FICINO AND THE FATHERS: PATRISTIC READINGS OF *DE CHRISTIANA RELIGIONE* AND THE *CORPUS HERMETICUM*

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Abstract. This essay examines the influence of ancient Christian sources on Renaissance thought, particularly on and through the works of Marsilio Ficino and Jacques Lefèvre d'Etaples. Conscious and unconscious bias makes that these influences are often overlooked, combined with a general lack of knowledge or understanding of Byzantine Eastern theology. Our case study details Ficino's *De Christiana Religione* and his translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and the preface to the latter by Lefèvre d'Etaples, and reveals that many ideas found in these writings often attributed to pagan sources, were in fact derived from early Christian writings. We focus on Ficino's interpretation of theology of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and how, instead of introducing novel, heretical concepts, it aligns with the Eastern Christian doctrine of *theosis*. The essay argues for a re-evaluation of Renaissance intellectual history, emphasizing the significant impact of Byzantine Christian texts on the period's thinkers, and the role that large-scale computational methods such as those employed by VERITRACE can play to further uncover these intricate influences.

Keywords: Marsilio Ficino, Jacques Lefèvre d'Etaples, *Corpus Hermeticum*, Patristics, Byzantine influence, *theosis*, Eastern Christianity

Introduction

How do we recognize influence? One useful way is to look at what sources our actors mention, and what other sources our actors had access to. Yet even this simple recipe turns out difficult to manage. For reasons we will discuss below, conscious and unconscious biases easily get in the way of fact-finding; and then there are those 'facts' that go unnoticed even beyond bias, influences so subtle or from works hitherto never associated with our objects of study.

When it comes to Marsilio Ficino's *era et labores*, we have long been told, and accepted, the story of a 'pagan Renaissance,' that is, the torrent of intellectual changes associated with the Renaissance is considered to stem mostly from non-Christian origins.[1] Some attention has been devoted to ancient Christian sources recovered during

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this period, but their influence has been considered negligible. We argue that this story needs to be revised, or at least revisited, based on three interrelated premises. First, our modern, 'pagan' account of the Renaissance hinges on modern definitions of paganisms associated with the confessional background of modern authors. Second, what is often interpreted as pagan turns out to be inherently Christian when inspected properly. Three, modern historians today are often ill-equipped to study questions of influence, as many of them would not even recognize a verse from Scripture if it stared them in the face, let alone a Patristic reference. Together, the issue is not just a matter of not knowing, it is a matter of not being able to conceive that these writings, now often relegated to the fringes, were of vital importance to early modern man.[2]

Much of the language apparently common to ancient Christianity and paganism, when read in context, shows the distinctive differences that the ancient Christian authors drew between themselves and their philosophical contemporaries. Moreover, a great many ideas which appear to come from one set of sources, may be revealed to come from another. As such, in this paper the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and its reception by Ficino and Jaques Lefèvre d'Etaples, form a case study demonstrating the value of reading Renaissance texts alongside the recently recovered 'Fathers' of the ancient church. We believe there is merit to the argument developed in this paper as it stands. But there are also numerous points where a scholarly reader might object (as we would), because the precise connection between, say, a Patristic text and a passage in Ficino, is hard to establish without a meticulous comparison of the texts available at the time. Rather than downplay those points, we would like to encourage the reader of this essay to think about how the ERC-funded VERITRACE project will be beneficial in comparing these texts, and in the overall comparison of entire corpora.[3]

Becoming God

In Marsilio Ficino's book, *De Christiana Religione*, he summarized the nature of human salvation as becoming God, a destiny for which humanity was designed:

> Wherefore God became man in order that man at the right time and in proper way might succeed in being made God. Indeed, God specifically made man to become such, and the natural instinct of man is bent toward this, to strive to be divine. But by no means is he able to ascend to God, unless God at length so draws him to ascend, just as he, from the beginning, was led to desire it.[4]

In his thorough study of Ficino's theology, *Die Erlösungslehre Marsilio Ficinos*, Jörg Lauster identified this passage as encapsulating the core of Ficino's teaching on salvation.[5] To some interpreters of Ficino, passages such as these are evidence of Ficino's unique interpretation of Christianity, or even of his heresy in repeating the lie of the serpent in the Garden, that human beings can be like God. From the modern, Western perspective, Ficino seems throughout his writings to be adding a strange belief in human power and potential to 'traditional' Christianity. In the influential opinion of Frances Yates, the *Corpus Hermeticum* differs from the book of Genesis precisely on the point that in the Hermetic text "Adam was created as a divine being, having the divine

creative power," and that this would shape Ficino's thought in a unique way.[6] Yates supported her conclusion by referencing two western theologians, Father Festugière, and C. H. Dodd. There is no denying the importance of these names in scholarship pertaining to the *Hermetica*, but there is also no denying their very western, and very modern, agendas. In like manner, the Lutheran theologian Anders Nygren censured Ficino for replacing a properly Christian worldview with a view that exalts man to the place of God, and thus can neither be called Christian, nor traditionally Platonic, but a modern innovation.[7] Ficino, according to Nygren, simply had too exalted a view of man to be Christian. As we will soon explain, from the Eastern perspective, what Nygren has labeled the new 'apotheosis of man' in Ficino's writings, is actually the ancient Christian doctrine of the '*theosis* of man'.

