Ideas of Spiritual Ascent and Theurgy from the Ancients to Ficino and Pico

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of MTh (by Research).

School of Critical Studies

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October 2020

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Abstract

The relationship between religion and magic has held a precarious position in the history of Ideas and ecclesiastical history. It is often held that religion petitions while magic coerces. Marsilio Ficino (1433 –1499) translated many Platonic, Neoplatonic and Hermetic texts into Latin reintroducing Platonic theology to the Italian renaissance humanists. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), utilising Ficino's translations and incorporating Jewish Kabbalist ideas, gave birth to Christian Cabala through the publication of his nine hundred theses to be delivered in Rome. By exploring the idea of spiritual ascent and its relationship to the Neoplatonic practice of theurgy, it may enable a deeper understanding of the complexities between the Renaissance understanding of religion and magic. At the heart of this discussion for Ficino and Pico is a quest for divine truth, which centres on their understanding of mis-dated texts and the development of the *prisca theologia*. In understanding the way both men understood the concepts of ancient wisdom and ancient religion through the practice of spiritual ascent I aim to explore the complex history of magic and religion demonstrating that definitions between them are not always appropriate or helpful. Chapter one sets the Renaissance scene in which Ficino and Pico were working. Chapter two explores the ideas of spiritual ascent and theurgy in Late Antiquity. Chapter three focuses on Christianity, in particular the legacy of Augustine's rhetoric and ideas of spiritual ascent in Pseudo-Dionysius. The final two chapters explore the role of theurgy and spiritual ascent in the writings of Ficino and Pico. This thesis explores the development of ideas of spiritual ascent from Classical antiquity into the early modern period, and considers, how, when applied to the thought of Ficino and Pico, these ideas can shed light on the contested relationship between magic and religion.

Acknowledgments

This thesis would not have been possible without the help and support of my supervisors, Prof Charlotte Methuen and Dr Mia Spiro. Thanks also to the TRS department staff and students at Glasgow who have supported me throughout.

I would like to give special thanks to Prof. Methuen for her unwavering support and understanding throughout this entire process. I feel blessed to be working with you.

My family and friends, who have supported me through the stress with kind words of support and encouragement. Without you all, I would be lost.

I thank my husband, for the hundreds of cups of coffee, love, and support that he has shown me at the darkest of times.

Finally, I acknowledge my three cats who are always on stand-by for a cuddle just when I need it the most.

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Introduction.

In a letter written to Antonio Zilioli,[1] Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) argued that 'philosophy and religion are true sisters.' In consequence, Ficino suggests, 'the philosopher should be called wise when he raises us to the contemplation of God, and pious and religious when he kindles within us the love of divine goodness. For this reason, the whole philosophy of the ancients is simply religion united with wisdom.'[2] Two important features of Ficino's thought emerge here. Firstly, he assumes that there is an ancient wisdom. Secondly, he proposes that there was an ancient notion of religion which is connected in some way to the ancient wisdom, to which philosophy can 'raise us up'. Wouter Hanegraaff suggests that for Renaissance thinkers such as Ficino, 'Jesus Christ restored the ancient religion after it had been abandoned due to the pernicious influence of the demonic entities which the pagans worshipped as their gods.'[3] Yet Ficino saw a pattern in ancient discussions of wisdom, which were the ideas of spiritual ascent. Narratives of spiritual ascent, and in particular accounts of the practice known as theurgy, have often been seen as controversial in the Christian tradition, particularly due to concern they might clash with Christian doctrine. This thesis will argue that ideas of spiritual ascent and theurgy found in the narratives of the ancient philosophers and Jewish Kabbalists can help us better understand the complexities of religion and magic as defined by Ficino and Giovanni della Mirandola (1463-1494). The act of contemplation has been

[1] Date of the letter not given.
[2] Marsilio Ficino, *Letters* 6, (London: Shepard-Walwyn, 1999), 32.
[3] Wouter Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 21.

viewed as orthodox by Christian thinkers, while the act of theurgy has generally been rejected as magic. Yet, many of the proponents of ancient religion and wisdom cited by Ficino and Pico, and in particular the revelatory experiences discussed in the texts, appear to assert practices which would fall into the category of theurgy. This thesis explores the development of ideas of spiritual ascent from Classical antiquity into the early modern period, and considers how, when applied to the thought of Ficino and Pico, these ideas can shed light on the contested relationship between magic and religion.

Much of the debate surrounding the work of Ficino and Pico is found in the academic study of Western Esotericism.[4] Academic interest began in the early twentieth century with a group of historians who believed that certain aspects of thought found in the ancient world and the European Renaissance had been largely ignored in traditional fields of scholarly research.[5] In contemporary academia the field of esoteric studies is growing, yet is not without its obstacles. One of the main difficulties is the interdisciplinary aspect of the field which includes areas such as religion, philosophy, history of science and the arts in general.[6] The interdisciplinary dynamics of the field rests on one of the central themes in esoteric studies, magic. Magic and religion are often treated as separate practices, but this thesis asks whether we can better understand the connection and overlap between these areas through exploring practices of

[4] The term "Western Esotericism" is contested within the field. See, Egil Asprem, "Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism" in *Correspondences* 2.1, (2014), 3-33.

[5] One of the main centres which developed these ideas was the Warburg Institute in London where Ernst Cassirer, Frances Yates, D. P. Walker and Edgar Wind all carried out early research in the field.

[6] These issues were first highlighted by Antoine Faivre in *Access to Western Esotericism*, (New York: SUNY Press, 1994). See also; Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed,* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2013).

spiritual ascent and theurgy from the ancient world, and the reception of these ideas in the works of two key figures of the Florentine Renaissance, Ficino and Pico. Discussions regarding spiritual ascent in the Renaissance are not confined to Ficino and Pico alone.[7] However, Ficino and Pico are the focus of this thesis given the intellectual contribution of both men to this area of Renaissance thought. Ficino is noted for his extensive translations of and commentaries on the Platonic, Neoplatonic and Hermetic corpus' and Pico, as the founder of Christian Cabala.[8] In considering how Ficino and Pico integrated ideas of ancient religion, wisdom and revelation with the practice of spiritual ascent and theurgy, it can be seen that although some of these practices were perceived as magic and condemned by the Christian Church, they also came to be understood by both Ficino and Pico as aids to deepening their understanding of Christian faith and practice and its roots in history.

The terms Cabala and theurgy have been linked in scholarship to the notion of magical practice.[9] Therefore, an understanding of magic itself is

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[7] The idea of a spiritual ascent is also found in Johannes Reuchlin's, *De Arte Cabalistica*. See, Johann Reuchlin, *On the Art of the Kabbalah*, Martin & Sarah Goodman (trans), (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993). See also, Jean Thenaud, *Traicté de la Cabale*, (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2007). Francesco Giorgi, *De harmonia mundi totius cantic tria*, (1545 reprint; Paris: Hachette Livre-BNF, 2018) and evidence may also be found in the works of the German Jewish convert to Christianity, Paolo Riccio. See also, Joseph Dann, *The Christian Kabbalah: Jewish Books and their Christian Interpreters*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[8] There are many variations on the spelling of Kabbalah. However, there appears to be a general rule in modern scholarship; even although within this rule are further variations. The Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah appears throughout scholarship beginning with the letter "K", with variations such as "Kaballah", and "Kabballa". The Christianised version of the Jewish tradition tends to begin with the letter "C", with variations such as "Cabbalah" and "Cabalah". A third spelling, "Qabalah" is often used to denote the hermetic tradition. For the purposes of this thesis, the Jewish tradition will use "Kabbalah". The Christianised tradition will use "Cabala". The only variation from this will be within a direct quotation.

[9] Examples include: Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, (London: Penguin, 1971), at 320-322. Frances Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, (1979; reprint, London: Routledge, 1999). Elliot R. Wolfston, "Language, Secrecy, and the Mysteries of Law: Theurgy and the Christian Kabbalah of Johannes Reuchlin" in *Invoking Angels: Theurgic Ideas and Practices, Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries*, Claire Fanger (ed), (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 312-340.

required. In today's culture and scholarship, it is often assumed that terms such as "religion" and "magic" have a basic understanding or cohesion. Nonetheless, problems arise when we try to set out clear definitions for magic and religion. The term "magic", its history and the cultural functions of practices deemed to be magical have been a focus of scholarship since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[10] Hanegraaff suggests that 'the Greek complex of words relating to magic is derived from the Old Persian *magu-*, the exact meaning of which is unclear although it must have referred to a religious functionary of some kind.'[11] The term magic has had both positive and negative connotations throughout history, becoming of particular importance in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries during the Renaissance when consideration of the origins and development of magical practices in antiquity became a focus for the philosophers and theologians of the period. Hanegraaff argues that 'these origins became highly important from the Renaissance on, as seen in the attempts of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Cornelius Agrippa to promote a positive understanding of magic as the "ancient wisdom" of Zoroaster by juxtaposing it sharply against its negative and demonic counterpart, *goetia*.'[12] In

[10] The classic anthropological works include: James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3rd ed., 12 vols., (London: Macmillan, 1913-20); Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Karen E. Fields (trans), (1912; reprint New York: Free Press, 1995); and E.B Taylor, *Primitive Culture*, Vols. 1-2, (London: John Murray, 1871). Advancing scholarship on these original works and of equal importance for defining traditional concepts of magic are B. Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948) and particularly in reference to Durkheim's work, Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, Robert Brain (trans), (1972; reprint London: Routledge, 2002). On magic as a proto science see; Lynn Thorndike, *History of Magic and Experimental Science*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923-1958).

[11] Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*, 169. For an introduction of the connection between *magu-* and the Persian Magi see, Jenny Rose, *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 46-63. Cf. Herodotus, *Histories*, Robin Waterfield (trans), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); 1.103, 107,119, 133, 7.43.

[12]Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*, 169. For a detailed discussion on various Renaissance thinkers' connections to magic see, Paola Zambelli, *White Magic, Black Magic in the European Renaissance: From Ficino, Pico, Della Porta to Trithemius, Agrippa, Bruno,* (Leiden: Brill, 2007). *Goetia* was seen as the malevolent opposite of a type of magic practised by the Neoplatonists known as theurgy. In late antiquity, 'the sharp distinction is made between 1) the sinister *goeteia*

consequence, according to Hanegraaff, an attempt at a clear definition between magic and religion becomes the focus of scholarly discussion during the time of the Renaissance and is intrinsically linked to the concept of the ancient wisdom.

One of the difficulties with defining magic, J.N. Bremmer argues, is that it, 'assumes that the definition of religion is already agreed upon.'[13] Caroline Schaffalitzky de Muckadell highlights the issue noting, 'the literature on defining religion is vast, but a general consensus has not materialised.'[14] Part of the problem is that 'in the study of religion, a fundamental distinction is often drawn between "real" definitions—typically in the form of "substantive" variants— that attempt to describe the essential properties of religion, and "nominal" definitions—which do not entail that "religion" is the name of some kind of object with essential properties.'[15] In consequence modern definitions may have no bearing on the way religion was conceived in different historical contexts. Therefore, if religion has no working definition, the definition of magic as an opposition to it also becomes problematic. Kaske and Clarke highlight another problem in the history of magic, arguing, 'it is impossible to sum up the basic assumptions of magic because they differ so much from magician to magician.'[16] It is for this reason that Michael Bailey has suggested that the intellectual study of magic is an unstable area of scholarship and posits that 'a clear understanding of the terminology employed to designate magical acts in

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and 2) *theourgia*, the sacramental divine work.' Algis Uždavinys, *Philosophy & Theurgy in Late Antiquity*, (Kettering: Angelico Press Ltd, 2010), 289.

[13] Jan N. Bremmer, "Magic and Religion" in *idem* & Jan R. Veenstra (eds.), *The Metamorphosis of Magic from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 267-271, at 268.

[14] Caroline Schaffalitzky de Muckadell, "On Essentialism and Real Definitions of Religion" in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 82.2 (2014), 495-520, at 495-96.

[15] *Ibid*, 496.

[16] Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life: A Critical Edition and Translation with Introduction and Notes*, Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clarke (eds & trans), (Tempe: Arizona State University, 2002), 48.

any particular context is critical, but a strict adherence to that terminology or even the basic distinction it draws upon will not be suitable for all scholarly purposes.'[17] More importantly for this thesis, Bailey goes on to assert that that 'a remarkable aspect of magic is the degree to which many people in various social and historical contexts have engaged in acts that their culture as a whole, or at least certain cultural authorities, would categorise as magical without considering themselves to be performing magic.'[18] Therefore, this thesis argues that what may have been viewed as magic by some, was viewed by thinkers such as Ficino and Pico as ancient religion. Indeed, Ficino and Pico viewed themselves as orthodox Christians, yet faced condemnation from the Church both during their lives and for Pico after his death as expounders of magic. Therefore, it is difficult to provide clear categorisations of religion and magic and Bremmer's contention holds particular weight when we assess conceptions of religion and magic together.[19]

Nonetheless, an understanding of how Ficino and Pico viewed religion is important for the purpose of this **thesis**. Ficino is widely recognised as one of the leading proponents of Renaissance Christian humanism, carrying on a Florentine tradition beginning with Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca,1304-74) in

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[17] Michael Bailey, "The Meaning of Magic" in *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1, (2006), 1-23, at 23.
[18] *Ibid*, 2.
[19] Using Ninian Smart's Seven Dimensions of Religion to aid us in defining what religion is, many of the systems or beliefs that are categorised as magic would be defined as religion. Most magical systems practice rituals and contain a Narrative and Myth. There are social and Institutional ties and many have ethical and legal charters in place and all have a doctrine of philosophical system which adherents are required to follow. Lastly, they have a material dimension that is deemed sacred or supernatural. This shows that when anthropologists and historians try to polarise magic against religion there is a tendency to elevate established religious systems such as "orthodox" Christianity or Judaism and base arguments for magic against the established faith system viewing practices as either superstitious or folklore. See, Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, (Glasgow: Willian Collins, 1969), 75-76. Further discussion is found in Eric J. Sharpe, *Understanding Religion*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1983).

Avignon,[20] which focused on 'the rediscovery and study of ancient Greek and Roman texts, the restoration and interpretation of them and the assimilation of the ideas and values that they contain.'[21] Along with a renewed interest in classical literary works came a renewed interest in the ancient philosophers and the Church Fathers. Alastair Hamilton suggests, 'what made the Church Fathers so attractive to Petrarch and later humanists was that they reconciled classical and Christian views of human life and morals, and that they presented them in an elegant style.'[22] Irena Backus adds, 'studying the Fathers became linked in some humanist minds with liberation from Scholastic theology, just as reading classical authors such as Cicero or Virgil was inseparable from freeing the Latin language from Scholastic corruptions and accretions.'[23] These elements of humanism are of particular relevance in the case of Ficino due to their connections with his understanding of the ancient religion and wisdom. As Hanegraaff notes, 'the grand renaissance project of recovering the sources of classical antiquity and its philosophical traditions forced Christian thinkers to reconsider basic questions concerning the relation between human rationality and divine revelation, and stimulated them to trace the historical origins and chronological development of both.'[24] Hanegraaff concludes – I think correctly in the case of Ficino and Pico – that the aim was to 'demonstrate the sources of true knowledge and wisdom, trace the paths they had followed through time, and make clear how those trajectories harmonized or coincided with the

[20] For a full discussion see; Nicholas Mann, "The Origins of Humanism" in Jill Kraye (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1-19.
[21] *Ibid*, 2.
[22] Alastair Hamilton, "Humanists and the Bible" in Kraye (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion,* 100-118, at 100.
[23] Irena Backus, "The Church Fathers and the Humanities in the Renaissance and the Reformation", in Jens Zimmerman (ed.), *Re-envisioning Christian Humanism: Education and the Restoration of Humanity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 33-54, at 36.
[24] Hanegraaff*, Esotericism*, 5.

unquestionable truth of Christian doctrine.'[25] This thesis suggests that one of the ways Ficino and Pico traced these trajectories through time was through their readings of narratives of spiritual ascent and the practice of theurgy.

