eastern orthodoxy to the West. Moreover, the prominent figure of the Orthodox Church in this Council was Mark of Ephesus (1438-1439), a student of Plethon who was engaged in various theological debates.[79]

Despite Ficino being too young to participate in this conference, it influenced the theological education and cultural milieu of Italy in the following decades. As a young theologian, he had a conference participant, Giovanni Argiropulo (c. 1416-1487), as a teacher, while Plethon always a strong influence. Hence, he was strongly influenced by Eastern thought. Nevertheless, the Ferrara-Florence Council was not the only source of Eastern thought on epiclesis that affected his perspective on these hymns.

Ficino was a translator and commentator of pseudo-Dionysius' works, a series of writings with a mystical nature, Neoplatonic language, and Christian mystical ideas that originated in the late 5th to early 6th century from an unknown author but traditionally attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, the Athenian disciple of Paul mentioned in *Acts* 17:34.[80] Ficino translated and wrote a commentary for his *Divine Names*, a theological and philosophical treatise that explores the various names attributed to God, aiming to articulate the divine attributes and the mystical nature of God's transcendence and immanence. Within the Neoplatonic tradition–and as a result within the works of Dionysius–divine names are often used in theurgy. Despite the various definitions of the term, theurgy in its Neoplatonic sense can be described as a religious and philosophical practice focused on contemplation around divine icons and names intending to change the practitioner and connect with the divine.[81] *Hesychasm* is strongly associated with this definition of the theurgy.

The *Divine Names* is a work with a structure similar to a prayer. Dionysius claims that using the divine names is an act of praise and, as a result, a theurgic prayer (*DN* 589C).[82] In a passage emphasised by Ficino himself, he argued that the secret mysteries of theology were contained in the divine names.[83] This is a long Neoplatonic tradition found in Iamblichus and Proclus that Dionysius built on his Neoplatonic frame of Christianity. The *Orphic Hymns* are poems written for singing containing divine names often linked together in chains of considerable length. There are about 850 divine epithets in the *Orphic Hymns*.[84] It is reasonable for Ficino to read the divine names of the *Orphic Hymns* with the Dionysian point of view as a theurgic text with extraordinary power.

Moreover, for the Eastern Christian world, invocation was a central part not only of the Liturgy but also of medical writing. For example, Nikolaos Myrepsos (flourished c. 1240-80), a prominent physician and personal doctor of the Byzantine emperor John III (c. 1192-1254), accompanies his medical guidelines with details about the specific names that need to be invoked when using ointments and remedies.[85] After two editions in Venice, his *Dynameron* achieved massive success in the West, as it remained the principal pharmaceutical reference book of the Parisian medical faculty until 1651.[86] His rise to fame was probably due to the creation of *Aurea Alexandrina*, an opioid medicine for pain relief that was also capable of inducing hallucinations. While Myrepsos was not a typical medical writer of his era, this use of invocation was common in magical and future-telling texts.[87]

In addition, the divine-name-using tradition was fundamental in monasticism, which began in Egypt and later spread to the rest of the East. John Sinaites wrote *The Ladder of Paradise* in the 6th-7th centuries. In this work about the monastic life and how the highest degree of religious perfection may be attained, he advises the readers to "scourge the enemies with the name of Jesus."[88] John Sinaites' work was printed for the first time in Torrebelvicino in 1478. This invocation idea is central to the mystic tradition of Eastern Christianity, which by the time of Ficino was already well-established as *Hesychasm* or *Palamism* after a period of conflict between theological schools.[89] Eastern Orthodox mysticism centres on the repetitive invocation of the name of Jesus through the Jesus Prayer, also known as noetic prayer, to achieve *theosis*, a profound union with God. A distorted and mocking form of *Hesychasm* was already known in the West through Barlaam of Seminara as early as the 14th century. Turning back to the Florence Synod, Hesychasm was one of the topics discussed in that Council, which created stir and tension, leaving its eastern marks in Italy and nourishing the era of the Renaissance. In fact, the prominent Greek theologians, including Mark of Ephesus, were convinced supporters of the Hesychasm.