More recent scholarship on Ficino has distanced itself from the confessional biases which colored the thinking of Festugière, Dodd, and Nygren. Anthony Levi, in an otherwise nuanced and very thorough study of Ficino's development of traditional Augustinian and Thomist thought, concludes that Ficino's ideas on human dignity and potential come from an original fusion of Moses, the *Timaeus*, and Plotinus. Thus, Ficino is for Levi a novel and distinctly modern thinker: "the author of a blueprint for a Christian anthropology which, in addition to its overwhelming immediate success, would continue to dominate western European culture for three centuries."[8] Apart from the at minimum latent presentism contained in this line, for some reason Levi wholly ignores the most direct source for Ficino's anthropology, the Eastern Fathers. Indeed, it appears that in particular the Byzantine connection with Ficino's writings remains largely unexplored.

Becoming Byzantine

From an Eastern Christian perspective, the afore-quoted passage from Ficino is far from antithetical to traditional Christianity, and is, arguably, an attempt to return to a more pristine Christian worldview. Ficino here expressed in his own words the doctrine of *theosis* or deification, the central doctrine of all forms of non-western Christianity, and of the Church as it existed more or less undivided during its first centuries. According to the second-century bishop Irenaeus of Lyons, Christians are those who follow "the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through his transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself."[9] This is an early predecessor to the famous maxim of Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 297-373) in his sermon on the Incarnation (<335), "He became man so that we might become god."[10] From the beginning, according to Irenaeus, humankind was destined for deification, but the fall into sin derailed everything. It took the direct action of God in the Incarnation to get mankind back on track, but now, says Irenaeus, "man [is] making progress day by day, and ascending towards the perfect, that is, approximating to the uncreated One."[11] For sure, there are plenty of points on which Ficino's orthodoxy could be questioned from an Eastern Christian perspective, but they are not the same as those which are often identified in Western scholarship.

The reason a Western priest such as Ficino would hold such a distinctively Eastern doctrine may be found in the libraries of the fifteenth century. Here we see a

turn toward *all* classical antiquity, with a particular interest in Greek Christianity. The development of both the Papal Library and the public library of Florence reflects what Charles Stinger has aptly called a "renaissance of Patristic studies" in the early quattrocento.[12] By the mid-fifteenth century, the holdings of both libraries swelled with the recently recovered works of Chrysostom, Irenaeus, the Cappadocians, and many other Eastern Fathers which had shaped a thousand years of Byzantine thought.[13] The Greek Christian influence was even more strongly evident at the Camaldolese monastery of S. Maria degli Angeli, the monastery of the great recoverer of Greek Christian texts, Ambrogio Traversari, and consciously Eastern in its spirituality and discipline.[14] As Dennis Lackner has shown, this monastery was a formative influence on Ficino's thought as well as a forum for his own teaching and sermons.[15]

Ficino's theology only appears unique if we forget that Renaissance Florence bridged two intellectual worlds, the Latin and the Greek. Yet in spite of the work of scholars such as Charles Trinkaus and Dena Geanakoplos, the Byzantine world is very seldom consulted.[16] There is a clear, but, we have come to believe, unconscious bias toward the Western, Latin, context in the scholarly consideration of an individual such as Marsilio Ficino. Ficino is often compared with Augustine, Aquinas, and the 'scholastics,' a comparison which is certainly important, given his dependence upon these sources.[17] But if Ficino is not *also* compared with Nazianzus, Maximus, and the Eastern Orthodox *rejection* of scholasticism then we are operating with a distorted image of the Florentine Renaissance, and we can only *misunderstand* Ficino's place in it. Because he was so often at variance with Western thought – contemporaneous but in particularly modern – Ficino is frequently presented as an innovator, without due consideration of whether his 'innovations' might reflect the Eastern perspective of the texts that had been recovered in Florence. Could it be that modern researchers ignore these Eastern Christian thoughts, ideas, and even literal citations found in the Florentine milieu because they are simply unfamiliar with this ecosystem?

Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* serves as an excellent example for the value of using Byzantine theology as a key to understanding his work and his philosophy in proper historical context.[18] From a modern Western perspective, there are a vast host of statements which are or would seem theologically objectionable in the *Corpus* when compared with 'traditional' Christian dogma. In the first book, 'Poimandres,' we find immortal man 'trapped' in his mortal body, a body he has to be 'released' from. At best a pale echo of St Paul's description of the body as 'a tent' in which 'we groan and are burdened because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life' – at worst a refusal of accepting the incarnation of Christ – or is it?[19] Book thirteen is devoted to the concept of rebirth, an essential element in the *Hermetica*. And the title of the seventh book is something of a dead giveaway: 'That the greatest evil in mankind is ignorance concerning God' – a running theme throughout the corpus.[20] From the Eastern perspective, since many of these statements either reflect the doctrine of *theosis* or build upon it, only a few remain problematic.