Central to the idea of a universal ancient religion and wisdom is the development of the concept of *prisca theologia*.[26] D. P. Walker describes this "Ancient Theology" as a 'certain tradition of Christian apologetic theology which rests on misdated texts.'[27] Ficino believed in a 'continuous self-consistent secular tradition of truth' which he believed travelled 'parallel to the Christian truth'.[28] He proposed a series of ancient theologians which ended with Plato, whose lineage was broken with the foundation of Proclus' school that led to the fragmentation of the divine message, but also included writings attributed to Zoroaster, Orpheus and Hermes which, he believed, 'gave access to the most ancient and therefore authoritative sources of true religion.'[29] Pico draws from the same ancient sources as Ficino but includes ideas from the Jewish Kabbalah. For Pico, the 'Christian Kabbalah was a specific manifestation of *prisca theologia*.'[30] As Hanegraaff explains, 'whereas the religions of the Persians, Egyptians or Greeks had long been superseded by the advent of Christianity and now survived only through textual remains, the kabbalah survived as a living tradition in Pico's own time.'[31] What emerges during the Renaissance is, as

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[25] *Ibid*, 5.
[26] *Prisca theologia* is not the only term used when discussing these ideas. The term "Ancient Theology" is also used in scholarship. For this thesis, I will use *prisca theologia*, unless using a direct quote.
[27] D. P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology: Studies in Christian Platonism*, (London: Duckworth & Co. Ltd, 1972), at 1.
[28] Kaske and Clark, *Three Books on Life*, at 39.
[29] Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*, 9.
[30] *Ibid*, 54. Cf. Mallary Masters, "Renaissance Kabbalah" in Faivre, Needleman & Voss (eds.), *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 132-154.
[31] *Ibid*, 56.

Hanegraaff argues, a 'powerful grand narrative which seriously challenged traditional perspectives on the relation between philosophy and theology, or rationality and revelation.'[32] Similarly, Amos Edelheit notes that, 'one feature of the humanist attitude to religion – and we shall find it in both Ficino and in Pico – is the demand for a strict separation between the human and the divine.'[33] These themes of rationality and revelation, human and divine, appear repeatedly in the writings of both Ficino and Pico and will be explored in more detail in chapter one. With the discovery of new sources, Renaissance thinkers were able to appreciate ancient wisdom as a *praeparatio evangelica*. This meant, as Hanegraaff argues that 'as a matter of principle, anything of value that they might contain was believed to be expressed more fully and clearly by Christian theology, and anything not included in it had to be a pagan error by definition.'[34] One of the areas in which the writings of ancient philosophers overlap with Christian theology is through narratives of spiritual ascent, also known as theurgy in ancient Greek circles. Therefore, an assessment of theurgy is required.

The term theurgy (Greek θεουργία or *theourgia*) is believed to have originated in the *Chaldaean Oracles* which, as Ruth Majercik explains, are 'a collection of abstruse, hexameter verses purported to have been "handed down by the gods" to a certain Julian the Chaldean and/or his son, Julian the Theurgist, who flourished during the late second century CE.'[35] The word

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[32] *Ibid*, 6.
[33] Amos Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola: The Evolution of Humanist Theology 1461/2 – 1498*, (Leiden: Brill, 2008), at 35.
[34] Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*, 11.
[35] Ruth Majercik, *The Chaldean Oracles: Text, Translation, and Commentary,* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 1. See also; H. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy: Mysticism, Magic and Platonism in the Later Roman Empire*, Third edition, (Paris: Institute of Augustinian Studies, 2010).

θεουργία is a Greek compound word which literally translates as 'god work'. Claire Fanger suggests that the term was adopted in late antique philosophy as a way to differentiate between the ritual acts and practice, in opposition to theology, which can be literally translated as 'god speech' or speech about God.[36] Fanger appears to be drawing from Andrew Louth who argues that the term θεουργία 'seems to have been fashioned on analogy with θεολογία [theology]: as a θεολόγος [theologian] is one who can speak of the divine or declare divine things, so a θεουργος, a theurgist, is one who can do divine things, or tap the divine power on a human level.'[37] Louth and Fanger are indicative of the developments in scholarship on the topic of theurgy. E.R. Dodds, writing over thirty years earlier, in the early 1950s, suggested, in contrast, that theurgy was a form of vulgar magic, proposing that 'vulgar magic is commonly the last resort of the personally desperate, whom man and God have alike failed, so theurgy became the refuge of a despairing intelligentsia which already felt *la fascination de l'abime*.'[38] However, in Dodd's view, while 'vulgar magic used names and formulae of religious origin to profane ends, theurgy used procedures of vulgar magic primarily to religious ends.'[39] Dodd's assessment of theurgy has fallen out of favour due to more recent research which has re-evaluated the relationship between the Neoplatonists and concepts of ritual magic.[40] Although Dodd's identification of a relationship between theurgy and religion is useful, it is important also to take into account George

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[36] Claire Fanger, "Introduction" in Fanger (ed.), *Invoking Angels*,1-33, at 15.
[37] Andrew Louth, **"Pagan Theurgy** and Christian Sacramentalism in Denys the Areopagite" in *The Journal of Theological Studies* 37, (1986), 432-438, at 432
[38] E.R. Dodds, "Theurgy", Appendix II in *The Greeks and the Irrational*, (London: University of California Press, 1951), 291.
[39] *Ibid*, 291.
[40] See; Anne Shepard, "Proclus' Attitude to Theurgy," in *The Classical Quarterly* 32, (1982), 212-224; Wendy Elgersma Helleman, "Plotinus and Magic" in *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 4, (2010), 114- 146; Giuseppe Muscolino, "Prophecy and Black Magic," in *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 9, (2015), 146-158.

Luck's assessment that 'theurgy was essentially a higher form of magic, merely a respectable cousin of what the Greeks called γοητεία (charm).'[41] In recognising theurgy as a higher form of magic in antiquity, its connections to the practices defined as magic of the Renaissance become clearer. As Fanger suggests, 'many scholars are recognising the need for more serious account[s] to be taken of neglected or marginalised strands in religion',[42] and these include those categorised as magic. The development and history of theurgy in the Christian west is one of those marginalised strands. Part of the problem in understanding the role of theurgy in religion and magic is that theurgy has not been clearly defined in scholarship. Therefore, in order to clarify my use of the term theurgy in this thesis I will offer my own definition.

Fanger suggests three basic tenets pertaining to the practice of theurgy. 'At a basic level, theurgic operations (1) tend to involve rituals to affect the soul's purification; (2) tend to involve fellowship with intermediary beings (gods, angels, daemons);[43] and (3) tend to be orientated towards revelation, or experiences in which something is transmitted by divine powers. In practice this means to receive visions.'[44] While Fanger's tenets provide a solid baseline for identifying theurgic practices, an in-depth set of markers will help to identify why certain practices were viewed as orthodox while others are deemed heretical and in some way magical. Given the diversity of the traditions on which the Renaissance thinkers drew, in expanding the tenets which define an act as

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[41] George Luck, *Ancient Pathways and Hidden pursuits: Religion, Morals, and Magic in the Ancient World*, (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), 114.
[42] Fanger, "I*ntroduction*," 26.
[43] Fellowship in this context implies some sort of assistance, whether that is for protection, guidance or can even imply the messenger of revelation.
[44] Fanger, "*Introduction*", 16

theurgic in nature, it may be possible to understand how Ficino and Pico viewed these ideas of spiritual ascent as an ancient wisdom or religion. This may also help in identifying why the ideas of Ficino and Pico were viewed as orthodox by some and controversial by others. One area which Fanger's tenets stop short of identifying is the transformative experience or deification described as the culmination of the ascent process. Norman Russell suggests that 'this transformation [the process of deification] is the result of theurgy, a concept which entered into Platonism from the *Chaldean Oracles*.'[45] Can an assessment of the ideas regarding spiritual ascent in the *Chaldean Oracles* aid in expanding the tenets in which theurgy can be defined?

Majercik argues that, 'from the fragments we do have, we can surely locate the *Chaldean Oracles* in a middle Platonic milieu, especially that type of Middle Platonism which had affinities with both Gnosticism and Hermeticism as well as links with Numenius.'[46] Majercik identifies key features that these ideologies have in common:

> a) their elaborate and often exasperating metaphysical constructions; b) an extreme derogation of material existence; c) a dualistic understanding of human nature that envisions the mind as a "spark" of the Divine trapped in matter; d) a method of salvation or enlightenment that generally involves a spiritual and/or ritual ascent of the soul; e) a mythologizing tendency that hypostasizes various abstractions into quasi-mythical beings.[47]

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[45] Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), at 44
[46] Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*, 3
[47] *Ibid*, 4.

Therefore, what Majercik defines as the features of these emerging ideologies in Late Antiquity, could be usefully integrated as the indicators by which a practice may be defined as theurgic. Luck suggests that *theurgia* can be explained as a contrast to *theologia*, positing that it was 'an activity, an operation, a technique, for dealing with gods, not just a theory, a discussion, and act of contemplation. As such it was considered a form of worship, and it clearly had its own rewards for those who practised it.'[48] The aim of these practices, in Luck's view, was union between humanity and God: 'in later paganism, theurgy can be considered the ultimate development of the mysteries,[49] because it represents an initiation into the highest mystery of all, the union between man and god.'[50] As noted above, Fanger's tenets do not mention the ultimate goal of theurgic practice, the union between humanity and God. However, Fanger does relate theurgy to 'revelation' and as something 'transmitted by divine powers'. If ideas of spiritual ascent and theurgic practice are the vehicle by which ancient philosophers and theologians received knowledge of the ancient religion and wisdom, how dangerous would a revival of these practices be for the Church in crisis during the Renaissance? Who had the authority to decide what is a genuine revelation from God, or a false revelation given by the devil in disguise?[51] Once

[48] Luck, *Ancient Pathways*, 111.
[49] The Mysteries were a school of religion in the Greco-Roman world that were characterised by their association with initiation and ritual. 'The ancient Greeks called them Mysteries ("*Mysteria*") and they represented a special opportunity for dealing with the gods of the polis on an individual basis. As these cults had to do with the individual's inner self, privacy was necessary and was secured by an initiation ceremony, a personal ritual that brought the individual to a new spiritual level, a higher degree of awareness in relation to the gods. Once initiated, the individual was entitled to share the eternal truth, to catch a glimpse of the eternal reality.' Michael B. Cosmopoulos, *Greek Mysteries: The Archaeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults*, (London: Routledge, 2003), at xii. See also, Hugh Bowmen, *Mystery Cults in the Ancient World*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Jan N. Bremmer, *Initiation into the Mysteries of the Ancient World*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).
[50] Luck, *Ancient Pathways*, 112.
[51] Cf. 2 Cor. 11:14, 'And no marvel; for Satan himself transformed into an angel of light.'

again we return to themes of authority and tradition, which will be discussed further in the chapter on Christianity and spiritual ascent.

Drawing on the discussion above, this thesis proposes seven tenets as key identifiers of theurgic practice. In applying these tenets this thesis will explore the complex relationship between ideas and practices of spiritual ascent with the boundary between orthodoxy and magic, also highlighting the delicate balance between tradition and authority. Like Luck, I hold that there are two main theurgic operations or aims. The first, which will not be discussed in detail in this thesis, is the technique of animating statues by drawing down the power of the gods. The second is the achieving of union between man and the gods/God. In addition, for a practice to be deemed as theurgic the following tenets are suggested:

1. Humanity is seen as inherently flawed, whether in the Platonic idea of corruptible matter, or the Judeo-Christian concepts of fallen/sinful.

2. Ascent is achieved through a hierarchical system. It may contain beings (gods/angels/daemons) between man and the Ultimate Good/God. The practitioner has access to them in order to aid their journey.

3. Transcendence of the soul through the hierarchy is possible through ritual and prayer.

4. God/The One, is the Ultimate Good and the highest level of reality.

5. The language used is apophatic, with a strong emphasis on the highest God/The One as light.

6. There is a strong emphasis on inner experience and the knowledge of self.

7. The ultimate goal is a union with God/the One, ending in a transformative experience (deification).

On the surface all these tenets sound religious. However, theurgic practice draws on so called 'magical' practices to achieve them, such as use of the "magical formulae" (*voces magicae*), interaction with spiritual beings for the practitioner's (supposed) own gain, and the ability to draw deities into inanimate objects such as statues and stones. These rituals are used by practitioners to gain a higher state of knowledge, with the ultimate goal of becoming God-like or achieving a state of mystical union with God (in the Jewish and Christian context), or the One (in the Platonic/ Neoplatonic world). Opinions regarding the orthodoxy of such **practices** rests on the tradition of Christian doctrine and dogma. However, as will be explored in chapter one, both Ficino and Pico challenge the authority of **human-driven** doctrine, arguing the superiority of divine wisdom over human interpretation.

Chapter one establishes the context in which Ficino and Pico developed their syncretic thoughts. Florence became the centre of the Platonist revival and this cultural milieu provided the necessary textual background through which Ficino could develop his *prisca theologia*. This chapter first explores how key texts such as the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the *Chaldaean Oracles*, along with the Platonic corpus, shaped Ficino's conception of ancient wisdom before turning to the influence of Ficino and of Jewish patrons on the development of Pico's Cabala. The chapter ends by assessing the development of the concept of man as the microcosm and the separation between human

rationality and divine inspiration. In understanding the world in which Ficino and Pico were writing, and their understanding of man's place in the cosmos, we are better placed to assess the way in which Ficino and Pico engaged with their sources.

Chapter two will focus on the development of theurgic practices in later antiquity. In the year 333BCE, Alexander the Great defeated the Persian King Darius. Along with the heralding of a new empire and politics came a period of profound cultural change. Bernard McGinn notes, 'Hellenism, the spread of Greek language and Greek cultural values to the new subject peoples, was bound to affect the traditional dynasties and age-old ways of life. The phenomenon is evident throughout the ancient East – Egypt, Persia, Babylonia – but perhaps nowhere more so among the Jews.'[52] Exploring the development of theurgy in Neoplatonism, Hermeticism and the Chaldean Oracles, the importance of Iamblichus (c. 245-c. 325CE) and Proclus (c. 410-85 CE) will be **assessed** before examining the ideas of spiritual ascent in the Hermetic corpus and the ***Chaldean Oracles*****.** Using the seven tenets discussed above the chapter argues that these three traditions of Late Antiquity can be described as theurgy.

Chapter three explores the extent to which the arguments offered by Augustine of Hippo in the fourth century CE against magic in general, and in theurgy in particular, shaped the reception and interpretation of theurgy in the Christian West. Challenging Augustine's legacy, this chapter will then turn to the reception history of Pseudo-Dionysius to explore the reluctance of scholarly

[52] Bernard McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism*, Vol. 1, (London: SCM Press, 1991), 9.

literature to acknowledge the links between the Greek definition of theurgic ritual and its existence in Christian texts. Pseudo-Dionysius provides an excellent example of the discomfort found within western Christian scholarship in using terms that err on the side of paganism or magic, even in modern scholarship. The final part of this chapter will focus on Origen as a case study for the way in which the early Church Fathers reconciled classical ideas, particularly Plato, with emerging Christian views around ideas of spiritual ascent.

Ficino and his ideas regarding spiritual ascent are addressed in chapter four. Ficino is often referred to as the "Doctor of Souls" and the first part of this chapter will explore the connection between the health of the body and the health of the soul through Ficino's notion of the priest-doctor. The discussion of the priest-doctor will frame an assessment of Ficino's ideas of spiritual ascent using the seven tenets outlined in the introduction. Given the constraints of this thesis, an assessment of Ficino's natural magic and his doctrine of the four frenzies, although highly relevant, will not be undertaken.[53] Ficino undertook a translation and commentary of Pseudo-Dionysius' works, but he does not use the term theurgy itself. Assessing the connection of Ficino's spiritual ascent to the practice of theurgy demonstrates the legacy of Augustine in Ficino's reluctance

[53] Ficino's natural magic is linked to his ideas around music and astrology. These in turn are discussed in Ficino's Doctrine of the four frenzies. However, the practices that Ficino discusses, specifically music and astrology, often involve drawing-down theurgy, which is not the subject of this thesis. While I acknowledge that the frenzies play an important role for the preparation of the ascent and are significant to understanding conscious states in Ficino's work, this thesis will focus solely on the actual steps of ascent rather than the altered states of consciousness which induce the ascent. On the Frenzies see, Michael J. B. Allen, "XV. The Soul as Rhapsode: Marsilio Ficino's interpretation of Plato's Ion" in *idem*, *Plato's Third Eye: Studies in Marsilio Ficino's Metaphysics and its sources*, (Aldershot: Variorum, 1995), 125-148. Hanegraaff, "The Platonic Frenzies in Marsilio Ficino, in Jitse Dijkstra, Justin Kroesen, and Yme Kuiper (eds), *Myths, martyrs, and modernity: studies in the history of religions in honour of Jan N. Bremmer*, (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 553-568.

to connect spiritual ascent directly to theurgy. In contrast, the language of Pico would be far more explicit.