Summarising, Ficino was not only a Dionysius connoisseur but also deeply affected by his works. Despite the postponement of the translation of Dionysian works until the end of his career, in a letter from 1491, he claims that:

> no form of knowledge is more delightful to me certainly than the Platonic, and of this knowledge, none will ever be more venerable to me than that in Dionysius. I love Plato in Iamblichus, I admire him in Plotinus, but I venerate him in Dionysius.[90]

From the Dionysian point of view, divine names are how the soul offers worship to God. It is through these names that the soul achieves union with God, not by its own inherent power, but by God's power acting within the soul. We can now understand Ficino's hesitance–or fear–for the *Orphic Hymns*. It is natural for him to be sceptical in front of a set of poems with invocations of every pagan deity, given that the divine names are a means of theurgy. We do not know why exactly Ficino was afraid of invocation. However, we do know that his ideas on the matter were influenced by the vital role of invocation in the East through the various connections Ficino and his cultural milieu had with Eastern Christianity.

Concluding remarks

Bringing back the doctrines of *prisca theologia* ultimately involved coming into contact with the practices of pagan priestly authorities. Paradoxically, it was precisely the priestly robes worn by Ficino that must have prompted him to rediscover the ancestral magico-theurgical rituals of the Chaldeans and Egyptians, and consequently put him at odds with ecclesiastical authority. In fact, the Florentine philosopher was equally attracted and frightened by the magico-theurgical operations he described and sometimes recommended. Frightened, in that he recognized the risk of heresy in promoting pagan rituals that centuries-old Western Christian tradition had condemned as demonic. Attracted, since the entire 'Christian-Platonic' tradition of *prisca theologia* testified to the possibility of drawing down 'celestial' gifts, with the noble end of elevating the material condition to the spiritual. As a Platonic physician, priest and philosopher, the temptation to explore these ancestral practices must have been irresistible, all the more so if personal fascination was combined with the novelty factor of rediscovering the long-forgotten writings of the ancient theology of the Gentiles. It was only a matter of time, then, before *prisca theologia* became for him a primordial wisdom that wove together astronomical, musical, magical, therapeutic and theurgical knowledge.

Ficino also displayed imprudence in his daily conduct. It is surprising in this sense that he decided to publish his *De vita* trilogy in 1489, when in 1487 his associate Giovanni Pico della Mirandola had been subjected to ongoing scrutiny and condemnation from the Inquisition tribunal. It is possible that he practiced those magical rituals proposed in the third book, if we can trust the testimony of Girolamo Benivieni (1453-1542), a poet and friend of Pico: "At Careggi and some other places, together with Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni de la Mirandola once attempted through natural magic and by virtue of the Kabbalistic doctrine, and with observations, orations, perfumes, to unite their minds with God, perform miracles, and prophesy."[91] It may even be speculated that the two humanists influenced each other in their interpretations of magical and theurgical motifs found within the *Orphic Hymns* and the Kabbalistic tradition.[92]

But Ficino's position was further complicated by his role as a priest and canon of Florence Cathedral, which he interpreted with a certain intellectual freedom. Indeed, in 1487 his public reading of Plotinus in the Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli caused a scandal among clerics.[93] When he finally realized that the atmosphere around him was changing, he decided to append two apologies in conclusion to the *De vita coelitus comparanda*, hoping to clarify the full legitimacy of his own position.[94] First, harkening back to the customs of the ancient Chaldean, Persian, and Egyptian priests, as well as to the pious testimony of Christ, Ficino claimed the necessity for a physician-priest to resort to the combined action of magical-astrological remedies.[95] It was the only way to effectively pursue the correct treatment of both body and soul, for the benefit of the many. Second, he asserted the absolute legitimacy for every good Christian to use natural magic. Ficino again 'invoked' the Zoroastrian magi who first recognized the divinity of Christ, coming from the East to worship him. Magus was therefore "a name pleasing to the Gospel."[96] It was by appealing to the Bible, and to the venerable magical tradition of the ancient followers of Zoroaster, that the author of *De vita* not only