According to the Byzantine context in which Ficino was working, there would be a number of good reasons why Ficino would agree with his patron that the

translation of the *Hermetica* was not only an acceptable endeavor, but a beneficial one. From Ficino's point of view, there might certainly be shortcomings stemming from the imperfect vision of one who is looking to Christianity in the distant future and from a gentile perspective, as Hermes was perceived a contemporary of Moses, or perhaps even older; but the writings of the triple-wise would appear not only to foretell the coming of Christ, but to accurately set forth the proper doctrine of salvation–that which was held central in the East, though increasingly forgotten in the West.

Before we can properly understand what the *Corpus Hermeticum* was, for Ficino, we must be very clear about what it was *not*. And the first thing that it was not is lost scripture. Nowhere does Ficino accord Hermes the canonical status of the Scriptures. Hermes does not rise to the level of authority even of Plato, and, as Michael Allen has stated, Ficino's "enthusiasm for Plato and the Platonic tradition did not blind him to the various differences with Christianity, even to their irreconcilability on certain fundamental points."[21] As with the *Logos spermaticos* of Justin Martyr, the power of the *Hermetica* remains for Ficino that of a testimony to the truth of Christianity from outside the line of the Covenant. The testimony of Hermes is allowed to *support* the Faith, not add to it. In Ficino's usage the *Corpus Hermeticum* is very much a case of 'spoiling the Egyptians'. As with Plato himself, the *Corpus* served as a model for how the Holy Spirit prepared pagans for the Gospel, akin to the teachings of St Justin which came down in western theology as the *preparatio evangelica.*

If the Hermetic writings were not scripture for Ficino, they were also not associated with Gnostic heresies as they have been by scholars today. Not only were the texts, for Ficino, far older than the age in which Gnosticism came to be, but they also lacked the key distinguishing features of Gnosticism as it was described in classical antiquity. In the library of Florence Ficino had access to the harshest critics of the Gnostic sects of antiquity: Plotinus and the recently recovered writings of St Irenaeus of Lyons.[22] Central to the condemnation of Gnosticism in both Irenaeus and Plotinus is the Gnostic rejection of the material world as 'evil'. For neither writer is this acceptable because of the aspersions which it casts upon the one transcendent God. More particular, it clashes spectacularly with Christ's incarnation – literally, his 'taking on flesh' – and with the bodily resurrection of the faithful at Christ's second coming. For both the pagan and Christian writer, the anti-material dualism of the Gnostics is the key doctrine of Gnosticism from which the other errors naturally follow.[23] It is not surprising then, that in his own discussion of Gnosticism in the commentary on Plotinus, Ficino follows suit.[24] Indeed, the *Corpus Hermeticum* is saturated with passages that praise the material world and the goodness of the Creator, even if there are other passages which appear to do the opposite. The complex pantheon or hierarchy which Irenaeus identifies with the main varieties of Gnosticism is also lacking from the *Corpus*. There is good reason for this: those hierarchies serve to distance the 'good spiritual realm' from the corrupt and evil world of matter. In the *Corpus*, at least as it has come down to us, the material realm is (usually) not evil, and there is no need for such a gap, as the good god of the *Corpus* is the Creator. Lacking greater context, or a better understanding of the conglomerate nature of the text, it is entirely reasonable, as Yates observed, that Ficino "would be likely to ignore, or to misunderstand as an 'Egyptian'

version of Christian asceticism, the dualist aspects of the *Hermetica*."[25] Equally, it is rather anachronistic to state with Wouter Hanegraaff that "Ficino's translation shows that he did not grasp the core message of the Hermetic literature all that well. We can see this from the rather careless way he handles some of the most crucial Hermetic passages about the attainment of gnosis, and his failure to understand the specificity of this terminology as referring to a salvational 'knowledge' unattainable by reason."[26]

If we, like Ficino and his contemporaries, assume that the various texts of the *Hermetica* are the work of a single, ancient author, we might begin seeing what they saw: a select number of repeated, unifying themes. One of these themes is a general piety directed toward the Creator, another the teaching that human salvation is a process of *theosis* or deification: through knowledge of, and interaction with, God, the human being gradually ascends to the place of divinity for which human nature was designed, to rule alongside the one transcendent God. There are significant discussions of the deification of man in five of the first fourteen books, as well as in the *Asclepius*.[27] Wherever the text turns from a meditation on the Creator or the structure of creation to the power of mankind, the language is that of deification, and it is very similar to the doctrine as it appears in Eastern Christian writings.