Chapter five will explore ideas of spiritual ascent and the development of Christian Cabala in Pico. Unlike Ficino, Pico explicitly links the practice of magic to the ascent as well as perfecting the practice of magic in his understanding of the Jewish Kabbalah. This chapter first examines the way in which Pico defines magic and situates it within his understanding of spiritual ascent. For Pico, magic only gains its efficacy when joined with the wisdom of the ancient Hebrews and Pico's Jewish sources are explored in the second section of this chapter. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a comparison of the ideas found in Pico's works with the seven tenets.

Chapter One

The Renaissance World of Ficino and Pico.

The Renaissance humanist project of recovering sources from classical antiquity led many thinkers to investigate notions of true knowledge and wisdom. One of the figures who received particular attention was Plato. While James Hankins emphasises that 'one may not speak of the Renaissance as an Age of Plato without serious distortion of the historical record,'[1] he also notes that, 'the period from Petrarch to Ficino was in fact an epoch when the philosophy of Plato was valued and studied more than at any time since Justinian closed the Athenian Academy in A.D. 529.'[2] Centuries before, Augustine, who was greatly admired by humanist thinkers, had written that, 'the very thing which is now called the Christian religion was with the ancients, and it was with the human race from its beginning to the time when Christ appeared in the flesh: from then on the true religion, which already existed, began to be called Christian.'[3] The question which many Renaissance thinkers were asking was: what was this ancient religion? The Scholastic world and its reliance on Aristotle had caused problems for Christian thought, as Hankins observes: 'Whereas Aristotle had encouraged heresy with his doctrine of eternity of the world and his ambiguous views on the immortality of the soul, Plato was known from the ***Timaeus*** to have believed in creation, and from *Phaedo* and other dialogues to have proved the soul's immortality.'[4] In consequence Plato, and those who followed him, the

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[1] James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, Vol.1, (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 4.
[2] *Ibid*, 4.
[3] Augustine, *Retractationes* 1.12.3. As printed in Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*, 9. (Trans. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 21). Cf. John 1:1-14.
[4] Hankins, *Italian Renaissance*, 7.

Neoplatonists in particular, **were seen by many Renaissance humanist Scholars to be the main proponents of this ancient religion.**

The reintroduction of **ancient Greek** texts to the Latin West is often credited to Petrarch, as noted in the introduction. Hanegraaff believes that for thinkers such as Ficino and Pico, 'metaphysical verities grounded in divine revelation were the self-evident foundation for intellectual enquiry.'[5] Hanegraaff suggests, 'their essential project was […] doctrinal and theological throughout.'[6] With the influx of newly translated ancient Greek texts into Latin a pattern began to emerge which bound up understandings of the ancient religion with ideas of spiritual ascent and revelation across time, linking them to the dawning of Christianity and the development of Christianity's earliest doctrines. Before an examination of these ideas of spiritual ascent can take place, we must understand the Renaissance world in which Ficino and Pico were working. This chapter will firstly look at the ways the so-called ancient texts became available during the Florentine Renaissance. With the introduction and translations of the texts, Ficino established his *prisca theologia*, discussed later in this chapter. Along with the translations and the development of the *prisca theologia*, humanity's place in the world of being would also become a key feature of Renaissance thought. Understanding the intellectual world in which Ficino and Pico were working will aid us in identifying how they utilised these traditions and developed their syncretic thought.

[5] Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*, 6.
[6] *Ibid*, 6.

1.1 The Introduction of Ancient Texts into the Florentine Humanist World.

Through Ficino's translations and commentaries, funded by the powerful Medici family in Florence, Latin versions of the Platonic corpus, Hermetic and Neoplatonic works, particularly those of Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Plotinus became widely available. As a result of Ficino's translations and commentaries Copenhaver and Schmitt suggest, 'it gradually became possible to take a broader view of philosophy than the traditional Peripatetic framework permitted.'[7] Kristeller highlights the importance of Ficino's contribution to the Renaissance, noting, that 'through his translations and commentaries Ficino did for Plato, Plotinus, and other ancient philosophers what the other humanists did for the ancient Greek orators, poets, and historians.'[8] Of particular relevance to this thesis is the fact that through extensive work on the Platonic corpus, Ficino identified what he saw as a synergy between Platonic philosophy and Christian dogma. Hankins notes, 'though clearly indebted to the early humanist tradition, Ficino was the first scholar with sufficient knowledge of Greek and of theology to devote himself in a serious way to recovering the hidden wisdom of pagans.'[9] Ficino owed much to the early humanists and a brief assessment of the development of their ideas will aid our understanding of his thinking.

Florence became the centre of the Platonist revival due to the influence of Chancellor Coluccio Salutati during his period of office, from 1375 to 1406.

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[7] Copenhaver & Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy: A History of Western Philosophy* 3, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 15.
[8] Paul Oskar Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, Virginia Conant, (trans.), (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 13.
[9] Hankins, *Italian Renaissance*, 282.

Goodrick-Clarke notes that Salutati 'recognised the importance of original Greek sources for a deeper understanding of Roman authors.'[10] In 1396 the leading Byzantine classical Scholar, Manuel Chrysoloras was appointed to the University in Florence and this heralded a growth in the number of humanists dedicated to the study and translation of Greek literature. Some of these were refugees, for, as Chadwick notes, 'Italian cities, especially Venice and Florence, had come to provide a desirable and safer home for many learned Greeks from Constantinople. The route was used by Greek scribes and owners of valued manuscripts of Aristotle and Plato, and other notable classical writers.'[11] However others were Italians, for Goodrick-Clarke explains that, 'thanks to Salutati's initiative, there were sufficient numbers of new Italian Hellenists to receive and articulate the next wave of Greek thought and letters that arrived in Florence from the Byzantine world.'[12] In addition, when the Council of Ferrera (1438-39) was moved midsession to Florence,[13] it brought with it two leading Byzantine delegates, Georgios Gemistos Plethon (ca. 1355-1472) and John Bessarion of Trebizond (1395-1472).[14] For the Florentine humanists Plethon represented the biblical "wise man from the East". It was through Plethon that the Florentine humanists first made contact with a man of the East who argued that true wisdom began with Zoroaster, and that Zoroaster was in fact the chief of the Magi.[15] The roots of this association, Hanegraaff notes, lie in 'a

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[10] Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Tradition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 35.
[11] Henry Chadwick, *East and West: The Making of a Rift in the Church: From Apostolic Times until the Council of Florence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 264.
[12] Goodrick-Clarke, *Traditions*, 35.
[13] On the council of Florence see; Deno J. Geanakoplos, "The Council of Florence (1438-9) and the Problem of Union between the Byzantine and Latin Churches" in *Church History* 24, (1955), 324-46. Joseph Gill, *The Council of Florence*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959). Chadwick, *East and West*, 264-273.
[14] For a discussion on Trebizond's stance against Plato, see; Hankins, *Italian Renaissance*, 165-192; 236-264. See also, Joseph Gill, *Personalities of the Council of Florence and other essays*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1964).
[15] For a full discussion see Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*, 30.

suggestive parallel [which] could be drawn between the visit of the Byzantine delegation to the head of Western Christianity, and the biblical story of the Magi who had come from the East to venerate the Christ child – thereby confirming the concordance of their ancient wisdom with the teachings of Christianity.'[16] The Magi and Zoroaster were also known to Renaissance humanists through Herodotus' *Histories* which was a popular Greek text of the time.[17] Perhaps the most important aspect of Plethon's contribution to humanism was his version of the *Chaldaean Oracles* and the commentaries he provided of them which highlighted the importance of their connection to the Magi of Herodotus.

The *Chaldean Oracles* are a collection of obscure, Greek hexameter verses which were claimed to have been handed down by the gods to Julian the Chaldean and/or his son, Julian the Theurgist, around the late second century A.D.[18] The version that Plethon composed contained sixty Greek hexameters,[19] and Woodhouse notes, 'some were only half-lines, and many were defective in prosody.'[20] Perhaps the most innovative aspect of Plethon's translation was his attribution of the *Oracles* to Zoroaster, instead of one or both of the two **Julians.** Woodhouse acknowledges 'there is no authentic ground for associating them with Zoroaster or the Persian Magi.'[21] Thus, for the first time in history

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[16] *Ibid*, 30. Cf. Matt. 2:1-12. In 1459, Cosimo de' Medici (1389-1464) commissioned Benozzo Gozzoli to paint a fresco titled *The Journey of the Magi*.
[17] Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457) was commissioned by Pope Nicholas V (1397-1455) to translate *the Histories* by Thucydides and Herodotus from Greek to Latin. Valla's translation was completed in 1455 and published posthumously and became the standard Latin version of the late 15th and 16th century. See; Adam Foley; "Valla's Herodotean Labours: Towards a New View of Herodotus in the Italian Renaissance" in Jessica Priestly and Vasili Zali (eds.), *The Reception of Herodotus from Antiquity and Beyond*, (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 213-231.
[18] Majercik, *Chaldean Oracles*, 1.
[19] The precise number of Oracles is difficult to determine due to the fragmentary nature of the sources across history. See*, ibid*, 2-3.
[20] C. M. Woodhouse, *Gemistos Plethon: The Last of the Hellenes*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 48.
[21] *Ibid*, 49.

the *Oracles* were attributed to Zoroaster. Woodhouse suggests that Plethon, described them thus 'in order to give the *Oracles* the prestige of antiquity combined with Oriental wisdom.'[22] Hanegraaff agrees that for Plethon, 'Zoroaster and the Magi were the depositors of the ancient, true and universal religion of Zoroaster' and that 'the "Chaldaeans" represented a later development that had corrupted the truth.'[23] It is unclear if Plethon understood the *Oracles* as coming from Zoroaster, or if this is how he wanted them to appear, as Hanegraaff points out: 'Plethon knew [the Oracles] from the collection preserved by Michael Psellus in the eleventh century, but eliminated six oracles from it and presented the results together with his commentary and a brief "explanation" under the new title: *Magical sayings of the Magi, Disciples of Zoroaster*.'[24] The theme of pristine revelation and a subsequent corruption of that message becomes an important focus for Ficino. It is claimed that Ficino first translated Plethon's *Oracles* into Latin,[25] and Ficino also followed Plethon's lead in associating the *Oracles* with the ancient wisdom of Zoroaster.[26]

The wealth and patronage of the Medici family played a significant role in obtaining ancient texts in Renaissance Florence. Cosimo de Medici was particularly supportive of the exploration of the ancient theology, as Goodrick-Clarke notes: 'Greek philosophy and learning were especially dear to Cosimo's heart. During the council of Florence, he frequently entertained Plethon and was

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[22] Woodhouse, *Plethon*, 49.
[23] Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*, 36.
[24] *Ibid*, 33
[25] Ficino's suspected translation is entitled *Magica (idest philosophica) dicta magorum ex Zoroastre*. An M.S. of the translation is held in Florence at the Biblioteca Laurentianae. Karl H. Dannenfeldt notes that, 'although the M.S. is not signed [A.M.] Bandini, for good reasons, assigns it to Ficino and the research of Bohdan Kieszkowski supports this.' See; Karl H. Dannenfeldt, "The Pseudo-Zoroastrian Oracles in the Renaissance," in *Studies in the Renaissance* 6, (1957), 7-30.
[26] For a full discussion on the issues of Zoroastrianism and literature, see; Albert De Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin literature*, (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

deeply impressed by his exposition of Platonist philosophy.'[27] It is likely that these meetings inspired Cosimo to found a Platonic Academy in Florence in 1462.[28] In that same year, Cosimo gave Ficino a manuscript of the complete works of Plato and a house in Florence which would become the centre of the new Academy with Ficino at the helm.[29] Although Hankins disputes this traditional account of the foundation of the Florentine School and denies that Cosimo had any connection to 'logical, scientific, and metaphysical issues,'[30] he concedes that 'Cosimo did, however, have a genuine interest in making books available to learned men and in sponsoring translations of "good literature", especially philosophical literature from the Greek.'[31] Either way, it was through Cosimo's patronage that Ficino was able to influence the Renaissance world through his translations.

Brian Copenhaver explains, 'in 1462 the young Marsilio Ficino had already begun his life's work of translating all of Plato into Latin when his patron, Cosimo de'Medici, interrupted this epochal task with something he found more momentous.'[32] The manuscript, which contained fourteen treatises, was the ***Corpus Hermeticum*** which Ficino finished translating from Greek into Latin in 1463 and which was eventually printed in 1471.[33] It was through Ficino's translation of the corpus that he became more aware of Hermes Trismegistus. Maurizio Campanelli suggests, 'in 1456 all of what Ficino knew on Hermes was

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[27] Goodrick-Clarke, *Traditions*, 35.
[28] See James Hankins, "Cosimo De' Medici and the 'Platonic Academy'," in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 53, (1990), 144-162.
[29] *Ibid*, 144.
[30] *Ibid*, 147.
[31] *Ibid*, 147.
[32] Copenhaver, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xlvii-xlviii.
[33] The first treatise of the Corpus is known as the *Pimander*. Ficino's translation of *Pimander* was the most influential version of the hermetic corpus until the nineteenth century. See, *ibid,* xlviii.

that he had been a pupil of Plato – "Explicit Hermes Trismegistus discipulus Platonis de natura divinitatis et deorum", as he wrote at the end of the ***Asclepius***.'[34] However, as a result of Ficino's translation Copenhaver argues that, 'Renaissance thinkers had made Hermes a contemporary of Moses' and held that Hermes was proof of a 'tradition of gentile theology concurrent with and confirming biblical revelation.'[35] Well over a century later, in 1614, the notion that the *Hermetica* was an ancient source of wisdom was challenged by Isaac Causabon who 'saw unmistakable linguistic proof of a much later date than the common tales of Egyptian origins could support.'[36] While Causabon's discovery would have implications for the *Hermetica's* standing in later centuries, for Ficino, there was no question of its ancient authority. It was through his translations of the Platonic corpus as well as Plethon's *Oracles* and the *Hermetica*; that Ficino began to construct his idea of the *prisca theologia* and through the *prisca theologia* his notions of the transmission of ancient wisdom.

1.2. Ficino's *Prisca Theologia* and the Development of Ancient Wisdom.

When the notion of divine truth demonstrated in the *prisca theologia* **is considered**, it becomes evident that many of the themes which connect the "ancient theologians and philosophers" to each other are found in narratives of spiritual ascent. Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann argues that the ideas found in the

[34] Maurizio Campanelli, "Marsilio Ficino's portrait of Hermes Trismegistus and its afterlife," in *Intellectual History Review* 29.1, (2019), 53-71, at 54. Asclepius is a Latin hermetic text written 100-300 C.E, also known as the *Perfect Discourse* (*Logos teleios*) in Greek. The 1576 Basel edition of Ficino's translation included the fourteen Greek hermetic texts, collectively known by Ficino as *Pimander*, and was followed by the Latin *Asclepius*. See Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, xl-xlv.
[35] Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, l.
[36] *Ibid*, l.

prisca theologia are a 'concordance of monotheistic theology and philosophy' and suggests that 'if western monotheism can be viewed as a spiritual theology, then the notion of a *prisca theologia* can be viewed as a philosophy of spirituality.'[37] Walker argues that the *prisca theologia* rests on a 'certain tradition of Christian apologetics which rests on misdated texts,' and two key 'misdated texts'[38] that feature prominently in the development of Ficino's *prisca theologia* are the *Chaldaean Oracles* and the ***Corpus Hermeticum*.** Ficino believed the writings, 'attributed to Zoroaster, Orpheus and Hermes, gave access to the most ancient and therefore authoritative sources of true religion and philosophy.'[39] Moreover, Ficino believed that his own work was an act of Divine Providence and that 'in translating these works he was acting as Gods mouthpiece.'[40] Moshe Idel points out that Ficino's contribution to the development of a Renaissance *prisca theologia* was decisive since, 'much of what happened after his translations and commentaries was reiteration of his ideas about chains of transmission of the ancient lore.'[41] These chains of transmission can be seen in the preface to Ficino's *Corpus Hermeticum*, which contains a clear example of his *prisca theologia*:

> Mercurius Trismegistus was the first philosopher to raise himself above physics and mathematics to the contemplation of the divine … Therefore, he was considered the original founder of theology. Orpheus followed him and held second place in ancient theology. Aglaophemus was initiated into Orphic mysteries. Aglaophemus'

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[37] Wilhem Schmidt-Biggemann, "Outlines of Philosophia Perennis" in *Intellectual News* 2.1, (1997), 60-66, at 61.
[38] Walker, *Ancient Theology*, 1.
[39] Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*, 52.
[40] *Ibid*, 52.
[41] Moshe Idel, "Prisca Theologia in Marsilio Ficino and Some Jewish Treatments", in Michael J.B. Allen & Valery Rees (eds.), *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy,* (Leiden: Brill, 2002),137-159, at 138.