advocated for his own magico-astrological medicines, but also hoped to justify himself in the eyes of the Church. But however well-intentioned he may have been, his magico-theurgical rituals veered dangerously close to a kind of pagan astrological polytheism exposed to the risk of contact with demonic intelligences. Inevitably, threats were not long in coming, and in May 1490 the papal curia accused him of magic and heresy.[97] The mediation of the archbishop of Florence Rinaldo Orsini, combined with the support provided by Ermolao Barbaro, proved key in defending the philosopher.[98]

In drawing conclusions, since the 1450s, *prisca theologia* represented a source of wisdom and continuous reference for Ficino. By combining their religious magisterium with medical, magical, astrological and theurgical wisdom, the six ancient theologians embodied the archetypal model of the true priest-philosopher. However, they were also pagan figures, whose ancestral rituals had long been condemned as heretical. Driven by a restless and eclectic mind, Ficino also explored theurgical sources within the Jewish tradition and Orthodox Christian theology. In the end, his ubiquitous efforts to reconcile sources stemming from such different backgrounds seem to have led him into a hermeneutical blind alley, placing him at odds with himself and in opposition to the doctrines of Western Christianity. *Prisca theologia* is a common thread running through all Ficino's major works: it was in the ambitious attempt to tread it in balance with orthodoxy that he found himself on the precipice of heresy.[99]

References

[1] On Plethon, see Hladky, V., *The Philosophy of Gemistos Plethon: Platonism in Late Byzantium, between Hellenism and Orthodoxy* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[2] See Garin, E., *L'Umanesimo italiano. Filosofia e vita civile nel Rinascimento* (Roma and Bari: Laterza, 1986), 112. *Theologia platonica* was also the title of Proclus' *magnum opus*, from which Ficino drew the name for one of his most famous works. Ficino owned a manuscript with several of Plethon's texts, including his commentary on the *Chaldean Oracles*. See Hanegraaff, W. J., *Esotericism and the Academy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 43.

[3] The content of the two orations is summarised in Hankins, J., *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Leiden, New York and Copenhagen: Brill, 1990), II, 460-462. The 20-year-old Ficino showed a keen interest in the philosophy of Plato, which he had approached through the study of classical sources like Apuleius (125-170 c.), Eusebius (c. 260-339), Augustine (354-430) and Macrobius (c. 385-430), as well as Neoplatonic writings and those of Plethon. As Hankins suggests, it is likely that his personal reinterpretation of *prisca theologia* derived from his study of the Greek historian Diogenes Laertius (180-240), the texts of the Church Fathers, and various sources within the Platonic tradition.

[4] An annotation in his manuscript reveals that the young Ficino initially regarded Hermes as a master of divine mysteries and a disciple of Plato. Within a year, however, he came to see Hermes as the more ancient figure. See Campanelli, M., "Marsilio Ficino's Portrait of Hermes Trismegistus and its Afterlife", in *Intellectual History Review*, 29/1 (2019): 54. Significant, however, is his early intuition of doctrinal parallels between

the Platonic and Hermetic traditions, perhaps influenced by the attribution of *Asclepius* to the Platonic Apuleius.