Prisca Theologia

In sixteenth-century copies, Ficino's partial translation of the *Corpus* is often bound with a commentary by Jaques Lefèvre d'Etaples (c. 1455 – c. 1536, latinized as *Faber Stapulensis*), which has at times been attributed to Ficino himself as the authorship of the text was not always stated.[28] Lefèvre D'Etaples is significant in this discussion as his central devotion to Christianity is unquestionable. Moreover, in his scholarly endeavors he favored Aristotle over Plato, and he is generally overlooked as a key player in the promotion of the Hermetic writings. Instead, he was and is recognized an authority in the newly recovered ancient Christian authors of the East. Beginning in 1491, Lefèvre d'Etaples made three journeys to Florence, where he encountered Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, among others.[29] There he also encountered libraries swelling with volumes of the newly recovered 'Church Fathers,' as well as the *Corpus Hermeticum*. His commentary on the text provides a window into how the *Corpus Hermeticum* was valued by the early modern reader.

The first book of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, in the order that it was received in Florence, introduces the concept of deification with a bluntness that can shock modern readers, particularly if they have a modern, western view of Christian doctrine. Speaking of the souls of those on the way of salvation, the text states, "They rise up to the father in order and surrender themselves to the powers, and, having become powers, they enter into god. This is the final good for those who have received knowledge: to be made god."[30] Throughout this first book there are subtle evidences of Gnostic influence, but we must steer away from the temptation to label this passage (or any other) as 'Gnostic' simply because of the role of knowledge in salvation. For the chief Christian adversary of Gnosticism, Irenaeus, the issue was not knowledge itself, but "knowledge falsely so called" which is at odds with the true, saving knowledge of God (found in the tradition and experience of the Church). For his part, Lefèvre d'Etaples

begins his comments in response to this first treatise of the *Corpus* without apology or fanfare, but the assumed significance of the text to the Christian is clear: "In this first of fourteen dialogues, always with the saving (*salva*) piety of religion, Mercurius [i.e. Hermes] is seen to discuss the mysteries of Moses."[31]

What appears to confuse, and at time disturb, the modern western reader in the passage from the *Corpus* with which we began, is the assertion that human beings *can* "be made god." With theologians like Nygren, this becomes a part of friction; with western scholars approaching the Hermetic texts from a different vantage point, such as Yates, we find claims that Ficino added something new to the Christian perspective in his views of human power or potential, and thus this becomes part of confusion. Yet no such friction or confusion for Ficino or Lefèvre d'Etaples, as the passage expressed what the ancient Eastern Christian authors, newly available in Florence, believed was the central and oldest teaching of the early Christians.

We need to be aware, when reading early modern authors, that their world lacked categories such as 'Neoplatonism' and 'Christian Neoplatonism' which modern scholars have used to explain the tremendous overlap between Christian and Pagan thinking in classical antiquity. Readers of Plato in the Renaissance generally agreed with Justin Martyr who had taught that Plato had been given to the Greeks to prepare them for Christ, as we mentioned earlier. Plato's was not a perfect revelation, but it was complete, in so far as the Greeks could handle it. What for modern scholars demonstrates some sort of 'hybrid' of Christian and pagan thinking had no such baggage at the turn of the sixteenth century. In regard to our starting passage from the *Corpus*, no scholar would have had to look far to the east for an authoritative Christian parallel. The ancient Hermes was simply expressing the truth as it would later, and more clearly, be expressed by (Pseudo) Dionysius the Areopagite, an authority in theology for medieval East and West, whom Ficino and Lefèvre d'Etaples believed to be the genuine disciple of the Apostle Paul mentioned in Acts 17. Dionysius would thus be the first Christian source to give a concise definition of deification: "the assimilation to, and union with, God, as far as attainable"[32] Throughout his writings Dionysius presents a clearly articulated explanation of Christian salvation as nothing other than deification. For example:

> The hierarch, who "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" by their assimilation towards God, proclaims the good news to all that God out of his own natural goodness is merciful to the inhabitants of earth, that because of his love for humanity he has deigned to come down to us and that, like a fire, he has made one with himself all those capable of being divinized. "For to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh but of God."[33]

Knowing as we do that the 'Areopagite' was actually a sixth century author, we see such passages as the *apex* of a long development of the language of deification which began to take shape with the New Testament and its early interpreters such as Irenaeus.

For Ficino and Lefèvre d'Etaples, Dionysius' clear and developed statements stood at the *head* of the tradition. Therefore authors such as Irenaeus, Athanasius, and even the pagan Platonists were referring to Dionysius, or plagiarizing him, in their discussions of deification, depending upon whether the discussion occurred inside or outside the Christian faith.[34] For those who accepted the antiquity of Dionysius, the language of deification found in his writings reflected the original and purest form of Christian discourse as it was shared among the intellectuals of classical antiquity. The recovery of ever more ancient Greek Fathers only served to reinforce the idea that with deification back in place, Christianity was back on track. What this means for Lefèvre d'Etaples as a reader of texts, is that he is hypersensitive to the language of deification wherever it may be found, since it is evidence of the central doctrine of the earliest believers.