> successor in theology was Pythagoras, and his pupil was **Philolaus,** the master of our divine Plato. So six theologians, in wonderful order, formed a unique and coherent succession in ancient theology, beginning with Mercurius and ending with the divine Plato.[42]

The chains of transmission were not intended by Ficino to be understood as direct transmission, but examples of ancient theologians and philosophers who had received some sort of revelation from God, even if that message was veiled. For Ficino that meant, as Hankins suggests:

> before Christ, God had given laws and mysteries only to a few inspired minds, such as Moses and the prophets among the Jews, and Plato and the other ancient theologians among the Gentiles. These laws and mysteries had been written down, often in a poetic or gnomic fashion, and were generally too sublime to be fully understood – even, sometimes by the *prisci theologi* themselves.[43]

The coming of Christ had revealed these great mysteries. The importance for Ficino of thinkers such as Plato, Hermes, Moses, Orpheus and even Zoroaster, Hanegraaff notes, therefore 'resided in their status as inspired mouthpieces of the ancient, timeless and universal wisdom whose ultimate author was God.'[44] Consequently, for Ficino, historical and chronological lines of transmission begin to lose their significance, for as Hanegraaff posits, 'if the divine truth revealed to the ancients had been absolute and immutable, and all of them had been in perfect accord about it, this rendered the "search for origin" a somewhat futile

[42] As translated in Walker, *Ancient Theology*, 25-26.
[43] Hankins, *Italian Renaissance*, 283.
[44] Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*, 43.

exercise.'[45] One aspect which all of Ficino's *prisci theologi* consider in their writings is discussions and practices of spiritual ascent.

Plato holds a place of central importance for Ficino. Hankins argues, 'for Ficino, Platonism, instead of being the nemesis of Christendom, is part of God's providential design for the human race, a philosophical perennis, springing intertwined with Christianity from the same religious soil of religious experience; each of them lends support to the other in their growth towards perfection and truth.'[46] Ficino saw Plato as divinely inspired and the pinnacle of ancient wisdom. Hanegraaff suggests, '***Sapientia,*** wisdom, was the most convenient term for an intellectual ideal that was supposed to include *and* transcend theology as well as philosophy.'[47] This correlates with Hankins' argument that for Ficino:

> the best pagan minds had been far above polytheistic superstitions and adhered to an esoteric philosophico-religious wisdom which they concealed from the uninitiated to avoid persecution and vulgarization of thought. It had secretly prepared the pagans for Christianity as the Jews had been prepared by the wisdom of Moses.[48]

To Ficino, Plato appeared to be the most divine of those pagan minds. In 1483/4,[49] in a letter to Giovanni Niccolini, Archbishop of Amalfi, he wrote of

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[45] *Ibid*, 50.
[46] Hankins, *Italian Renaissance*, 285.
[47] Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*, 12.
[48] Hankins, *Italian Renaissance*, 282.
[49] It is unclear in the letters the exact date of this letter. However, it is suggested that the letter was sent with the purpose that Niccolini might speak favourably to the Pope regarding the publication of Ficino's *Platonic Theology*. See, Ficino, *Letters* 6, 80, n.1.

Numenius the Pythagorean,[50] whom 'Origen puts above all other Pythagoreans'[51] and claimed that **Numenius,** having read the books of Moses and Plato had 'decided that Plato was a second Moses speaking in the Greek tongue.'[52] Similarly in a letter to Peregrino **Agli** in 1457, Ficino described Plato as, 'the divine philosopher' who taught that the perfect knowledge and bliss of God are achieved 'through two virtues, one relating to moral conduct, and the other to contemplation; one he [Plato] names with a common term "justice", and the other "wisdom".'[53] It is apparent then that Ficino not only held Plato to be the most divine of the pagan thinkers, but he also saw him as teaching that the act of contemplation is linked to wisdom.

It is well known that Ficino read Plato through the lens of Neoplatonism. Anthony Levi points out that 'in his Christianizing of Plato Ficino partly relied on the Plotinian interpretation of Plato in Augustine, and partly on the Neo-Platonist elements derived from elsewhere, strengthening the result by assertions of the Mosaic and therefore revealed origins of Plato's Doctrine.'[54] The importance of the Neoplatonists for Ficino's conception of Plato reflects Ficino's belief that classical Neoplatonists such as 'Plotinus, **Numenius**, Iamblichus, Amelius[55] as well as theologians in the Christian tradition such as St Paul, St John, and (Pseudo-) Dionysius the **Areopagite** had been influenced by

[50] Numenius of Apamea was a second century CE Neopythagorean. Fragments of his works are preserved by Origen and Eusebius.
[51] See Origen, *Contra Celsus*, Henry Chadwick (trans), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), IV.51.
[52] Ficino, *Letters* 6, 35.
[53] Ficino, *Letters* 1, 43.
[54] Anthony Levi, "Ficino, Augustine and the Pagans" in Allen & Rees (eds), *Marsilio Ficino*, 99-113, at 99
[55] Neoplatonist philosopher and writer in the second half of the third century. Cited by Eusebius as having agreed with the definition of the logos in the Gospel of John. See; Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica*, Edwin H. Gifford (trans), (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982), xi. 19.

Christian theology.'[56] Indeed, Ficino wrote, 'I love Plato in Iamblichus, I admire him in Plotinus, but I venerate him in Dionysius.'[57] In Ficino's understanding, therefore, as Hankins explains, 'the Neoplatonist philosophers, Ficino's *platonici*, were able to use the best Christian interpreters, especially Dionysius the Areopagite ("Platonicae disciplinae **culmen,** et Christianae theologiae columen") to interpret their own gentile theologians, especially Plato.'[58] For Ficino these interpretations represented a codification of the divine message.[59] Ficino's belief that the Neoplatonists had been inspired by the work of Christian writers offers evidence of how Ficino's ideas were based on misdated texts; he attributes the works of Pseudo-Dionysius to Paul's contemporary, mentioned in Acts 17:34. As Allen notes, 'it was Ficino who set [the] greatest store by the putative first century dating, since it provided him with the justification for his radically Platonic account of the history of philosophy and its intersection with Christian revelation.'[60] It was through this process, as Jörg Lauster argues, that Ficino, 'tried to abolish the separation between religion and philosophy with his programme of ***docta religio*** and *prisca theologia*.'[61] This thesis argues that what Ficino was trying to demonstrate is that true philosophical wisdom is, and can only be achieved, through a process of spiritual ascent, divinely ordained by God and can be traced across history through ancient religion. This relates to

[56] For Ficino's understanding of the classical Neoplatonists, see Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico*, 270. For the Christian theologians see, Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*, 50.
[57] 'Amo eqidem Platonem in Iamblicho, **admiror** in Plotino, in Dionysio veneror.' Cited and translated in Michael. J. B. Allen, *Synoptic Art: Marsilio Ficino on the History of Interpretation*, (Florence: Casa Editrice, 1998), 67.
[58] Hankins, *Italian Renaissance*, 283.
[59] A full discussion of the significance of Pseudo-Dionysius will be explored in chapter three.
[60] Michael J. B. Allen, "Introduction," in Marsilio Ficino, *On Dionysius the Areopagite*, Allen (ed.), (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 2015), vii-xxxix, at xiv.
[61] Jörg Lauster, "Marsilio Ficino as a Christian Thinker: Theological Aspects of His Platonism," in Allen and Rees (eds.), *Marsilio Ficino*, 45-70, at 45.

Ficino's understanding of history described by Hankins in terms of periods of "inspiration" followed by periods of "interpretation".[62]

The first period of metaphysical truth given to human beings is evidenced through the prophets of the Old Testament for the Hebrews and found in the gentiles through the *prisca theologia*. This period of inspiration ended with Plato and true wisdom ended with the first "catastrophic decline" due to a 'multiplicity of human opinion' in the Platonic academy.[63] The coming of Christianity marked the second period of inspiration.[64] Hankins suggests that for Ficino, 'in Christ was revealed the fullness of divine mysteries' and 'with the coming of Christ his disciples and followers were able to make sense of the law and the prophets.'[65] The true wisdom had once again been revealed, not just through Christ, but also through John the Evangelist, Paul and Pseudo-Dionysius. However, a second unknown "catastrophic" event occurred, as Hankins explains: 'owing to a mysterious "calamity in the Church", religious wisdom had again been "hidden away".'[66] According to Ficino, this wisdom had been recovered, 'not by Christians, but by the *platonici* who read Paul, John, Hierotheus and Dionysius. It was through the *platonici* that the great Christian theologians of the patristic period, especially Origen and Augustine, had been able to bring back the salutary tradition of religious wisdom.'[67] The medieval period that followed saw a return to the veiling of religious wisdom, due in part to the influence of Aristotle on Scholasticism.[68] However, Ficino believed it was 'now

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[62] **See Hankins, *Italian Renaissance* 1, 284-286. Cf. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*, 50-53.**
[63] See Hankins, *Italian Renaissance* 1, 283.
[64] *Ibid*, 283.
[65] *Ibid*, 283.
[66] *Ibid*, 284.
[67] *Ibid*, 284. Cf. Ficino, *De Christiana Religione*, XXII.
[68] Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico*, 272.

being brought back to life once more, by Divine Providence' through his own work.[69] Inspired by the works and *prisca theologia* of Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola would forge his own path in Renaissance thought developing the syncretic Christian Cabala.

1.3. Pico and the Idea of Christian Cabala.

An investigation of Pico's personal library by Pearl Kibre shows that Pico owned several of Ficino's works. These included Ficino's Latin translation of Plotinus, which, as Kibre notes, Pico viewed as 'Ficino's masterpiece,'[70] as well as Ficino's tracts *On the Christian Religion* ***[De religione Christiana]***; *On Music*; and the *De Vita Sana*.[71] While Pico was inspired by the works of Ficino, whom he travelled to Florence to meet in 1484, his contribution to renaissance thought is often held to have been more original than that of Ficino's. Kristeller suggests that 'Ficino holds his ground in any comparison with other philosophers from the standpoint of "independence"; on the point of "originality" he is certainly inferior to his contemporary Pico, who makes frequent boast of being "original", especially during his earlier years.'[72] Hankins argues that 'Ficino is the magician of the natural world, content with facilitating health and well-being; Pico is the

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[69] Hankins, *Italian Renaissance* 1, 284. Cf. Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico*, 271-273.
[70] Pearl Kibre, *The Library of Pico della Mirandola*, (New York, AMS Press, 1965), 56
[71] *On the Christian Religion* is Ficino's most theological work. Music plays an important role in Ficino's work and is linked to the notion of the spirit, developed in the Doctrine of the Four Frenzies. D. P. Walker suggests for Ficino this rests on two principles. 'The first is the ancient and persistent theory, deriving from Plato's *Timaeus* or the Pythagoreans before him, that both the universe and man, the microcosm and macrocosm, are constructed on the same harmonic proportions; that there is a music of the spheres, *musica mundana*, of man's body, spirit and soul, *musica humana*, of voices and instruments, *musica instrumentalis*.' D.P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, (1958, reprint; Trupp, Sutton Publishing Limited, 2000), 14. The *De Vita Sana*, (On a Healthy Life), is the first book of *Liber De Vita in Tres Libros Divisus*, (A Book on Life divided into Three Books). It focuses on ways in which those who devote themselves to literary studies can care for their health.
[72] Kristeller, *Philosophy*, 5.

magician of the intelligible world, aiming to exploit angelic forces to attain unlimited power for the human race.'[73] While Ficino's influence can be found in the works of Pico, the traditional concept of Pico as the dedicated disciple of Ficino has become increasingly untenable due to advances in scholarship. Yates argued that Pico simply added Kabbalah to Ficino's ideas of astrologically based natural magic, concluding, 'Pico's natural magic is therefore, it would seem, probably the same as Ficino's magic, using natural sympathies but also magical images and signs, though on the understanding that this is to attract natural power, not demonic power.'[74] However, more recent scholarship has shown that Pico had a complete **disdain** for astrology and his relationship with Ficino was not the idyllic master/disciple relationship as first suspected.[75] Michael Allen observes, 'Pico was never a committed, let alone a doctrinaire, Neoplatonist, but a careful eclectic, an antiastrological syncretist, and a theorist of the "perennial" philosophy of "natural" religion.'[76] Pico owed much to medieval scholasticism and Aristotelian concepts and terminology, so much so that Ficino recognised Pico as an authentic Aristotelian of the time.[77] Yates' theory no longer holds weight; however, the similarities Yates saw between Hermeticism

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[73] James Hankins, "Ficino, Avicenna, and the Occult Powers of the Rational Soul" in Fabrizio Meroi and Elisabetta Scapparone (eds.), *Tra antica Sapienza e filosofia naturale: La Magia neu 'Europa Moderna*, (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2007), 35-52, at 36-37.
[74] Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, (1964, reprint; London: Routledge, 2002), 96.
[75] Due to Pico's early death, his unfinished *Disputations Against Divinatory Astrology* was found by his nephew Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola. It was published posthumously in 1496 and contains a destructive sceptical attack on the foundations of astrology. See; H. Darrel Rutkin, "Mysteries of Attraction: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, astrology, and desire," in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 41.2, (2010), 117-124.
[76] Michael J. B. Allen, "The Second Ficino-Pico controversy: Parmenidean poetry, eristic and the One" in *Plato's Third Eye: Studies in Marsilio Ficino's Metaphysics and its Sources*, (Hampshire: Variorum, 1995), 417-455.
[77] *Ibid*, 418. See, also a letter written to Pico from Ficino in December 1482 commending Pico on his study of Aristotle and urging him to pursue the further study of Plato. Ficino, "Qua in re praecipue disciplina platonica peripateticam superat", *Letters* 6, 45.

and astrology may gain some traction when re-examined through the lens of ancient wisdom and ideas of spiritual ascent.

Pico is credited with developing the idea of a Christian Cabala. Educated in his youth in the classical tradition, he attended the Universities of Padua and Paris to continue his studies where he became acquainted with many of the leading humanists of his time.[78] During his stay in Padua from 1480 to 1482, Pico became acquainted with the Jewish Scholar Elijah del Medigo (c. 1460-93). Their intellectual connection was forged through Medigo's Latin translations of the Islamic philosopher Averroes (1126-1198).[79] B. C. Novack suggests that Pico became interested in Jewish topics in December 1486, and that Del Medigo had procured a copy of the *Commentary on the Torah* by Menahem Recanati (1223-1290) for Pico to study.[80] Recanati's text would become one of the key sources of Pico's Kabbalistic thought.[81] The second of Pico's Hebrew teachers was Flavius Mithridates, a Jewish Christian convert who in 1486 aided Pico with his language studies in Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic ('Chaldaean', according to Novack),[82] as well as providing Pico with translations of several Jewish philosophical and **Cabalistic** treatises.[83] Pico's third Jewish influence was

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[78] Brian P. Copenhaver, "The Secret of Pico's Oration: Cabala and Renaissance Philosophy," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 26.1, (2002), 56-81.
[79] Still regarded as the most reliable biography of Pico's life is Eugenio Garin, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Vita e dottrine*, (Firenze: F. Le Monnier, 1937).
[80] Averroes was an Andalusian Aristotelian commentator who opposed the Neoplatonist views of Muslim thinkers, in particular Avicenna.
[81] In a letter send from Del Medigo to Pico in the December of that year he lists major Kabbalists works including the Zohar, the sefer Yezirah, Joseph Gikatilla's Gates of Light and Menahem Recanati's Commentary on the Torah. B. C. Novak, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Jochanan Alemanno" in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 45, (1982), 125-147, at 128.
[82] Novack, *Pico and Alemanno*, 129.
[83] These include; Gersonides's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Maimonides's *Treatise on the Resurrection of the Dead*, Eliezer of Worms's, *the Scientia Animae*, and Abraham *Abulafia's Commentary on Maimonides Guide of the Perplexed*. *Ibid*, 130. The accuracy of the translations given to Pico by Mithridates has been a source of scholarly discussion. For an example see, Michela Andreatta, "Subverting Patronage in Translation: Flavius Mithridates, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and Gersonides' Commentary on the Song of Songs" in Esperanza Alfonso and

Jochanan Alemanno (c. 1435-1504), a follower of Abraham Abulafia (1240-c. 1291), whom he met in Florence 1488.[84] As has already been seen, Ficino based his ideas around ancient wisdom on misdated texts and Pico would do the same with his understanding of the Kabbalah.