[5] Allen, M. J. B., "Introduction", in *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, his Philosophy, his Legacy*, ed. M. J. B. Allen, V. Rees, M. Davies (Leiden, Boston, and Cologne: Brill, 2002), XVII. For a contemporary edition of the *Orphic Hymns*, see Athanassakis, A., Wolkow, B. (ed.), *The Orphic Hymns: translation, introduction, and notes* (Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013). For broader perspectives on the *Orphic Hymns* and the Orphic tradition–if such a tradition can be assumed–, see West, M. L., *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983); Bernabé, A., *Poetae Epici Graeci: Testimonia et Fragmenta Pars II* (Leipzig: Teubner, 2004); Ricciardelli, G., *Inni Orfici* (Milan: Bompiani, 2012); Morand, A.-F., *Études sur les Hymnes orphiques* (Boston: Brill, 2001); Rudhardt, J., *Opera inedita: essai sur la religion grecque & recherches sur les hymnes orphiques* (Liège: Kernos suppl. 19, 2008).

[6] This is the case with Canon Lorenzo Pisano and Bishop Antonio degli Agli. See Hanegraaff, W. J., (2012), 44.

[7] The collection of the fourteen Hermetic texts was rendered under the title of *Pimander sive de potestate et sapientia Dei*, named after the first treatise. For the Ficinian translation (in Latin), see Ficino, M. (ed.), *Pimander sive de potestate et sapientia Dei*, ed. M. Campanelli (Turin: Aragno, 2011). The expression 'Corpus Hermeticum' was coined only in 1904 by German scholar Richard Reitzenstein. Treatises XVI to XVIII (the XV does not exist) were translated by Ludovico Lazzarelli (1447-1500), who worked from a different manuscript than Ficino's. See Hanegraaff, W. J., *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination. Altered States of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 123.

[8] Ficino, M., *Argumentum Marsili Ficini florentini in librum Mercurii Trismegisti ad Cosmum Medicem patrie patrem*, in Ficino, M., (2011), 4 (trans. ours).

[9] Bartolucci, G., "Marsilio Ficino, Yohanan Alemanno e la 'scientia divinum nominum'", *Rinascimento* 48 (2008): 144.

[10] See Monfasani, J., "Marsilio Ficino and the Plato-Aristotle Controversy" in M. J. B. Allen, V. Rees, M. Davies (ed.), (2002), 187-188.

[11] The revised succession of the six ancient theologians according to Ficino is: Zoroaster, Mercury (Hermes), Orpheus, Aglaophemus, Pythagoras, and Plato. This list was derived from Proclus, with the addition of Zoroaster as the original theologian. For a recent edition of *De Christiana religione*, see Ficino, M., *On the Christian Religion*, trans. D. Attrell, B. Bartlett, D. Porreca (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2022). For his *Theologia Platonica*, see Ficino, M., *Platonic Theology*, 6 vols., ed. J. Hankins, W. Bowen, trans. M. J. B. Allen (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2001-2006).

[12] For an English translation, see Ficino, M., *Three Books on Life. A Critical Edition and Translation with Introduction and Notes*, ed. C. V. Kaske, J. R. Clark (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1998).

[13] Aside from works of great Neoplatonic authorities, the text also featured the *Corpus Hermeticum*, *Asclepius*, and various Ficinian treatises on magical topics. For the translation/paraphrase by Ficino of *De Mysteriis* (in Italian), see Iamblichus, *I misteri. (De mysteriis Aegyptiorum, Chaldaeorum et Assyriorum). Secondo la traduzione latina di Marsilio Ficino*, ed. A. Boffino (Milan: Sebastiani, 1946). Iamblichus was possibly the first to introduce

Hermetic spirituality and the theurgy of the *Chaldaean Oracles* into the Platonic tradition: on this see Hanegraaff, W. J., (2023), 99-118.

[14] The text, likely extracted by Psellos from a larger work by Proclus, is reproduced in Copenhaver, B. P., *Magic in Western Culture. From Antiquity to the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 91-94.

[15] Shaw, G., "Neoplatonic Theurgy and Dionysius the Areopagite", in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7/4 (1999): 573-599.

[16] On the differences between these expressions, see Hanegraaff, W. J., (2012), 7-12.

[17] Al-Magriti (pseudo), *Picatrix. A Medieval Treatise on Astral Magic*, trans. D. Attrell, D. Porreca (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019).