What is to be made of it then when this doctrine, the core of Christianity itself, as it was preserved in the Greek Fathers, is found clearly articulated by an ancient sage, a gentile near contemporary of Moses? Measuring by the yardstick of the doctrine of deification, the ancient Hermes Trismegistus appears to anticipate Christianity. He is a prophet, and if an imperfect one, he still cannot be considered other than an instrument of the Holy Spirit. Lefèvre d'Etaples' commentary on the *Corpus Hermeticum* is quite sparse, seldom amounting to more than a brief paragraph for each treatise, because he is not looking to explain or defend the *Hermetica* but to identify the reflections of the Truth as a support for the Faith. He finds reflections enough. It has been often observed that he believed, with Lactantius, that Hermes foresaw the coming of Christ and Christianity, but with the Eastern understanding of salvation as deification, Lefèvre d'Etaples' entire commentary can be more clearly understood. [35]

One of the more significant passages for Lefèvre d'Etaples is when, in the thirteenth treatise, Hermes identifies 'rebirth' as the key to beginning the deified life. For "[n]o one can be saved before being born again" according to the *Corpus*, and divinization comes through "this birth." [36] In his commentary, Lefèvre d'Etaples recognizes the obvious connection to baptism, and new life in Christ, as foreseen by Hermes.[37] For one accustomed to Christianity, and particularly to the language of Dionysius, the connection is unavoidable. After all, Dionysius presented baptism as essentially the removing of the obstacles to deification, where the believer "has overthrown, in his struggles after the Divine example, the energies and impulses opposed to his deification,"[38] and, as Hermes would agree, the rites "divinely work the sacred deification of those being initiated."[39] Throughout the writings of those who understand the 'true' Faith, baptism is the key to coming back to the road of deification.

At some points, Lefèvre d'Etaples' conviction that Hermes understood the Faith correctly causes him to adjust the meaning of the *Hermetica* to be properly orthodox. When, in the *Asclepius* Hermes describes the sensible world as "another god," Lefèvre d'Etaples clarifies this with proper Dionysian vocabulary: it is divine because it *participates* in God.[40] At other points, there are passages which the modern western reader would deem worthy of considerable commentary, yet these are not addressed by Lefèvre d'Etaples at all. Many of these passages simply do not strike one as odd when reading from the Eastern perspective. One such passage occurs at the end of book ten, "Therefore we must dare to say that the human on earth is a mortal god, but that god

in heaven is an immortal human."[41] This concept of the human being a 'god on earth' is language to which Nygren most vehemently objected when he found it in Ficino's own writing, identifying it as a distinctly modern turn.[42] Yet the idea of man 'being a god on earth' is a key part of human identity for Ficino in his later *Theologia Platonica*.[43] In regard to human mastery over the things of creation Ficino states: "In the end, according to the earthly condition, this man is lord. He is truly a god in the midst of the earth."[44]

From the Eastern perspective, this idea is typical of the language of Christian deification. It reflects the parallelisms of Irenaeus and Athanasius, mentioned earlier, where God becomes man, thereby taking humanity to heaven with him, and man becomes God, by participation, even while remaining on Earth. This *deus in terris* language also ties in to a corollary doctrine of deification in the East. According to the Eastern Fathers, and particularly the Cappadocians and Maximus the Confessor, mankind was created to be a god on earth ruling over all things as God's image. Thus, Gregory of Nyssa described the purpose of God making man:

> Just as in human customs, those who fashion images of rulers both mould the figure of their form and represent the royal rank by the purple robe, and even the image is customarily called a king, so also human nature, since it was fashioned to rule the rest, on account of its likeness to the King of all, was established as it were as a living image, sharing with the Archetype in both rank and name…[45]

For Gregory, mankind as the image of God is a 'mortal god' and may be called by the term which is usually applied to that which humanity represents.

If many of the western objections to the *Corpus Hermeticum* fall away when viewed from an Eastern perspective, or, if many of the assumed pagan influences in the *Corpus* turn out to be compatible with Eastern Orthodoxy, we should not go to the extreme of assuming that *ancient* Hermeticism is compatible with Eastern Orthodoxy, now or in the past. There is a good reason for the rather inoffensive appearance of the *Corpus Hermeticum*: the text, as it came down to Ficino, and as it comes down to us, was selectively preserved, and edited, in a Byzantine Christian context. Brian Copenhaver has written that this may well be the reason that the *Corpus* itself is so un-magical, when texts outside the *Corpus*, particularly the technical *Hermetica*, are much more concerned with magic and alchemy.[46] The text of the *Corpus* was selected and arranged exactly to avoid these problems. We would do well to follow Copenhaver's example in acknowledging Byzantine influence on the text, and open the question of the degree to which the *theology* of the *Corpus* may have been adjusted as well.