Pico was intrigued by the Jewish system of Kabbalah, which literally translates to mean 'tradition'. Gershom Scholem is careful to point out the 'Kabbalah … is not the name of a certain dogma or system, but rather the general term applied to a whole religious movement.'[85] Scholem goes on to suggest that 'Kabbalists are largely concerned with the investigation of a sphere of religious reality which lies quite outside the orbit of medieval Jewish philosophy, their purpose is to discover a new stratum of the religious consciousness.'[86] Scholarship has shown that Kabbalah was developed by Jewish thinkers in thirteenth century Spain, and the Zohar is considered to be the central text of the movement.[87] However, for Pico and other Christian cabalists, Kabbalah was an ancient wisdom. Wirszubski explains, for the Christian cabalists kabbalah was 'ancient, pre-Christian and divinely inspired [and] consequently, the agreement between Kabbala and John or Paul might imply not only that Kabbala confirms or foreshadows Christianity but also that the apostles were

Jonathan Decter (eds), *Patronage, Production, and Transmission of Texts in Medieval and Early Modern Jewish Cultures*, (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2014), 165-198.

[84] On Alemanno's connection and influence on Pico see Novak, *Pico and Alemanno*, 131-147. On the influences on Alemanno see; Moshe Idel, "The Anthopology of Yohanan Alemanno: Sources and Influences," in *Topoi* 7, (1988), 201-210.

[85] Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1946), 18.

[86] *Ibid*, 24.

[87] See*, ibid*, 119-243; **Gershom Scholem**, ***Origins of the Kabbalah***, (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1987).

familiar with the kabbala.'[88] Thus, Pico incorporates his understanding of the kabbalah as an ancient tradition into his *prisca theologia*.

Like Ficino, Pico was a proponent of the *prisca theologia*. However, Pico expands on Ficino's genealogy, suggesting:

> That divine philosophy of Pythagoras, which they call magic, belongs to a great extent to the Mosaic tradition; since Pythagoras had managed to reach the Jews and their doctrine in Egypt, and knowledge of many of their sacred mysteries … Zoroaster, the son of Oromasius, in practicing magic, took that to be the cult of God and the study of Divinity; while engaged in study in Persia he most successfully investigated every virtue and power of nature, in order to know those sacred and sublime secrets of the divine intellect; which subject many people called theurgy, others Cabala or magic.[89]

Not only does Pico here link transmission from the Mosaic tradition, through Pythagoras and to Zoroaster, but he also suggests that the sacred knowledge that is being transmitted can be called theurgy. Here Pico aligns theurgy to the practice of Cabala, found in the Jewish tradition, and the magic of the Persian Magi. However, it seems that Pico is suggesting that Pythagoras is directly linked to the Jewish tradition, where Zoroaster is not.[90] According to Wirszubski Pico's model of transmission was gleaned from the Mishna which claims: 'Oral law was revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai, and then handed on in an unbroken succession from Moses to Joshua, and from Joshua to the Elders, and from the Elders to the

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[88] Wirszubski, *Encounters*, 109.
[89] Walker, *Ancient Theology*, 23.
[90]For a full discussion on *prisca theologia* theories of transmission see; Idel, *Prisca Theologia in Ficino*, 137- 159; "Prisca Theologia" in *Kabbalah in Italy, 1280-1510: A Survey*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 165-177.

Judges, and from the Judges to the prophets, and from the prophets to the men of the great Assembly.'[91] Just as Ficino based his *prisca theologia* on the transmission of ancient wisdom which foretold the coming of Christianity through ancient Greek texts, Pico and other Christian cabalists held that the **Hebrews** were divinely given a similar revelation that was only fully realised in the coming of Christianity, thus the Cabalists have a "specific manifestation" of the *prisca theologia* as noted by Hanegraaff. Where Pico differs from Ficino is that his genealogy expressly links the transmission of ancient wisdom to the practice of theurgy, a practice of spiritual ascent. Therefore, while Ficino and Pico take different approaches to the genealogical transmission of their ancient wisdom, both men appear to be drawing from the notion that this wisdom is achieved through a process of spiritual ascent which is divinely given. Both **strands** of ancient wisdom are then fully realised in the advent of Christianity and as such, in the eyes of Ficino and Pico at least, are completely orthodox with the Christian message. The means by which humankind can access this knowledge relates directly to how thinkers in the Renaissance viewed the position of humans within the cosmos.

1.4. The Micro/macrocosm.

The microcosm and macrocosm refer to the cosmological idea that a part (the microcosm) reflects the whole (the macrocosm) and vice versa. The relationship between micro/macrocosm is linked to the notion of correspondences or the 'principle of universal interdependence'. Faivre notes, 'the entire universe is a huge theatre of mirrors, an ensemble of hieroglyphs to

[91] Mishna, 'Abot, il, as printed in Wirszubski, *Encounters*, 123.

be decoded. Everything is a sign; everything conceals and exudes mystery; every object hides a secret.'[92] In Renaissance thought, the understanding of the human being as the microcosm was a central feature, one that was intrinsic to both Ficino and Pico's work. Similar to other ideas important in Renaissance thought, the micro/macrocosm theory was based in ancient texts. It is believed that Pythagoras first discussed humanity as the microcosm, arguing that humans contain all the powers of the cosmos: 'For the universe contains the gods, the four elements and plants. All of these powers are contained in man. He has reason, which is divine power; he has the nature of the elements, and the power of moving, growing, and reproduction.'[93] However, while the human being contains all these elements, all of these powers are slightly inferior since 'we have less reasoning than the gods, and less of the elements than the elements themselves. Our anger and desire are inferior to those passions in the irrational animals, while our powers of nutrition and growth are inferior to those in plants.'[94] Thus, humans exist in a unique position in the universe of being.

This idea was further discussed by Plato, who saw a close correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm which is often referred to as "organicism".[95] Plato's ideas about organicism are found primarily in the *Timaeus*. In agreement with Pythagoras, Plato argues that, while humans are unique and a reflection of the macrocosm, there is a hierarchy or chain of being. According to Plato, once the supreme being had created the universe and the

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[92] Faivre, *Access*, 10
[93] Anon, *Life of Pythagoras*, Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie (trans.), in Algis Uždavinys, *The Golden Chain: An Anthology of Pythagorean and Platonic Philosophy*, (Bloomington: World Wisdom Inc., 1994), at 4-5.
[94] *Ibid,* 5
[95] **See Richard McDonough, "Plato: Organicism" in *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. www.iep.utm.edu. Accessed 10/11/2019.**

world soul, mankind was next, 'the only difference being that they were no longer as unfailingly pure as before, but were a grade or two lower in the scale of purity.'[96] Thus, the cosmological and metaphysical notions of Sameness and Difference were found in the human and world soul. For Plato and his followers, the goal of philosophy was to transcend the sensible world through contemplation to entire the realm of the divine.[97] The notion of man as the microcosm was propagated by the Neoplatonists, in particular Plotinus,[98] and can also be found in the early church Fathers such as Origen. The great chain of being was continued by scholastic theologians such as Thomas Aquinas in which the hierarchy of being was seen as a God-given and unchanging.'[99] Therefore, given humankind's unique position questions surrounding human rationality and how it might aspire to divine inspiration began to arise. For thinkers such as Ficino and Pico the idea that humankind stood in a unique position of the chain of being would become central to their ideas of spiritual ascent.

1.5. Human rationality versus Divine Inspiration.

A feature of the humanist approach to religion was to demand a separation between the human and the divine.[100] Edelheit posits, 'humanists like Ficino and Pico – the first in his practice, the second more explicitly and methodically – attempted to redraw the line between dogmas which had full

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[96] Plato, *Timaeus and Critias,* Robin Waterfield (trans), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 41d.
[97] Cf. Plato, *Timaeus*, 73e; *Philebus*, Robin Waterfield (trans), (London: Penguin, 1982); 29a. Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus of Plato*, Thomas Taylor (trans), (London: A.J. Walpy, 1820), I.1.1 – 1.8.
[98] Plotinus, *Enneads*, Stephen MacKenna (trans), (London: Penguin, 1991), 3.4.3.
[99] See Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1936). Olivia Blanchette, "Aquinas' Conception of the Great Chain of Being: A More Considered Reply to Lovejoy" in Kent Emery, Russell Friedman and Andreas Speer (eds.) *Philosophy and Theology in the Long Middle Ages*, (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 155-187.
[100] Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico*, 35.

divine sanction and later opinions, which were disputable and subject to criticism and rejection.'[101] However, as John F. D'Amico explains, 'humanist writers on theology had to contend with the hostility of some professional theologians in Rome. This opposition reinforced the desire of some humanists to emphasize the agreement between their new formulations and established teachings.'[102] Both Ficino and Pico had to write *apologias* for works which displeased the Church,[103] in which they **argue** that Christianity was the culmination of all ancient revelation, made flesh in Christ. Another way the humanists sought to root their orthodox tradition was through their appeal to the teaching of the patristics. Edelheit suggests that the humanists employed their 'historical and philosophical methods in order to reach back to what they regarded as a purer form of Christianity, as it was before the more recent centuries transformed it into a series of empty ceremonies and a collection of Scholastic opinions.'[104] The works of the Church Fathers, Origen in particular, became central to the theological thinking of both Ficino and Pico as they sought to redraw the line between divine revelation and **human opinion**.

In understanding the world in which Ficino and Pico were writing, we are better placed to assess the sources with which they were engaging. **The intellectual milieu of the Italian Renaissance not only introduced new texts from the ancients but also viewed humankind as placed in a unique position in the cosmos in which they could ascend towards the divine or descend**

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[101] *Ibid*, 35.
[102] John F. D'Amico, *Renaissance Humanism in Papal Rome*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1983), 144.
[103] Ficino wrote his *apologia* in response to the third book in his *De Triplici Vita*. Pico's *apologia* was written in response to the condemning of several of his nine hundred theses before the work was banned in its entirety.
[104] Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico*, 25.

towards the body. Although the church was in a period of crisis, particularly in Florence, this crisis allowed for the flow of humanist ideas and a questioning of the medieval scholastic tradition.[105] Ficino and Pico would base their work on misdated texts, but this perceived early dating allowed for the development of the *prisca theologia*. In a world in which correspondences were seen as part of God's design, the idea of an ancient wisdom and religion could flourish. For Ficino, the most compelling evidence of this ancient wisdom was found in the ascent narratives of the Platonic, Hermetic, and Chaldaic texts to which we now turn.

[105] **On the Florentine crisis and the development of the humanist theology see Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico*, passim.**

Chapter Two

Ideas of Spiritual Ascent in Antiquity.

Ficino's conception of an ancient wisdom and religion is based on his work translating and commenting, in part, on the works of Plato, the Neoplatonists and *Hermetica*, as well as his reading of Plethon's *Chaldaean Oracles*. The theory of correspondences provides a useful account of the way in which Ficino may have drawn his conclusions. By expanding on Fanger's three tenets of theurgy to the seven proposed in the introduction, a more nuanced interconnectivity may be observed. As outlined in the introduction, part of the problem with defining theurgy lies in its relationship between what is "religious" and what is described as "magic". Traditional views on the dichotomy between religion and magic assumes that 'religion and magic stand in binary opposition: religion petitions while magic coerces.'[1] Seeking to polarise religion against magic tends to ignore the complexity of religious ritual and removes the significance of the role faith plays when participating in these acts. This thesis suggests that theurgy straddles both religion and magic, and due to this fact, the definition of theurgy itself has proven elusive. However, in the later Greek world, theurgy was intrinsically linked to the religious aspect of philosophy. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the relationship between some of the ancient texts Ficino was using and draw out their common features in ideas of spiritual ascent and theurgy. The findings will then be compared to the

[1] Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, 2nd Edition, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), x.

Christian reception of these ideas of spiritual ascent and theurgy in the next chapter.

The late Neoplatonist Damascius (c. 458- c.538 CE) wrote:

> Some give place of pride to philosophy, as do Porphyry and Plotinus and many other philosophers, some to the hieratic arts,[2] as do Iamblichus and Syrianus and Proclus and all the adepts of the hieratic art.[3]

Damascius highlights the divide found amongst Neoplatonists in late antiquity suggesting that Porphyry, Plotinus and others believed that traditional concepts of philosophising (logic, ethics, physics) were deemed the highest form of philosophical life, whereas, Iamblichus, Syrianus, and Proclus believed that beyond the traditional conception of philosophising, the goal should be one of transcendence. Uždavinys suggests, 'Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy was not simply a discourse about gods and the world, but an anagogic path leading the soul to a concrete union with the divine Intellect and the ineffable One.'[4] This practice was known as the hieratic technique and was linked directly to theurgic practice.[5] The act of transcendence is one of the foundations of theurgic practice and therefore the hieratic technique can be viewed as the method which a theurgist employs to achieve their final goal of unification with the One.

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[2] ἱερατικά. Literal translation, "priestly".
[3] Damascius, in Phd. I 172.1 – 3. As translated in Uždavinys, *Philosophy & Theurgy*, 23.
[4] Uždavinys, *The Golden Chain*, xiii.
[5] The Hieratic technique, 'sacred art, hieratic art, namely the priestly art, theurgy, accomplished by the gods themselves through different degrees of initiation, transformation, elevation (anagoge) and ineffable mystagogy; it represents the ascending path to unification with the One through scientific training regarding certain henadic qualities, ontological symbols, sacred rites, divine names and theurgic powers.' *Idem*, *Philosophy and Theurgy*, 291.

Central to theurgy in late antiquity is the religious dimension of philosophical thought which developed in the Neoplatonic School. Robert M. van den Berg posits, 'all Neoplatonism is religious. Neoplatonic metaphysics refers to the various levels of reality that it distinguishes as "divine" and "god(s)".'[6] However, the contemplative dynamic of Platonist philosophy did not originate with the Neoplatonists. Neoplatonists such as Iamblichus and Proclus set out to re-connect with what they believed was the true message of the ancient philosophers, specifically Pythagoras and Plato. Uždavinys posits, 'the task of the ancient philosophers was in fact to contemplate the cosmic order and its beauty; to live in harmony with it and to transcend the limitations imposed by sense experience and discursive reasoning.'[7] This is because there is a difference between what we have come to know in the modern world as philosophical discourse and a philosophical way of life. Uždavinys argues, 'it is necessary to emphasize that this way is in fact the way of spiritual purification and actualization of the divine in the human, leading the soul to a living, concrete union with the divine Intellect and the Good, or the Neoplatonic One, which is *epekeina tes ousias*, beyond being and intellect.'[8] Plato writes, 'to escape is to become like God, so far as this is possible; and to become like God is to become righteous and holy and wise'.[9] Thus, in order to understand what

[6] Robert M. van den Berg, "Theurgy in the Context of Proclus' Philosophy" in Pieter d'Hoine and Marije Martjin (eds.), *All For One: A Guide to Proclus*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 224-240, at 224.
[7] Uždavinys, *Golden Chain*, xi.
[8] *Idem*, *Philosophy and Theurgy*, 11.
[9] Plato, *Theaetetus*, Robin Waterfield (trans), (London: Penguin, 1987), 176b. Plato's discussion of escape may be a reference to his Allegory of the Cave found in *Republic,* Desmond Lee (trans), (London: Penguin, 2007),514a-520a.

Iamblichus and Proclus were trying to achieve, we must also look at Pythagorean and Platonic philosophy.

Pythagoras (born c. 570 B.C.E) is described by Uždavinys as 'a spiritual guide who reinterpreted and synthesized all available religious and philosophic knowledge (including the mysteries of Egypt and the science of Babylonia, inherited from Sumer) was crucial to the rise of the Hellenic intellectual tradition and the establishment of the so-called esoteric 'house of mysteries.'[10] Numenius highlights the significance of Pythagoras on Platonic thought. He writes:

> On this point [i.e. the problem of God], after having cited and taken notice of Plato's testimonies, one should go further back and connect them to the teachings of Pythagoras, calling next upon the peoples of high renown so as to include their initiations, dogmas and cultural foundations, which they accomplish in full accord with Plato, in short, to all on which the Brahmans, the Jews, the Magi and the Egyptians were in agreement.[11]

The influence of Numenius' chain of ancient philosophers on the development of Ficino's *prisca theologia* is clear.[12] Therefore, the development of Pythagorean and Platonic conceptions of spiritual ascent is significant in understanding the Neoplatonic notions of theurgy. Central to ideas of ascent is an understanding of the theory of the soul, which has already been show as the important feature of

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[10] Uždavinys, *Golden Chain*, 1

[11] Numenius, Περί Ταγαθου, Bk. I, frag. I a (des Places ed., 42). Reproduced in Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*, 14.

[12] **On Ficino and Numenius see Michael J. B. Allen 'Marsilio Ficino on Plato, the Neoplatonists and the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 37:4 (1984): 555-584, at 557-8.**

humanity's unique place as the microcosm and our position in the hierarchy of being.