[18] Al-Magriti (pseudo), (2019), 37.

[19] The original Arabic title itself, *Ghāyat al-hakīm*, could be translated as 'The goal of the wise'.

[20] Ficino ignored the cruder, harmful or macabre magical operations (such as coprophagy, cannibalism, animal sacrifices, animal and human mutilation), and disguised the presence of the *Picatrix* behind vague expressions like "Arab" or "Arabic astrologers " (Ficino, M., (1998), 251, 255, 257, 365) or "a certain Arab miscellany " (Ficino, M., (1998), 335).

[21] A distinction that followed that between natural magic and demonic magic. See Ficino, M., (1998), 399.

[22] Ficino, M., (1998), 357.

[23] That of planetary intelligences was a view already expressed in his *Theologia platonica* on the basis of the Arab astrologer Abu Ma'shar (787-886), quoted several times in the *De vita*. See Saif, L., *Arabic Influences on Early Modern Occultism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2015), 103. In a Christian context, the minds of the stars were identified with angels, see Faracovi, O. P. (ed.), *Introduzione*, in *Marsilio Ficino. Scritti sull'astrologia* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1999), 14.

[24] While referring to a 'Platonic tradition' as a monolithic entity is clearly inaccurate, this expression aptly conveys Ficino's belief. For a discussion of demons in Neoplatonism, see Brisson, L., O'Neill S., Timotin A. (ed.), *Neoplatonic Demons and Angels* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018).

[25] Ficino, M., *Commentarium in epistolas Pauli*, quoted in Walker, D. P., *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* [1958] (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 50. See also Vanhaelen, M., "Ficino's Commentary on St Paul's First Epistle to the Romans (1497): An Anti-Savonarolan Reading of Vision and Prophecy", in *The Rebirth of Platonic Theology*, eds J. Hankins, F. Meroi (Firenze: Olschki, 2013), 205-233.

[26] Ficino, M., *Opera*, I, p. 865. The quotation given here is from Toussaint, S., "L'individuo estatico. Tecniche profetiche in Marsilio Ficino e Giovanni Pico della Mirandola", *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 16/2 (2000): 359, (trans. ours).

[27] For example, Thomas Aquinas argued that it was permissible to address to planetary angels those acts of devotion dedicated to the saints, while worship was only up to God. See Walker, D. P., (2000), 137.

[28] The term ('*magie destinative*' in French) was coined by Weill-Parrot to refer to magical operations aimed at otherworldly entities. See Weill-Parrot, N., "Astral Magic and

Intellectual Changes (Twelfth-Fifteenth Centuries). 'Astrological Images' and the Concept of 'Addressative' Magic", in *The Metamorphosis of Magic: From Late Antiquity to Early Modern Period*, ed. J. N. Bremmer, J. R. Veenstra (Leuven, Paris and Dudley: Peeters, 2002), 169.

[29] Weill-Parrot, N., (2002), 176-177.

[30] Ficino, M., (1998), 239: "Finally, if you do not approve of astronomical images, albeit invented for the health of mortals–which even I do not so much approve of as report–dismiss them with my complete permission and even, if you will, by my advice". Elsewhere, he claimed to be merely interpreting Plotinus to address, supposedly in a more legitimate way, the arguments of magi and astrologers in support of talismans (Ficino, M., (1998), 321).

[31] Ficino referred to various accounts by the Zoroastrian magi, Hermes Trismegistus, the Hebrews, Ptolemy (c. 100-170), Ali ibn Ridwan (c. 988-1061), the *Picatrix*, as well as Porphyry, Iamblichus, Synesius and Proclus: Ficino, M., (1998), 305 ff.

[32] Ficino, M., (1998), 317.