In sum

The goal of this essay has not been to establish anything new, but to argue for a reestablishment of the old: we need to reestablish the place of Byzantine influence in the *study of* the Italian Renaissance to match the influence which Byzantium had *on* the Renaissance. When we do so, much that looks new and strange in the Renaissance will

be given a foundation in the very old and very traditional. In the case of the reintroduction of the *Corpus Hermeticum* to the West, a little understanding of Eastern theology, as expressed in the Greek Fathers, goes a long way toward explaining the appearance of orthodoxy which Ficino and Lefèvre d'Etaples saw there. In light of the Byzantine context of Florence, most of Ficino's thought can be placed well within the spectrum of Byzantine Christianity, from the doctrine of *theosis* discussed here, to his rejection of Augustine's doctrine of original sin, and his use of inscribed talismans.[47] Much effort has been spent making Ficino into an original Western thinker. Without losing the truth behind that image, we must also recognize that he was a fairly traditional Eastern/Patristic one on many points and modify his image accordingly.

The key to understanding the Byzantine context of Florence is to recognize that the context is defined (though not solely) by the available texts. The catalogs of Renaissance libraries are essential for our understanding of the perspectives of those whose worldviews were shaped by these texts, such as Ficino and Lefèvre d'Etaples. Many otherwise puzzling developments will be properly grounded. The ability to compare all available texts rapidly to find parallels would be a real advantage in research, particularly given the common difficulty of determining who was citing, quoting, near-quoting, or plagiarizing what.

As many researchers have learned personally, even after having been warned about it by their doctoral advisors and the writings of Tony Grafton, Renaissance citation of 'common texts' like the Scriptures and the Patristic sources was rare. Augustine and Lactantius were the only Patristic sources *cited* by Ficino in defense of the *Corpus*, arguably because they were among the few to mention Hermes by name, and their writings were already familiar throughout the West. However, all of the Eastern Fathers cited in this essay were readily available on the shelves of Florentine libraries. Ficino had access to them, and Lefèvre d'Etaples had journeyed from France to visit these libraries, as had many other scholars from all over Europe. Patristic theology would have had a mediating effect on the reading of texts such as the *Corpus Hermeticum,* for all who worked in that context, but without some assistance it is very difficult to establish the what and how.

As such, VERITRACE promises to offer a powerful set of tools for the identification of parallel passages, near quotations, and common scriptural references, which are essential for determining the dependence of one text upon another, particularly when, as in the case of Patristic references, many of the early modern authors never saw the need to cite them. It should take away conscious and unconscious biases regarding influence and let the data speak for itself. The authors would not be surprised if methods such as those developed by VERITRACE will unearth as yet hidden, unrecognized, or even unknown influences on Ficino, Lefèvre d'Etaples, and their contemporaries.

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[1] See, e.g., Dodd, C. H., *The Bible and the Greeks* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935); Festugière, A.-J., *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, 4 vols. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1942-1954); Wind, E., *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (London: Faber & Faber, 1958); Yates,

F., *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964); Godwin, J., *The Pagan Dream of the Renaissance* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002); Hanegraaff, W. J., *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[2] The most notable modern critique of a 'pagan Renaissance' comes from Kocku von Stuckrad, but his argument hinges on the continuation of a pagan tradition rather than a renaissance thereof–very different from the thesis developed in this paper. See von Stuckrad, K., *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 157-174.

[3] 'Traces de la Verité: The reappropriation of ancient wisdom in early modern natural philosophy', Horizon ERC-2022-StG VERITRACE (101076836); see veritrace.eu for details.

[4] "Cur olim Deus homo factus est, ut homo quamdoque quodammodo Deus efficeretur. Deus enim quodammodo fieri potest, qui naturali instincto cupit, studetque esse divinus. Non potest autem in Deum surgere, nisi Deus aliquando ita trahat, ut surgat, quemadmodum ante traxerat, ut appeteret." Ficino, M., *Opera Omnia*, 2 vols. (Basel: Ex Officina Henricpetrina, 1576), vol. 1, 20 (trans. ours). See Vasoli, C., "Il '*De Christiana Religione*' di Marsilio Ficino. Parole Chiave: Religione, Sapienza, Profezia, Vita Civile, Ebrei", *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 13/2 (2007): 403-428.

[5] Lauster, J., *Die Erlösungslehre Marsilio Ficinos* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 92.

[6] Yates, F., (1964), 27.

[7] Nygren, A., "The Role of the Self-Evident in History", *The Journal of Religion* 28/4 (1948): 239-240.

[8] Levi, A., "Ficino, Augustine, and the Pagans", in *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, ed. M. J. B. Allen, V. Rees, M. Davies (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 99-113, at 113.

[9] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.0 (Preface), in *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325. Volume 1: The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, ed. A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, A. C. Coxe (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), 526.

[10] Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, 54.3. *Athanasius: Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, trans. and ed. R. W. Thompson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 269 translates 'θεοποιηθῶμεν' with 'might become divine,' but the traditional 'might be made god'–with or without capital–is to be preferred for both historical and philological reasons. The dating as before 335 is already argued by Thompson R. W., (1971), xxii, and further substantiated by Slusser, M., "Athanasius, '*Contra Gentes*' and '*De Incarnatione*': Place and Date of Composition", *The Journal of Theological Studies* 37/1 (1986): 114-117.