The first tenet of theurgy suggests humanity is inherently flawed through the notion that matter is corruptible. **For Plato the Forms or Ideas** are immaterial and unchanging constants, 'they constituted the only true objects of divine knowledge.'[13] They are 'noetic paradigms, archetypes, and universals arranged in a hierarchy.'[14] This is also described as the world of Being. By contrast, **material things are** ever changing and viewed as imperfect imitations of the Forms. The world of matter is therefore described as the world of Becoming. Because of this fact, humans can be seen as an imitation of the divine form, a less perfect example. Uždavinys explains, 'the divine Demiurge,[15] models the world of Becoming on the world of Being.'[16] This notion has links to the theory of the Soul.

Edward P. Bulter contends that 'the practice of "theurgy" or "telestic" (from teleô, to make perfect, i.e., to consecrate), that is, ritual work directed towards the gods, is grounded in the fundamental nature of the soul, which is related at once to the order of forms and to the order of the "henads" or Gods (from to hen, the One).'[17] Plato discusses the soul in the myth of Phaedrus and

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[13] Uždavinys, *Golden Chain*, 66.
[14] *Ibid*, 66.
[15] In Platonism, the Demiurge is portrayed as a craftsman god which is different from the gods found in the traditional Greek myth. 'It is significant, relative to previous Greek mythology, that Plato's demiurge wishes everything to be in the best possible state of order and has no jealously.' Andrew Gregory, "introduction" in Plato, *Timaeus and Critas*, ix – lvii, at xxxii.
[16] Uždavinys, *Golden Chain*, 67.
[17] Edward P. Butler, "Offering to the Gods: A Neoplatonic Perspective" in *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 2.1, (2007), 1-20, at 4-5.

compares it to a 'pair of winged horses and a charioteer.'[18] According to Plato, the horses and the charioteer that belong to the gods are 'all good and of good descent.'[19] Yet the horses and charioteers of humans are divided, one of the horses is noble and pure while the other is 'quite the opposite breed and character.'[20] The myth of Phaedrus demonstrates the flawed nature of humanity and explains the significance of a return to the divine. This notion of a divided soul remains an important discussion throughout the Greek schools of philosophical thought. However, for the purpose of this thesis, focus will be placed on the ideas discussed by two prominent **Neoplatonists**; Iamblichus (c. 245-c.325 CE), and Proclus (c. 410 – 85 CE) given **that they** are the two figures commonly associated with ascent narratives of late antiquity in Renaissance thought.

For Iamblichus and Proclus, 'the most important function of theurgy was to free the human soul from this physical existence and elevate it to the divine.'[21] Drawing from Plato's Myth of Phaedrus, there are two further notions which are linked to the soul. The first is the controversy around the Doctrine of the undescended soul. Plotinus argues that the human soul does not fully descend from the divine intellect and that some part of the soul remains undescended. Plotinus writes, 'even our human Soul has not sunk entire; something of it is continuously in the Intellectual realm.'[22] For Plotinus, because part of our soul remains in the intellectual realm, an ascent is possible through the practice of philosophy. Both Iamblichus and Proclus reject Plotinus'

[18] Plato, *Phaedrus*, Harold N. Fowler (trans), (London: William Heinemaan Ltd., 1925), 245e.
[19] *Ibid*, 246a-246b.
[20] *Ibid*, 246b.
[21] Van den Berg, *Theurgy in Context*, 225.
[22] Plotinus, *Enneads*, IV.6.8.1 -3.

claim that the soul is not fully descended and with that rejection came the rejection of the idea that philosophy alone could aid the ascent of the soul to the One. Iamblichus argues:

> For it is not pure thought that joins the theurgists to the gods. Indeed what, then, would hinder those who are theoretical philosophers from enjoying theurgic union with the gods? But the situation is not so: it is the accomplishment of acts not to be divulged and beyond all conception, and the power of unutterable symbols, understood solely by the gods, which establishes a theurgic union. Hence, we do not bring about these things by intellection alone.[23]

Proclus agrees with Iamblichus and concludes that the 'transcendent Forms are unknowable by our faculty of knowledge.' He continues, 'for neither sense-perception, nor cognition based on opinion, nor pure reason, nor intellective cognition of our type serves to connect the soul with those Forms, but apparently only illumination from the intellective gods renders us capable of joining ourselves to those intelligible-and-intellective Forms, as some inspired person says.'[24] Proclus and Iamblichus agree that philosophy alone cannot provide the way by which the soul can unite with the one. As van den Berg highlights, 'Proclus and Iamblichus, against Plotinus and Porphyry, maintained that philosophical anamnesis by itself was not enough to accomplish our return to the intelligible. Theurgic ritual was also needed.'[25] Through Proclus we can see the second important aspect of the soul and theurgy, which is also the

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[23] οὐδὲ γὰρ ἡ ἔννοια συνάπτει τοῖς θεοῖς τοὺς θεουργούς· ἐπεὶ τί ἐκώλυε τούς θεωρητικῶς φιλοσοφοῦτας ἔχειν τὴν θεουργικὴν πρὸς τοὺς θεούς; νῦν δ' οὐκ ἔχει τό γε ἀληθὲς οὕτως· ἀλλ' ἡ τῶν ἔργων των ἀρρήτων καὶ ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν νόησιν θεοπρεπῶς ἐνεργουμένων τελεσιουργία ἥ τε τῶν νοουμένων τοῖς θεοῖς μόνον συμβόλων ἀφθέγκτων δύ|ναμις ἐντίθησι τὴν θεουργικὴν ἕνωσιν. Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, Emma C. Clarke et al. (trans), (Leiden: Brill, 2004), II 11, 96.13 – 97.2, at 114 & 115.

[24] Proclus, *in parm*. IV 949.11-3, as translated in, van den Berg, *Theurgy in the Context*, 229.

[25] Van den Berg, *Theurgy in the Context*, 228.

second and third tenets outlined in the introduction; the ascent of the soul and the role of ritual in aiding the ascent.

The theory that the soul is able to detach from the body to unify with the first principle is found in the writings of Plato and is expanded upon by the middle and Neoplatonists.[26] Jean Trouillard argues that 'theurgy ritually enacts a way to enter mysteries that discursive thinking, necessarily divided, cannot penetrate. Theurgy is not opposed to philosophical thinking but its culmination.'[27] **As noted** previously, Uždavinys suggests there is a significant difference between philosophical discourse and a philosophical way of life, particularly in late antiquity. In the passage above by Iamblichus, he is careful to note that it is the 'theoretical philosophers' who are unable to attain the ultimate goal of a union with the one. Through the examples from Iamblichus and Proclus, Uždavinys argues, I think correctly, that 'philosophy in its deepest essence is analogous to the hieratic rite of ascent.'[28] Plato wrote that the ultimate aim is to 'flee this world and become like God as much as one can.'[29] Thus, the ritual act of theurgy is a practice intended to bring about an escape from the material world and enter a state of union with the One.

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[26] In Plato, *Phaedo,* David Gallop (trans), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 65b-65c, Plato suggests that the soul attains truth 'when none of these things troubles it, neither hearing nor sight, nor pain nor pleasure, but it is, so far as possible, alone by itself, and takes leave of the body, avoiding, so far as it can, all association or contact with the body, reaches out towards reality.' In the *Enneads* 5.3.9, Plotinus also discusses the separation of the soul from the body stating, 'In order, then to know what the Divine Mind is, we must observe the soul and especially its most God-like phase. One certain way to this knowledge is to separate first, the man from the body – yourself, that is, from your body.'

[27] As discussed in Gregory Shaw, "Taking the Shape of the Gods: A Theurgic Reading of Hermetic Rebirth" in *Aries* 15, (2015), 136-169, at 138. C.f. Jean Trouillard, *L'Un et L'âme selon Proclus*, (Paris: Les Belles Letters, 1972), 174.

[28] Uždavinys, *Philosophy & Theurgy*, 19.

[29] Plato, *Theaet*. 176b.

The techniques and understanding of who or what enables the ascent of the practitioner vary depending on which thinker is read. Shaw's studies on the works of Iamblichus, have paid particular attention to Iamblichus' discussions of theurgy. As noted above, the act of theurgy was seen as the culmination of the practical side of philosophic life. Porphyry (c. 234-c.305) claimed that the act of theurgy was an attempt to coerce the gods. Shaw suggests in contrast that, 'Iamblichus states throughout *de Mysteriis* that theurgy was not an attempt to influence the gods' and holds that this 'was in fact a response to Porphyry's claim that theurgy was an attempt to coerce the gods.'[30] John Dillon posits that 'under pressure from Porphyry, Iamblichus seems to me, in the *de Mysteriis*, to stand forth as the first theorist of the distinction between religion and magic.'[31] In Dillon's view, Iamblichus 'is really taking a stand in defence of the "higher" magic.'[32] Both Dillon and Shaw emphasise that theurgic practice as described by Iamblichus is not an attempt to coerce gods, but a ritual act in which the practitioner may be united with the One. Shaw argues that Iamblichus saw the cosmos as a 'living temple' and that the soul, 'progressively recovered its divinity in the process of unifying itself with the divine powers revealed in the material world.'[33] Shaw contends that, 'Iamblichus maintained that the release of this power was a divine activity, not human; in a word, it was theurgy, the activity of the gods.'[34] Shaw's assessment suggests therefore that Iamblichus believes the theurgist is only able to participate in the rituals of theurgy because

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[30] Gregory Shaw, "Neoplatonic Theurgy and Dionysius the Areopagite" in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7, (1999), 572-599, at 579. Porphyry denied that theurgy operated in the higher levels of the intellect. For Porphyry, theurgy operated through the doctrine of sympathy and as such was restricted to the material world only. Discussions regarding the role of sympathy in magic would again become significant in the Renaissance and feature heavily in discourse surrounding natural magic.

[31] John Dillon, "Iamblichus' Defence of Theurgy: Some Reflections" in *The International Journal of Platonic Traditions* 1, (2007), 30-41, at 32

[32] *Ibid*, 32.

[33] Shaw, *Neoplatonic Theurgy*, 580

[34] *Ibid*, 581

the gods themselves allow it. Shaw's argument opposes Louth's evaluation which suggests that theurgy is a purely human pursuit with the goal of tapping into divine powers. Evidence for Shaw's conjecture can be found in chapter twelve of *De Mysteriis* where Iamblichus writes:

> It is by virtue of such will, then, that the gods in their benevolence and graciousness unstintingly shed their light upon theurgists, summoning up their souls to themselves and orchestrating their union with them, accustoming them, even while still in the body, to detach themselves from their bodies, and to turn themselves towards their eternal and intelligible first principle.[35]

Iamblichus is suggesting that theurgy is a divinely given exercise and discusses two other elements of theurgy previously outlined, that of the detachment of the soul from the body and the goal of returning to the first principle. This aids our translation of theurgy to mean 'god-work', as it is the work of the gods to allow the theurgist to unite with them. Precisely who is responsible for the act of theurgy, the practitioner or the One/God, is a recurrent theme throughout scholarship that seeks to define the practice and is one of the reasons it remains controversial. Within the Neoplatonic concept, there is no doctrinal authority that would prohibit Iamblichus' claim. While Iamblichus argues that theurgy is a divinely given gift, Proclus highlights the importance faith should play in the ritual aspect of theurgy. Proclus' discussion of theurgy stems from his readings and understanding of the *Chaldean Oracles*, which are the body of texts Proclus uses as the basis for his discussion of theurgy.

[35] Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, I.12.

We have seen that Ficino came to know the *Oracles* through Plethon's translation which was incorrectly attributed to Zoroaster, thus dating the text much earlier than it was actually composed. It is therefore possible that Ficino may have believed he was reading the same text that Proclus based his thoughts on. One of the similarities found in Plethon's translation which correlates with Plato and the Neoplatonists is humanity's unique place in the chain of being and an ascent narrative. Plethon's *Oracles* instructs, 'inquire after the channel of the Soul: wherefrom, in what order, having served the body, to that order which you flowed you shall rise again.'[36] To ascend one must, 'hasten towards the light and rays of the Father, whence your soul was sent out, clothed in abundant intellect.'[37] The culmination of the ascent sees the soul being 'utterly intoxicated from God.'[38] In this state the soul 'glories in harmony' and thus the soul 'remains immortal and is mistress of life. And shall be filled with many **repletions** from the depths of the world.'[39] The similarities in the ascent narrative would have been clear to Ficino. Majercik explains, 'the Chaldean system included a complex ascent ritual involving purification, trance, phantasmagoria, sacred objects, magical instruments and formulas, prayers, hymns, and even a contemplative element, all of which was practiced most likely in the context of a mystery community.'[40] Within the Chaldean way, 'Faith, Truth, and Love are also understood in a theurgic sense, as it is through these three virtues that the theurgist is said to unite with God.'[41] What appears

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[36] Woodhouse, *Gemistos*, 51.
[37] *Ibid*, 52.
[38] *Ibid*, 52.
[39] *Ibid*, 52.
[40] Majercik, *The Chaldean Oracles*, 5
[41] *Ibid*, 11. C.f. Frag 48. "For all things are governed and exist in these three (virtues)". (Say the oracle). 'For this reason, the gods counsel the theurgists to unite themselves with God by means of this triad'. *Ibid*, 67.

to link all these strands together, is the significance of prayer or contemplation in ritual.

Prayer and contemplation thus straddle the divide between religion and magic, and it is for this reason that theurgic operations have caused controversy throughout history. This is illustrated by Iamblichus' response to Porphyry:

> But prayers of petition (λιτανειαι), you say, "are not suitable for presentation to the purity of the Intellect". Not so; for by reason of this very circumstance, that we are inferior to the gods in power and in purity and all other respects, it is eminently suitable that we entreat them to the greatest degree possible. The consciousness of our own nothingness, if one judges it in comparison to the gods, makes us naturally turn to supplications; and by the practice of supplication we are raised gradually to the level of the object of our supplication, and we gain likeness to it by virtue of our constant consorting with it, and, starting from our own imperfection, we gradually take on the perfection of the divine.[42]

Iamblichus appears to be arguing here that theurgic practice has a direct link to the act of prayer and therefore can be linked to some form of salvation[43] or release when he writes, 'by the practice of supplication we are raised gradually to the object of our supplication.' We also find evidence of the outcome of the practitioner's prayers and supplication, for Iamblichus writes, 'we gain likeness to it by virtue of our own constant consorting with it, and starting with our own

[42] Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, 1.47.
[43] On the discussion regarding prayer in Neoplatonism see; Danielle A. Layne, "Philosophical Prayer in Proclus's 'Commentary on Plato's Timaeus'." In *The Review of Metaphysics* 67.2, (2013),345-368. Luc Brisson, "Prayer in Neoplatonism and the Chaldaean Oracles" in John M. Dillon and Andrei Timotin (Eds.), *Platonic Theories of Prayer*, (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 108-133.

imperfection, we gradually take on the perfection of the divine'. Thus, through theurgic practice, the practitioner is able to become god-like. Plethon's *Oracles* also tells us that the act of the ascent is closely linked to the practice of prayer stating, 'you shall rise again, combining the act with the sacred word.'[44] Iamblichus' passage encompasses four of the seven tenets outlined in the introduction. We as humans are flawed, or imperfect and the way to perfection is achieved through ascent which occurs through the ritual of prayer and encompasses the importance of the inner experience of the practitioner. The conclusion is reached when the practitioner becomes godlike.

This idea would have serious consequences for the relationship between Christianity and theurgy which will be explored in the next chapter. The significant feature drawn out is the culmination of the ascent, which liberates the practitioner at the end result of the process, with the aim to become one with God. Dillon concludes that, for Iamblichus, 'through the practice of theurgic prayer, we can progressively divinize ourselves.'[45] As already noted, for Iamblichus, it is the gods themselves who have given us the insight into how to use these rituals and the theurgist is the one who is equipped to carry out these acts as the gods have prescribed. In *De Mysteriis Book* II.11 Iamblichus states:

> Theurgic union is brought about only by the perfective operation of ineffable acts correctly performed, acts which are beyond all understanding, and by the power of the unutterable symbols which are intelligible only to the gods. For this reason, it is not by intelligizing that we successfully perform these acts; for in that case their

[44] Woodhouse, *Gemistos*, 51.
[45] Dillon, *Iamblichus Defence*, 36.