[33] For an analysis of the scholastic background of Ficinian arguments on talismanic magic, see Copenhaver, B. P., "Scholastic Philosophy and Renaissance Magic in the De vita of Marsilio Ficino", *Renaissance Quarterly* 37/4 (1984): 530-539. It is interesting to note how Ficino summarised Aquinas' ambivalent but critical view on talismans, an opinion he likely shared: see Ficino, M., (1998), 341, 343.

[34] Ficino, M., (1998), 339.

[35] Ficino, M., (1998), 343.

[36] Ficino, M., (1998), 351.

[37] Ficino, M., (1998), 307.

[38] Intriguingly, in those same years the Jewish intellectual Yohanan Alemanno also gave a talismanic interpretation of the golden calf. See Idel, M., *Kabbalah in Italy, 1280-1510: A Survey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 186-187.

[39] Al-Magriti (pseudo), (2019), 148-149.

[40] Ficino, M., (1998), 389: "Plotinus uses almost the same examples in that place where, paraphrasing Hermes Trismegistus, he says…". Cf. *Asclepius*, 23-24, 37-38.

[41] The term denotes a process of 'perfecting' the soul of the theurgist, and material receptacles, by divine effluxes. More generally, however, *telestiké* means the magical-theurgical operation by which spiritual entities were drawn inside the statues of the gods, which were animated and thus acted as oracles. See Johnston, S. I., "Animating Statues: A Case Study in Ritual", *Arethusa*, 41/3 (2008): 452-458.

[42] *Ascl.* 38, in Hermes Trismegistus (pseudo), *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction*, ed. B. P. Copenhaver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 90.

[43] On *symbola* and *synthêmata* in the theurgical rituals of the Neoplatonists and in Ficino, see Johnston, (2008), 454-458.

[44] The argument is further supported by Ficino's keen interest in ecstatic experiences. On theurgical elements in Ficino's thought, see Giglioni, G., "Healing Rituals and Their Philosophical Significance in Marsilio Ficino's Philosophy", in *Platonism. Ficino to Foucault*, ed. V. Rees, A. Corrias, F. M. Crasta, L. Follesa, G. Giglioni (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021), 55-77. For an in-depth analysis of the theurgical elements in

Ficino's *De vita*, see Rutkin, H. D., "Dancing with the Stars: A Preliminary Exploration as to whether the Astrology in Marsilio Ficino's De vita is Theurgical", *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 26 (2020): 403-419.

[45] The same unequivocally theurgical conceptions were also to be found in the writings of Iamblichus and Proclus. In *De mysteriis* translated/paraphrased by Ficino himself, the philosopher of Chalcis discussed the predisposition of earthly entities–that is, of herbs, stones, aromas and animals–to receive the gods. See Iamblichus, (1946), 150. After dwelling on the universal sympathy that linked worldly nature to the heavenly dimension, Proclus concluded instead that "the authorities on the priestly art have thus discovered how to gain the favour of powers above", quoted in Copenhaver, B. P., (2015), 93.

[46] Ficino, M., (1998), 307.

[47] Ficino, M., (1998), 367.

[48] Ficino, M., (1998), 319. Chapter XV was deeply indebted to Proclus. See Copenhaver, B. P., *Magic in Western Culture. From Antiquity to the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 94-ff.

[49] Ficino, M., (1998), 389.

[50] Ficino, M., (1998), 351.

[51] Ficino, M., (1998), 391.

[52] Ficino, M., (1998), 241.

[53] On Ficino's encounter with the Jewish/conversos polemical and esoteric tradition, which led him to a surprising early quotation of the *Sefer Ha Bahir* (the first kabbalistic text) in his *De Christiana religione*, see Bartolucci, G., *Vera religio. Marsilio Ficino e la tradizione ebraica* (Turin: Paideia, 2017).