[11] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.54, in A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, A. C. Coxe (ed.), (1885), 521-522.

[12] Stinger, C.L., *Humanism and the Church Fathers: Ambrogio Traversari (1386-1439) and Christian Antiquity in the Italian Renaissance* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1977), 83.

[13] On the holdings of the public library of Florence, cf. Ullman, B. L., Stadter, P. A., *The Public Library of Renaissance Florence* (Padua: Antenore, 1972). On the growth of the Papal

library through the acquisition of Eastern Fathers (especially under Nicholas V) see Müntz, E., Fabre, P., *La Bibliotheque du Vatican au XVe Siecle* (Paris: Ernest Thorin, 1887).

[14] For which, see, e.g., Stinger, C. L. (1977); Op de Coul, M., "Byzantine Literature in Translation: Ambrogio Traversari and his Legacy", in *Byzanzrezeption in Europa: Spurensuche über das Mittelalter und die Renaissance bis in die Gegenwart*, ed. F. Kolovou (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 117-133.

[15] Lackner, D., "The Camaldolese Academy: Ambrogio Traversari, Marsilio Ficino, and the Christian Platonic Tradition", in M. J. B. Allen, V. Rees, M. Davies (ed.), (2002), 15-44.

[16] See, e.g., Trinkaus, C., *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970), and the various essays collected in Trinkaus, C., *Renaissance Transformations of Late Medieval Thought* (Farnham: Ashgate, 1999); Geanakoplos, D., *Byzantium and the Renaissance: Greek scholars in Venice: Studies in the Dissemination of Greek Learning from Byzantium to Western Europe* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1973), and Geanakoplos, D., *Constantinople and the West: Essays on the Late Byzantine (Palaeologan) and Italian Renaissances and the Byzantine and Roman Churches* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

[17] See, e.g., Robichaud, D. J.-J., "Marsilio Ficino 'Si Deus Fiat Homo' and Augustine's 'Non Ibi Legi': The Incarnation and Plato's *Persona* in the Scholia to the *Laws*", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 77 (2014): 87-114, and the materials referred to at 88-89, n. 5; Kristeller, P. O., "The Scholastic Background of Marsilio Ficino: With an Edition of Unpublished Texts", *Traditio* 2 (1944): 257-318; Collins, A. B., *The Secular is Sacred: Platonism and Thomism in Marsilio Ficino's Platonic Theology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974); Copenhaver, B., "Ten Arguments in Search of a Philosopher: Averroes and Aquinas in Ficino's Platonic Theology", *Vivarium* 47 (2009): 444-479; Edelheit, A., "The Scholastic Background of Marsilio Ficino, Round Two", in *Renaissance Scholasticisms: Fighting Back*, ed. A. Edelheit (Leiden: Brill, 2025), 115-136.

[18] For which, see e.g., Kristeller, P. O., "Marsilio Ficino e Lodovico Lazzarelli: Contributo alla diffusione delle idee ermetiche nel Rinascimento", *Annali della R. Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa* 2 (1938): 237-262 (reprinted in Kristeller, P. O., *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*, vol. 1 (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1956), 221-247); Allen, M. J. B., "Marsilio Ficino, Hermes Trismegistus and the Corpus Hermeticum", in *New Perspectives on Renaissance Thought: Essays in the History of Science, Education and Philosophy, in Memory of Charles B. Schmitt*, ed. J. Henry, S. Hutton (London: Duckworth, 1990), 38-47; Garin, E., *Il ritorno dei filosofi antichi* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1994), 66-76; Gentile, S., "Il ritorno di Platone, dei platonici e del '*corpus*' ermetico: Filosofia, teologia e astrologia nell'opera di Marsilio Ficino", in *Le filosofie del Rinascimento*, ed. C. Vasoli (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2002), 193-228; Gentile, S., "The Reappearance of Hermes in Fifteenth-Century Florence", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 87 (2024): 203-212.

[19] *Corpus Hermeticum* 1.24, in *Hermetica. The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction*, trans. and ed. B. P. Copenhaver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 5-6; the quotation from St Paul is from 2 Corinthians 5:4, New International Version.