> actualisation would be an intellectual process and contributed by us… For in fact the actual tokens (συνθήματα) of themselves perform their proper function even without our conscious thoughts, and the ineffable power of the gods, towards whom these things draw us up, of itself recognises its own images, but not by being summoned up by our intellectual activity (νόησις).[46]

This passage makes clear that the act of theurgy is divinely sanctioned. It highlights that within humanity is a divine likeness, which is recognised by the gods. It also discusses the significance of "tokens" in the ascent, which are utilised through a system of hierarchy. This system of hierarchy to enable a connection between the earthly realm and divine realm, I suggest is one of the key markers that enable us to describe a ritual as theurgic.

Uždavinys posits that 'in the context of Neoplatonic – Chaldean Theurgy, the symbol (*sumbolon, sunthema*) is viewed as the central link between the divine realm and the human world.'[47] He goes on to explain that for Proclus, 'the theurgic ascent is also comparable to the rite of the hieratic invocation, since, at the level of divine intellect (to which the Neoplatonic philosopher aspires), creation and the act of naming are identical.'[48] The significance of names and the role they play in theurgic operations will be discussed throughout this thesis. Uždavinys asserts that 'in Neoplatonism, names are likened to "divine Images" that are essentially symbolic and theurgic. They function within the metaphysical triad of remaining, procession, and reversion (*mone, proodos*, *epistrophe*), leading to the first principle and causes through their effects and

[46] Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, II.11, at 115.
[47] Uždavinys, *Philosophy & Theurgy*, 143.
[48] *Ibid*, 122.

traces.'[49] Lucas Siovanes suggests that, 'manipulating the "symbols" [names] gives way to working with the Real Thing. Likewise, incantation gives way to pure invocation and ultimately to theurgic prayer. At the pinnacle of the operation, the priest-theurgist entrusts the soul's one to the "One" itself. Through this leap of faith, the "one" unites cognitively to the One.'[50] Uždavinys concludes that 'by chanting these mysterious sounds which are tokens (*sunthemata*) and symbols (*sumbola*) of the gods, the caller (*Kletor*) himself is turned into the perfect (*teleia*) and godlike (*theoeide*) receptacle for the gods ba [manifestation, noetic and life giving power, the descending soul of the deity], like the hieratic statue (agalma), which is to be permeated by the divine rays.'[51] Proclus argues in *De Philosophia Chaldaica*, fragment 4:

> If the Word (logos) which comes-into-light is names [by the Chaldean Oracle] as more ineffable, it is necessary that prior to the Word there should be silence (sigen) which substantiates the Word, and prior to everything holy comes the cause which makes them divine… As beings posterior to the intelligibles are the words of the intelligibles, so the Word which is in them, hypnotised from another ineffable unity, is the word prior to the silence of the intelligibles, that is the silence of the silent intelligibles.[52]

This seems to suggest that the practitioner receives illumination through the invocation of the deity, whose power is required to enable a purification of the

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[49] *Ibid,* 92.
[50] Lucas Siorvanes, *Proclus: Neoplatonic Philosophy and Science*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 197.
[51] Uždavinys, *Philosophy & Theurgy*, 138. These mysterious sounds are at the heart of discussions on other ancient magical texts, particularly the Greek Magical Papyri as part of a wider study into the *voces magicae*. See Fritz Graf, "Theories of Magic in Antiquity" Paul Mirecki & Marvin Meyer (Eds.), *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient world*, (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 92-104; Hans Dieter Betz; *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation: Including Demotic Spells*, (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1986).
[52] As translated in Uždavinys, *Philosophy & Theurgy*, 139

soul, which is elevated by divine rays. Plethon's Oracles also mention rays stating, 'you must hasten towards the light and rays of the Father.'[53] The language of light is another of the seven tenets outlined. Names have power as the very act of naming something gives it power. The power of language, in particular Hebrew, plays a crucial role in the development of the Jewish mystical traditions. These ideas in turn, would have a profound effect for Pico in his development of Christian Cabala.

The notion of ascent, divine light, illumination, and the ability to become godlike are not exclusive to the school of the Neoplatonists or the *Chaldaean Oracles* in later antiquity. Hermeticism discusses similar practices within its texts, and these similarities would have been clear to Ficino. Giovanni Filoramo contends that 'the ideal structure of the [Hermetic] Corpus is *eusebeia meta gnōseōs* (piety with knowledge), and attitude of genuine, deep devotion as the way to knowledge of oneself and of God'.[54] In the first text of the *Hermetica*, known as *Poimandres*, or *[Discourse] of Hermes Trismegistus*, a conversation between an unnamed character and a deity known as Poimandres takes place. Poimandres posits, 'from life and light **the man** became soul and mind; from life came soul, from light came mind, and all the things in the cosmos of the senses remained thus until a cycle ended [and] kinds of things became to be.'[55] Similar to Iamblichus, knowledge is available to those who are mindful in recognising themselves. Poimandres explains the way in which a human can achieve this act.

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[53] Woodhouse, *Gemistos*, 52.
[54] Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, Anthony Alcock (trans), (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1990), 9.
[55] Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 4.

> [24] First, in releasing the material body you give the body itself over to alteration, and the form that you used to have vanishes. To the demons you give over your temperament, now inactive. The body's senses rise up and flow back to their particular sources, becoming separate parts and mingling again with the energies. And feeling and longing go on towards irrational nature. [25] Thence the human being rushes up through the cosmic framework, at the first zone surrendering the energy of increase and decrease; at the second evil machination, a device now inactive; at the third the illusion of longing, now inactive; at the fourth the rulers arrogance, now freed from excess; at the fifth unholy presumption and daring, recklessness; at the sixth the evil impulses that come with wealth, now inactive; and at the seventh zone the deceit that lies in ambush. [26] And then, stripped of the effects of the cosmic framework, the human enters the region of the Ogdoad;[56] he has his own proper power, and along with the blessed he hymns the father… They rise up to the father in order to 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.[57]

In this text, the key motifs of theurgic practice are present. The idea that humankind has within them a divine spark which can be united fully with the divine through the casting off of the material body and ascent to the heavenly realm through the acceptance of knowledge that was given by God at creation is

[56] Ogdoad is a group of eight divine beings, the firstborn is the root of all things. In Egyptian mythology the Ogdoad of Hermopolis, also known as the Ogdoad of Khum are the eight deities of the primitive waters. See, J.A. Coleman, *The Dictionary of Mythology: An A – Z of Themes, Legends, and Heroes*, (London: Capella, 2007), 773.
[57] Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 5-6.

strikingly similar to the ideas discussed by the Neoplatonists and found in Plethon's *Oracles*.

These common features found within the three traditions relate to what Ficino identified as a universal religion. In expanding Fanger's basic tenets of theurgy to seven by including Majercik's definition of ascent in the Oracles we find a more comprehensive set of similarities, that due to Ficino's misdating of these texts, would have shown him a tradition of spiritual ascent narratives in correlation with each other stretching back across time. The similarities in these traditions believed by Ficino to be shared by the ancient Egyptians, Persians and Greeks, indicated to him a divinely inspired message that came from God, an ancient religion. While certain practices differ within each tradition, and they are not monotheistic, Ficino viewed this as the corruption of God's true message over time as discussed in chapter one. One area which several similarities are found in each tradition are ideas of Spiritual ascent, which we have shown to be called theurgy by the Neoplatonists and the Chaldaeans. The culmination of the ascent shows that the authors of these texts describe a unification which also brings a level of wisdom. This wisdom appears uniform across the texts explored above and helps to define what Ficino held to be the ancient wisdom. It was observed in the previous chapter that Renaissance humanists sought to demonstrate that ideas found in ancient texts correlated with the earliest, and therefore purest, expression of the contemporary Christian belief and praxis. Thus, theurgy is the pinnacle of religious wisdom. However, with the growing spread of Christianity, and the desire for a unified Christian faith, theurgy, along with other pagan traditions would find themselves up against the charge of magic.

Chapter Three

Christianity, Ideas of Spiritual Ascent and Theurgy.

Naomi Janowitz explains, 'in religious debates during the first three centuries charges of magic were used in numerous ways to draw distinctions between insiders and outsiders, and between proper and improper practices and beliefs.'[1] This chapter will explore the controversial history between Christianity and theurgy. As previously explored, the final goal of theurgic pagan practice was to become god-like. The problem with such rituals for Christians is that such an act would transform the embodiment into incarnation, which in Christianity is a unique historical event, related to the birth, and Incarnation of Christ, and through his death and resurrection, salvation. If anyone could become God-like, this would create significant problems for the Christian church.[2] The first part of this chapter will explore the legacy of Augustine's definitions of magic and theurgy, arguing that it was through Augustine's rhetoric that the Christian West became accustomed to viewing theurgic practices as demonic and superstitious. Augustine was an important figure to Renaissance humanists and an understanding of the development of Christian rhetoric in the Latin speaking west is essential for our understanding of Christian reception of theurgy. The second part will explore the controversial writings of the sixth-century mystical theologian, Pseudo-Dionysius and argue that using the seven tenets, the works of Pseudo-Dionysius can be described as theurgic. The

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[1] Naomi Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World: Pagans, Jews and Christians*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 16.

[2] Defining the nature of Christ was a central feature of early Christianity which culminated in the Arian controversy resulting in the development of the creed. Since God was the only one who could grant salvation, for Jesus to be seen as the saviour, he had to be divine in some way. If Jesus was just human, those who followed Christianity could be accused of idolatry. Thus, the nature of Christ as "of the same substance" with God became a vital theological discussion. Christ had to be set apart from the rest of humanity. See Alister McGrath, "The Doctrine of the Person of Christ" in *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, Fifth Edition, (Oxford: Wiley and Blackwell, 2011), 265-314.

introduction noted the significance of Pseudo-Dionysius for Ficino in particular, who viewed him as a late Platonist along with John, Paul and Hierotheus. In the Renaissance, Pseudo-Dionysius is seen as the perfection of the culmination of Platonism and Christianity and thus, must be examined for the purpose of this thesis. However, reflecting the influence of Augustine, there is a reluctance in scholarly literature to address the practices described by Pseudo-Dionysius as theurgic. The final section will focus on the rediscovery of the Greek Patristic Fathers, in particular Origen, who had a profound effect influence on both Ficino and Pico. After Pseudo-Dionysius, Origen is viewed by Ficino as a true Christian heir to Plato. Thus, the end of this chapter will assess the themes of spiritual ascent in the writings of Origen available to Ficino and Pico.

The polarisation of 'religion' and 'magic' in pagan Late Antiquity has already been discussed. Yet, it is through the ideas and semiotics of Augustine that the language of defining magic as an opposite to true religion becomes enshrined in Christian thought. Tertullian argued in *De Idolatria* that, 'Idolatry is the chief crime of mankind, the supreme guilt of the world, the entire case put before judgement.'[3] Both Old and New Testament texts take a clear stance on idolatry[4] and therefore idolatry was able to become the cornerstone on which the accusations of superstition and magic could be founded. Galatians 5: 19-21 places idolatry and sorcery/witchcraft together in the list of practices that would prevent those from partaking in the kingdom of God. Hanegraaff makes the point that 'the notion of idolatrous practice grounded in fear of demons

[3] Tertullian, *De Idolotaria: Critical Text, Translation, and Commentary*, J.H. Waszink and J.C.M Van Winden (Eds. & trans), (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 23.
[4] Cf. Isa. 44:9 – 20; Lev 19:4; Ex 20:3-6; 1 Cor 10:14; Rev 9:20; Judge 10:14. There are other examples, this is just a small example.

became central to how superstition was understood in church regulations and theoretical discussions throughout the Middle Ages'.[5] Although Hanegraaff is writing about medieval approaches to idolatry, this point is equally applicable to Christianity in late antiquity. While Augustine was not the first Christian to theorise about magic,[6] his conclusions regarding theurgy as a magical practice would remain prevalent in Christendom for **nearly one thousand five hundred years** after they were written. According to Robert Markus, it is Augustine's discussion of magic that, 'allow[s] us to understand the more or less permanent state of competition between what any particular society is recognised as "religion" and "magic".'[7] Augustine seems to have set out his definition of magic for two reasons. The first was to demonstrate the superiority of the Christian message, paying attention the church's rituals and miracles, with the aim of exposing pagan rituals and miracle-working acts as acts of superstition. The second, as argued by Markus and discussed further below, was to apply doctrine and symbolic language to strengthen the unity of the Christian community with the additional aim of reaffirming the message that salvation can only be found through Christ and that only through Christ can any unity be sought with God, thus denying the Neoplatonic conception of theurgy. The Neoplatonic conception of theurgy allows a practitioner to transcend to the One/God and thus become like God. However, in what had by Augustine's time come to be defined as orthodox Christian theology, Christ is the only human who shares directly in God's nature. The ability of Christ to absolve sin is dependent

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[5] Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*, 160.
[6] Irenaeus focused his arguments on other Christian groups interchanging 'heretics' and 'magicians' in his work *Adversus Haereses* (Against Heresies). See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, John Keble (trans), (Oxford: James Parker, 1872); 1.13.1-6; 1.4.7; 2.32.5. (Latin translation heaereticus/magus) Cf. Acts 8:9. Origen, *Contra Celsum*., 1.68; 5.5; 7.69; 8.2; 8.58.
[7] Robert Markus, "Augustine on Magic: A Neglected Semiotic Theory," in *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes* 40, (1994) 375-388, at 381.

on his divine stature. If anyone could become God-like, Christ would have no soteriological significance. Augustine used this new rhetoric to Christianise the ascension and experience achieved by the theurgists, redefining it by the Christian concept of the 'mystical experience'.[8] This two pronged attack by Augustine would secure the dichotomy of religious versus magic in Christian discourse and may be the reason why practices such as Cabala could be viewed as theurgic in nature, yet the definition of theurgy would not be applied, either deliberately, for fear of the theological implications or ignorance of the process as theurgical.

During the lifetime of Augustine (354-430), emerging Christianity, although now a legal religion of the empire, still had to contend with the pagan intelligentsia,[9] in which Neoplatonists and various Gnostic sects played a major role. The decree of 391 passed by Theodosius I finally established Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire and the traditional religious beliefs of the Roman Pagan Empire were officially banned. This provided the necessary legal background for Augustine to write. The accusations that had been levied by pagans against Christians in the second and third centuries could now be used against the pagans themselves, targeting their forced religious secrecy. Markus summarises Augustine's **distinction** between magicians' wonders and the

[8] McGinn explains Augustine's position on mystical union noting, 'Augustine, despite his dependence upon Plotinus, knows nothing of union. This may well hint at a polemic reaction of the Christian mystic to the pagan one. The African doctor speaks of "touching Eternal Wisdom", or "beholding Eternal Wisdom," or "cleaving to [divine] unity" in this life but not of union itself.' Bernard McGinn, "Mystical Union in the Western Christian Tradition" in *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: An Ecumenical Dialogue*, (New York: Continuum, 1999), 59-86, at 61-62.

[9] Since 313 Constantine I decreed that there would be an official toleration of Christianity in the Empire. In 361 under Emperor Julian these privileges were revoked. Then under the reigns of the imperial brothers Valens (r. 364-378) and Valentinian I (r. 364-375), who were both Christians, the tolerances were officially restored. Theodosius I passed an edict in 391 establishing Christianity as the official religion of the Empire.

miracles of the saints: 'the former mobilise the powers they control (through secret pacts, Augustine suspects) for their own, selfish and partial ends; the latter mobilises powers subject to God for disinterested, "public", ends, in line with God's universal purposes'.[10] The significant factor is that Augustine is defining the difference between a magical act, which is defined as one which seeks to achieve personal gain, and an act of public ministry which is acceptable to the church. The significance of the church in defining what constitutes a true miracle was one of crucial importance given that key Christian doctrines depend on the miraculous work of Jesus, the apostles, and the saints. In his *City of God*, Augustine argues that the miracles recorded in the bible, 'were intended to support the worship of the one true God, and to prevent the cult of many false deities. They were achieved by simple faith and devout confidence, not by spells and charms composed according to the rules of criminal superstition'.[11] By defining the miracles of the bible in this way, Augustine sought to ensure that Christ would be seen as the only mediator in salvation, and that true salvation could not be found through theurgic practices which, as discussed in chapter two, argue for a type of salvation through the practitioner's ascent to and union with the One.