[54] Ficino, M., (2022), 177: "Finally, as I have said elsewhere, the holiest goal of this teaching makes very clear that Christ and His disciples performed miracles not with magic but with divinity. There remains among you a book on the life of Jesus of Nazareth, where one reads that Jesus, among the other miracles that are there recounted in great number, even revived the dead, clearly because only He knew how to correctly pronounce the proper name of God, which among you is revered more than anything else, and since it consists only of four letters–and those in fact are all vowels (*vocales*) it is pronounced with the utmost difficulty. It sounds almost like this: 'hiehouahi,' that is, 'was, is, shall be,' and the majority of Hebrews hold this opinion."

[55] Ficino, M., *Opera Omnia* (Basel: Henricpetri, 1576), 1309-1314. For a detailed study on this topic, see Bartolucci, G., (2008): 137-163.

[56] This clearly seems to evoke the idea of an oral Torah, parallel to the written Torah. It seems plausible that Ficino learned this concept from one of the Jewish intellectuals who frequented his intellectual circle. The convert Flavius Mithridates (1450-1491), who reworked this idea from the kabbalist Abraham Abulafia (c. 1240–1291), is the most likely candidate.

[57] Also according to the *Chaldean Oracles* (Fr. 150) and Psellos' commentary on it (*Expositio in Oracula Chaldaica*), divine names must remain untranslated. This statement is repeated by Ficino in *De Vita* 3.21.

[58] Quoted from Idel, M., (2011), 186. The original source is found in Alemanno, Y., *Shir ha Ma'a lot li-Shlomo*, Oxford, Bodleian Library, ms. 1535, c. 8v.

[59] Toussaint, S., "Ficino's Orphic Magic or Jewish Astrology and Oriental Philosophy? A Note on spiritus, the Three Books on Life, Ibn Tufayl and Ibn Zarza", *Accademia* II (2000): 19-31. The passage reported by Ibn Zarza is transcribed and commented on by Idel, M., (2011), 275 ff. Prerequisite was an agreement with the celestial influences best suited to convey prophetic virtues.
[60] Cf. *Ascl.* 23-24, 37-38.
[61] 1 *Sam* 16:23.
[62] Ficino, M., (1998), 391.
[63] D. P. Walker narrates the Ficinian musical renditions of Davidic psalms and *Orphic hymns*, performances that closely resembled religious-magical ceremonies. See for example the account given by one of Ficino's disciples, Francesco da Diacceto (1466-1522), in Walker, (2000), 30-35. For this peculiar combination of sacred and pagan ceremonies, see Lackner, D. F., "The Camaldolese Academy: Ambrogio Traversari, Marsilio Ficino and the Christian Platonic Tradition" in M. J. B. Allen, V. Rees, M. Davies (ed.), (2002), 31; Vanhaelen, M., "Cosmic Harmony, Demons, and the Mnemonic Power of Music in Renaissance Florence" in *Sing Aloud Harmonious Spheres: Renaissance Conceptions of Cosmic Harmony*, ed. J. Prins, M. Vanhaelen (New York: Routdledge, 2017), 101-122.
[64] Modern scholarship tends to reject the unity of an Orphic religion or tradition. For more, see Note 5.
[65] Hladky, V., (2016), 266.
[66] Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, 52.372D.
[67] Marinus, *Vita Procli*, 22.40.31-33.
[68] Julian, *Fragmentum epistolae*, 302AB.
[69] On Hesychasm, see Brock, B., Nassif, B., (ed.), *The Philokalia: A Classic Text of Orthodox Spirituality* (New York; Oxford University Press 2012).
[70] On *theosi*s, see Russell, N., *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)
[71] For more on Plethon's rituals, see Anastos, M., "Pletho's Calendar and Liturgy", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 4 (1948), 183-305.
[72] Coughlin, R., "Uniting with Divine Wisdom: Theurgic Prayer and Religious Practice in Dionysius and Marsilio Ficino", *Dionysius* 36 (2018), 153.
[73] Hankins, J., (ed.), *Marsilio Ficino: Platonic theology Vol. 4, Books XII-XIV*, trans. M. J. B. Allen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 24-25.
[74] Lackner, D. F., (2002), 32.
[75] Burkert, W., *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).
[76] The translation of ἔντευξις as invocation may seem strange. *LSJ* s.v. ἔντευξις notes *lighting upon, meeting with, converse, intercourse, manners, behaviour, esp. sexual intercourse, speeches to the mob, petition, intercession for a person, reading, study.* In the context of Cabasilas' *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*, the term is used in a religious-liturgical setting. In this context, ἐντεύξεως (*enteuxeoōs*) is paired with εὐχῆς (*euchēs*), which clearly means 'prayer'. Given this, the translation as 'invocation' is a solid one. In liturgical terms, 'invocation' refers to calling upon a deity, which aligns with the religious use here. The term 'ἔντευξις' can mean a formal petition or intercession, which is appropriate for describing a priest's role in the liturgy. Considering ἔντευξις as intercession, it involves a