[20] Copenhaver, B. P., (1992), 24 ff. Obviously, the opposite hold true as well: the Hermetic writings as corroborative evidence for certain Christian dogmas. Lactantius (c. 250 – c. 325) in his *Divine Institutes* found ample inspiration in the *Corpus Hermeticum* for the monotheism of Christianity and in the *Asclepius* for the divinity and indeed *consubstantiality* of Christ; see Nicholson, C., Nicholson, O., "Lactantius, Hermes Trismegistus and Constantinian Obelisks", *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 109 (1989): 198-200.
[21] Allen, M. J. B., "Marsilio Ficino on Plato, the Neoplatonists, and the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity", *Renaissance Quarterly* 37/4 (1984): 555. Cf. 558 on the authority of the *prisci theologi* relative to Plato.
[22] Cf. Ullman, B. L., Stadter, P. A., (1972), xx.
[23] E.P. Meijering has done a thorough comparison of the rejections of Gnosticism by Plotinus and Irenaeus: "God Cosmos History: Christian and Neo-Platonic Views on Divine Revelation", *Vigiliae Christianae* 28/4 (1974): 248-276.
[24] Ficino, M., (1576), vol. 2, 1670-1671. Festugière's introduction of the anachronistic concept of an 'optimistic Gnosticism' which does not reject creation has done much to confuse the issue.
[25] Yates, F., (1964), 128.
[26] Hanegraaff, W. J., "Hermes Trismegistus and Hermetism", in *Encyclopedia of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. M. Sgarbi (Berlin: Springer, 2018), 1515; see also Hanegraaff, W. J., "How Hermetic was Renaissance Hermetism?", *Aries* 15 (2015): 179-209.
[27] Cf. Copenhaver, B. P., (1992), 119.
[28] See Walker, D. P., "The *Prisca Theologia* in France", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 17/3-4 (1954): 208-209, n. 10.
[29] Walker, D. P., (1954), 206-207.
[30] Copenhaver, B. P., (1992), 6.
[31] Ficino, M., (1576), vol. 2, 1839, trans. ours.
[32] Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 1.3, in Dionysius the Areopagite, *Works*, trans. J. Parker (London and Oxford: James Parker and Co, 1897), 142. The Greek has "ἡ δὲ θέωσίς ἐστιν ἡ πρὸς θεὸν ὡς ἐφικτὸν ἀφομοίωσίς τε καὶ ἕνωσις," with the translation by Parker much closer than the modern rendering of Colm Luibheid, "being as much as possible like and in union with God." Greek text from *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita. De Coelesti Hierarchia, De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia, De Mystica Theologia, Epistulae*, ed. G. Heil, A. M. Ritter (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1991), 66; *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. and ed. C. Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 146. For Ficino's reading of (Pseudo-)Dionysius, see also Senger, H. G., "Die Präferenz für Ps.-Dionysius bei Nicolas Cusanus und seinem Italienischen Umfeld", in *Die Dionysius-Rezeption in Mittelalter*, ed. T. Boiadjiev, G. Kapriev, A. Speer (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 505-555, esp. 527-532; Edwards, M., "Marsilio Ficino and the Dionysian Corpus", in *The Oxford Handbook of Dionysius the Areopagite*, ed. M. Edwards, D. Pallis, G. Steiris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 467-488.
[33] Slightly amended translation from Luibheid, C., (1987), 200.
[34] Cf. *De Christiana Religione*, in Ficino, M., (1576), vol. 1, 25.
[35] Cf. Ficino's preface to the 'Poimandres', Ficino, M., (1576), vol. 2, 1836.

[36] Copenhaver, B. P. (1992), 49 and 51.
[37] Ficino, M., (1576), vol. 2, 1856.
[38] Dionysius, (1897), 149.
[39] Dionysius, (1897), 155.
[40] Ficino, M., (1576), vol. 2, 1861.
[41] Copenhaver, B. P. (1992), 36. This may be profitably compared with another Eastern Christian source available throughout the Latin medieval period, John of Damascus in his discussion of the hypostatic union of God and Man in Christ, in book 3 of his *De Fidei Orthodoxa.*
[42] Nygren, A., (1948), 239.
[43] See especially book 16 chapters 6 and 7.
[44] Ficino, M., (1576), vol. 1, 378.
[45] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Human Image of God* (formerly known as *On the Making of Man*), 4, in *Gregory of Nyssa: On the Human Image of God*, trans. J. Behr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 163.
[46] Copenhaver, B. P. (1992), xli.
[47] Lauster, J., "Marsilio Ficino as a Christian Thinker", in M. J. B. Allen, V. Rees, M. Davies (ed.), (2002), 45-69, at 52. Lauster, as a systematic theologian, has provided a fine overview of Ficino's own theology, alas without examining Ficino's sources. Likewise, the otherwise excellent collection of essays found in Allen, M. J. B., *Plato's Third Eye: Studies in Marsilio Ficino's Metaphysics and its Sources* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1995) contains hardly any mention of the Eastern Fathers. Neither does Paul Richard Blum, who omits Fathers East *and* West in his discussion of Ficino: *Philosophy of Religion in the Renaissance* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 109-126. Regarding Ficino's use of inscribed talismans, Copenhaver, B. P. has presented this as pushing the envelope of acceptability in the West, but from the Eastern perspective, where such objects were a commonplace, Ficino's reluctance to use them in ways which go beyond the 'natural' appears as a conservative, western compromise. Cf. Copenhaver, B. P., "Scholastic Philosophy and Renaissance Magic in the De Vita of Marsilio Ficino", *Renaissance Quarterly* 37/4 (1984): 524.