priest acting on behalf of the congregation, invoking divine presence or action. While 'petition' or 'intercession' could also be accurate translations, 'invocation' specifically highlights the aspect of calling upon God's presence, which fits the liturgical context described by Cabasilas.

[77] Cabasilas, N., *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*, trans. J. Hussey, P. McNulty. (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1960), 72.

[78] Young, F., *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 73-97.

[79] Kappes, C., *The Epiclesis Debate at the Council of Florence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019).

[80] For more on Dionysius and his influence in Eastern Christian theology, see John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (Maryland: Fordham University Press, 1999), 27-31.

[81] Coughlin, R., (2018): 143.

[82] Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete works*, trans. C. Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

[83] Bartolucci, G., (2008): 143.

[84] Macedo, J., Kölligan D., Barbieri L. (ed.), *Πολυώνυμοι: A Lexicon of the Divine Epithets in the Orphic Hymns* (Würzburg: Würzburg University Press, 2021), 3-4.

[85] Valiakos, I., *Das Dynameron des Nikolaos Myrepsos* (Heidelberg: Propylaeum, 2019).

[86] Geanakoplos, J., *Byzantine East and Latin West: Two Worlds of Christendom in Middle Ages and Renaissance* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1966), 31.

[87] For a more representative exploration of Byzantine Medicine during Myrepsos' era, see Bouras-Vallianatos, P., *Innovation in Byzantine Medicine: The Writings of John Zacharias Aktouarios (c.1275–c.1330).* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020)

[88] Migne, J. P., *Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca) 88* (Paris: Migne, 1857-1866), 21.945.27a.

[89] Kappes, C., (2019), 2; cf. Meyendorff, J., (1999): 103-114.

[90] Ficino, M., (1576), 925.

[91] Quoted in Garin, E., *Ermetismo del Rinascimento* (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2006), 18-19 (trans. ours).

[92] Intriguingly, in his quest to find a *concordia* between different traditions, Pico saw a theurgical parallelism between the *Orphic Hymns* and Kabbalistic concepts. On this see Toussaint, S., "Kabbalah and Concordia in two of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's Orphic Theses", *Accademia* 12 (2010): 13-26.

[93] Garin, E., (2006), 18.

[94] The first dated to September 15, 1489, the second to the following day. The two apologies are transcribed in Latin, and translated in English, in Ficino, M., (1998), 394-405.

[95] Ficino, M., (1998), 397.

[96] Ficino, M., (1998), 397.

[97] Kaske, C. V., Clark, J. R., *Introduction*, in Ficino, M., (1998), 56.

[98] In his letter of June 26, 1490, he expressed gratitude to Archbishop Orsini, thanking him for saving him from the "voracious jaws of the wolves.". See Kaske, C. V., Clark, J. R., *Introduction*, in Ficino, M., (1998), 56.

[99] Regarding heresies in Ficino's thought, see Allen, M. J. B., "At Variance: Marsilio Ficino, Platonism and Heresy", in *Platonism at the Origins of Modernity: Studies on Platonism and Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. D. Hedley, S. Hutton (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 31-44.