The second theme that emerges in Augustine's discourse against magic is the promotion of a dedicated language of Christianity. Markus argues that for Augustine, 'magic and the like are symbolic systems, a language of words, signs and rituals, which, in the first place secure the association of men and demons; and, in doing so, establish the cohesion of the group on which the magical

[10] Markus, *Augustine on Magic*, 380.
[11] Augustine, *City of God*, Henry Bettenson (trans), (London: Penguin, 1984), X.8.

efficacy of it rests.'[12] Kieckhefer contends that 'unlike the pagans and Jews, Christianity had no ethic cohesion, and [Christians] asserted their group identity not only by using mysterious rituals (like mystery religions) but also by emphasising strongly the distinctiveness of their God and their teaching about him'.[13] Similarly, Dufault suggests that the motivation behind Augustine's promotion of semiotics is to 'create an exclusive religious identity for the Roman polity'.[14] Christians had to establish their faith as one that could be distinguished from that of the pagans and Jews. Default argues that Augustine's 'act of defining magic was not only motivated by philosophical enquiry but also political action'.[15] However, this seems unlikely: Evan and Chadwick both contend that after Augustine's conversion and consecration he 'no longer had social or political ambitions, if he ever [them] for himself.'[16] Thus, what Dufault has understood to be political is in fact Augustine's ambition to unite Christianity. In this sense, Markus's assertion that Augustine intended to develop his linguistic community as a means to unite Christianity against any future pagan attack on the nature of miracles or rituals, and particularly against theurgy, by developing the Christian language of signs as found in Book II of *De Christiana doctrina*.[17] Markus posits that communities grow and function

[12] Markus, *Augustine on Magic*, 382.
[13] Kieckhefer, *Middle Ages*, 36.
[14] Oliver Dufault, "Magic and Religion in Augustine and Iamblichus" in E. Digeser and R. Frakes (Eds.), *Religious Identities in Late Antiquity*, (Campbellville: Edgar Kent, 2006), 63-91, at 64.
[15] *Ibid*, 65.
[16] G.R. Evan; "Introduction" in Augustine, *City of God*, xxix. Cf. Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church: The Penguin History of the Church*, (1967; revised edition, London: Penguin Books, 1993) 216-226.
[17] In Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, R.P.H. Green (trans), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) Book II. XL 60, 'Any statements by those who are called Philosophers, especially the Platonists, which happen to be true and consistent with our faith should not cause alarm but should be claimed for our own use.' Augustine is making sure no one can claim that he is calling for a complete banning of Pagan thought. However, he is careful to ensure that his readers know the difference. 'Similarly all the branches of pagan learning contain not only false and superstitious fantasies and burdensome studies that involve unnecessary effort, which each one of us must loathe and avoid as under Christ's guidance.' Book II.L60.

through the way that they 'understand and use symbolic systems'.[18] Markus's argument creates a two-fold theory: firstly, he suggests that Augustine believes that so long as Christians stop using the language of demons, the demons cannot be contacted; secondly, and more importantly for the development of the church, that Augustine is defining the correct language to be used by the church as a way to bind the church together. Therefore, 'magic is the language of a group which parodies and undermines a true social order'.[19] These discussions around the development of language are particularly important for understanding the way in which Christian theologians developed their stance on theurgy. One of the ways in which Augustine could develop his own Christian language was to use the language of the pagans against them.

One way which Augustine evolved his language of Christianity was to develop the notion of superstition. Hanegraaff observes, from the first century onwards, the term *superstitio* 'came to be seen as referring to the depraved, strange, spooky and dishonourable religious practices imported from foreign peoples such as the Egyptians, Druids or Chaldeans'.[20] From this point, we begin to see 'superstition' used as a way to determine a religious or philosophical 'other' with negative connotations. Hanegraaff also suggests that 'the notion of idolatrous practice grounded in fear of demons became central to how superstition was understood in Church regulations and theoretical discussions throughout the Middle Ages.'[21] It would be primarily, though not exclusively, through Augustine that these ideas would prevail in Christian thought. The

[18] Markus, *Augustine on Magic*, 381.
[19] *Ibid*, 384.
[20] Hanegraaff, *Esotericism*, 160.
[21] *Ibid*, 160. Cf. 2 Cor 11: 14, 'And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light'. See also Augustine, *City of God*, X.10

origins of the term 'superstitious' are a hotly debated subject. Janowitz posits that 'early usages connect it with divination and excessive fear of gods'.[22] However, Dale B. Martin argues that the term more commonly used in ancient times for would have been '*deisidaimonia*' (*deisi* = "fear" and *daimones* = "*daimones*/gods or goddesses"),[23] pointing out that, 'in its earliest occurrences *deisidaimonia* seems not to have carried any stigma, referring simply to appropriate piety; it was relatively interchangeable with Greek words related to religion that were never pejorative, such as *eusebeia*, *eulabeia*, or *theosebeia* (each of which could be translated as "piety" or even "religious service")'.[24] Janowitz discusses the significance of the development of 'superstition' suggesting, 'the term continued to be used to refer to this excessive fear; with the rise of Christianity, however, Greco-Roman rituals were labelled "*superstitio*". Legislation against "*superstitio*" could then, for example, outlaw traditional modes of divination while also taking a swipe at pagan religious beliefs in general'.[25] Jörg Rüpke agrees explaining, 'in the third and fourth centuries, "superstitio" became coincident with magic and treacherous divination. To a corresponding degree, the expression entered the legal texts and became a weapon that could be employed both against and by Christianity'.[26] Augustine seizes upon this new way of using 'superstition' to show the superiority of the Christian message over pagan society.

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[22] Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, 26.
[23] Dale B. Martin, *Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocratic's to the Christians*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 2.
[24] *Ibid,* 19.
[25] Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, 26.
[26] Jörg Rüpke, *Religious Deviance in the Roman World: Superstition or Individuality?* David M. B. Richardson (trans), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 9. Pliny the Younger (c.112 CE), describes Christianity as a "depraved, immoderate superstition" (*Superstitio*). Roman Historian Tacitus, calls Christianity a "recurrent Superstition" (*rursum superstitio*). See Martin, *Inventing Superstition*, 2.

In *De doctrina Christiana*, Augustine writes that two forms of knowledge have come from pagan society, 'one consists of things which have been instituted by humans, the other consists of things already developed, or divinely instituted, which have been observed by them. Of those instituted by humans, some are superstitious, some not.'[27] Acts instituted by humans that are viewed as superstitious by Augustine include; the making and worshipping of idols, worshipping "created order" as if it were God, entering into contracts or consultations with demons, and any engagement with magic.[28] Here we see the idea of magic being taken to be synonymous with superstition.[29] Moreover, Augustine wishes to show that these acts may appear to be correct, but are traps laid by the demons themselves and are 'delusions and deceptions' which causes us to 'become ever more inquisitive and entrap themselves more and more in the manifold snares of this most deadly error.'[30] Augustine re-affirms his strong stance warning all Christians that 'this disastrous alliance of men and devils, must be totally rejected and avoided.'[31] Through Augustine's words there are resonances with how magic is viewed even today. By referring to magic using words including: delusions, deceptions, superstitious, divination, contracts, alliance, demons, and devils, Augustine marks the beginning of the Church's rhetoric against what were perceived to be magical practices and the charges that faced anyone believed to partake in such practices. Building on the rhetoric set out by the Church Fathers, particularly from Alexandria, who we will return

[27] Augustine, *On Christian Doctine*, II.73.
[28] On magic he makes specific reference to haruspices, which are a category of Soothsayers believed to tell the future by inspecting the entrails of animals. *Ibid*, II.74.
[29] Cf. Gal. 5: 19-21.
[30] Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, II. 87. Cf. Deut. 13:2-3; 1 Kgs (1 Sam) 28:11-19; Acts 16:16-18.
[31] *Ibid*, II.89.

to at the end of this chapter, Augustine was able to utilise the language of the Neoplatonists and Gnostic sects such as Manicheism and use it to define the superiority of the Christian message.

In City of God X.9, Augustine begins his attack on the practice of theurgy. As noted earlier, Augustine argues that the miracles of the bible were achieved through 'simple faith and devout confidence' and not through 'spells and charms'. He goes on to categorise theurgy stating, 'spells and charms [are] composed according to the rules of criminal superstition, the craft which is called magic, or sorcery – a name of detestation – or by the more honourable title of "theurgy".'[32] For Augustine there should be no distinction between practitioners, he continues that, 'for people attempt to make some sort of a distinction between practitioners of illicit arts, who are to be condemned, classing them as 'sorcerers' (the popular name for this kind is 'black magic') and others whom they are prepared to regard as praiseworthy, attributing them to the practice of 'theurgy'. In fact, both types are engaged in the fraudulent rites of demons, wrongly called angels'.[33] For Augustine, then, the reader is to understand that there can be no distinction of superstitious arts, and he condemns theurgy as an act which uses demons. Augustine acknowledges that the rituals of theurgy have been used as a way of purifying the soul, but he condemns this practice as demonic. Moreover, in chapter ten of book ten Augustine writes, 'What a wonderful art this "theurgy"! What a marvellous way of purifying the soul, where foul envy has more success in demanding than pure benevolence has in obtaining a result! We must beware of it; we must abhor it;

[32] Augustine, *City of God*, X.9.
[33] *Ibid*, X.9.

we must listen to the teachings of salvation'.[34] He attacked Porphyry's notion of purification and warns that, 'it is just as the Apostle says: "Satan transforms himself to look like an angel of the light". For it is from the Devil that these phantoms come. The Devil longs to ensnare men's wretched souls in the fraudulent ceremonies of all those false gods, and to seduce them from the true worship of the true God, by whom alone they are purified and healed.'[35] Augustine not only condemns the practice of theurgy but uses 1 Cor. 11.14, to enforce he demonic aspect of these rites. By exhorting Christians to 'listen to the teachings of salvation', Augustine emphasises that the practice of theurgy will not aid the practitioner in attaining any form of salvation, and that any claims to salvation through this practice are false and aided by demonic powers. It is on the basis of Augustine's definition of theurgy, that the practice has been condemned throughout the history of the Christian west.

There are, however, strong parallels between the descriptions presented by Plethon's *Oracles*, the Neoplatonists and the Hermeticists of the theurgic ascent and what is described in Christianity as the "mystical experience". Augustine may have been aware of the parallels on the basis of his own experience. In the ninth book of *Confessions*, Augustine recounts an experience he shared with his mother Monica, which alludes to knowledge of Plotinus's discussions of the ascent of the soul, beyond itself and to a union with God, before returning to the body. Augustine notes that 'the flame of love' was at the foundation of their ascent. As their souls 'passed to beyond them to that place of everlasting plenty' they became aware of 'that Wisdom' which 'simply is,

[34] *Ibid*, X.10.
[35] *Ibid*, X.10.

because eternity is not in the past or in the future.'[36] Augustine tells us that 'for one fleeting instant we reached out and touched it' before they had to 'return to the sound of our own speech.'[37] Amy Hollywood highlights four features of this passage. The first is the process of uplifting and transcendence in which Augustine, 'emphasises the transcendence of God and the transcending or uplifting motion of souls to God'.[38] The second is that they experience the transcendence of Wisdom temporarily. It appears according to Augustine that such an experience occurs in human time. The third is the way that Augustine 'contrasts their momentary grasp of the divine Word to human speech'.[39] Hollywood explains, 'the interplay between the use of sensory images and intellectual concepts to name God and claims to God's unnameability lies at the heart of the Christian mystical tradition'.[40] The fourth feature – which I believe to be one of the most significant – is that the experience is communal. Augustine shares this experience with his mother. In sharing the experience with his mother, we can see the way in which Augustine presses the importance of community and communal practice. What I hope to have demonstrated is the way in which Augustine has borrowed from the Greek philosophic tradition, yet transformed the experience into something that can be viewed as all together Christian. In developing a specifically Christian language, Augustine hoped to unite Christianity under Christ. The magic of the Church had to be separated from the magic of the pagans. One of the ways Augustine's success can be charted is through the secondary literature on Pseudo-Dionysius.

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[36] Augustine, *Confessions*, *Confessions*, R. S. Pine-Coffin (trans), (London: Penguin, 1961), IX.10.
[37] *Ibid*, IX.10.
[38] Amy Hollywood, "Introduction" in Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 1-33, at 2.
[39] *Ibid*, 3.
[40] *Ibid*, 3.

Theurgy once again entered the Christian tradition through the works of the **sixth-century** Greek writer known as Pseudo-Dionysius. Unlike Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius uses the language of theurgy to set forth his views on divine mediation. Claire Fanger argues that for Pseudo-Dionysius this was a 'theurgy that is forecast in the Old Testament, consummated in the New Testament, and represented and celebrated in the Sacraments, which enable the imitation of God.'[41] Pseudo-Dionysius himself, writing in Greek, used the term *theurgia*; however, Latin translations of his Greek texts never use *theurgia*; instead, the translators opted to use terms such as '***divina operatio***' or '*operatio Dei*'. This has the effect of dissociating the work of Pseudo-Dionysius from the theurgy condemned by Augustine, discussed above, and from its potential connections to demonic magic. Gregory Shaw asks, 'why are Christian theologians reluctant to admit that Dionysius was a theurgist?'[42] The answer to Shaw is clear: the rhetoric directed towards the practice of theurgy by Augustine served to place theurgic practice firmly in the category of 'magic' so that theurgy was hence forth viewed by the Latin West as using demonic forces to achieve its goals, and was consequently avoided. Shaw notes that even as late as the 1987 translation of the *Complete Works of Pseudo-Dionysius*, by Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, although the term *theurgia* and its cognates appear in the Greek text forty-seven times, they were not translated as such. For instance, in the footnotes to the *Divine Names*, Luibheid and Rorem explain that their translation uses 'divine enlightenment' instead of the literal translation which should read "theurgical lights". Luibheid and Rorem explain that, 'Pseudo-Dionysius used the term

[41] Fanger, *Introduction*, 20.
[42] Shaw, *Theurgy and Dionysius*, 572.

theurgy to mean "work of God", not as an object genitive indicating a work addressed to God (Iamblichus) but as a subjective genitive meaning "God's own work".'[43] However, this long-standing tradition of translation masks the reality that the works of Pseudo-Dionysius are theurgic. Pseudo-Dionysius's approach is theurgic, in that it shows a strong correlation with the seven-point framework outlined in this thesis.

Shaw highlights the issue at the heart of the Pseudo-Dionysian debate, positing: 'if Dionysius practiced theurgy, it would present a serious challenge to his "orthodoxy", for to have been a theurgist in the Neoplatonic sense would condemn the Areopagite in the eyes of all scholar apologists.'[44] There is insufficient space to include here a detailed reception history of the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus. However, it is a journey of interest and Jaroslav Pelikan describes it as an 'odyssey', 'from the heretical East, to the Orthodox East, to the Catholic West'.[45] One of the first Christian writers to tackle the issues of Pseudo-Dionysius' Neoplatonic overtones was John of Scythopolis (c. 536 – 550).[46] He composed an extensive set of *scholia* (marginal annotations) produced in 708 in Syriac with the Dionysian Corpus. Rorem and Lamoreaux suggest, 'the influence of John's comments exercised on the earliest form of the Dionysian tradition itself are of significance',[47] for they explain, 'John

[43] Pseudo-Dionysius; "The Divine Names" in *The Complete Works*, John Farina (ed), Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem (trans), (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 47-132.
[44] Shaw, *Theurgy and Dionysius*, 578.
[45] For a full discussion see **Jaroslav** Pelikan, "The Odyssey of Dionysian Spirituality" in *Pseudo-Dionysius, Complete Works*, 11-24. Cf. Paul Rorem and John C. Lamoreaux, "The Earliest Reception of the Corpus" in *John of Scythopolis and the Dionysian Corpus: Annotating the Areopagite*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) 1-22.
[46] A bishop of Scythopolis in Palestine and was a Byzantine theologian of neo-Chalcedonian theology. See Rorem and Lamoreaux for what little biographical information is available.
[47] Rorem & Lamoreaux, *John of Scythopolis*, 4.

occasionally decided to give biblical annotation to some of Dionysius' vocabulary and concepts which a reader might associate with Neoplatonism'.[48] One of the first annotations Scythopolis produces is the 'biblical warrant for the figure of Hierotheus, whom the suspicious reader might mistake for Proclus'.[49] Rorem and Lamoreaux identify, 'seven other examples of John's scriptural strategy regarding Dionysian uses of Neoplatonic terminology: "home", offshoots, flowers, and lights, not learning but suffering, the presence of God, theurgy, remaining, procession and return, and paradigms'.[50] They conclude that John was using this technique to avoid associations with Neoplatonism which would see the Corpus being declared as heretical. The evidence uncovered through the work of Rorem and Lamoreaux demonstrates the uncomfortable history the Dionysian Corpus has had with its Neoplatonic roots and particularly with what seems to be a close relationship with theurgy, and highlights the efforts of theologians such as John of Scythopolis to ensure it was not interpreted this way.

Strikingly, not much has changed in modern scholarship surrounding the theurgic overtones found in Pseudo-Dionysius. Rorem, who is responsible for discovering the work of John of Scythopolis, maintains that the way Pseudo-Dionysius used the term theurgy was fundamentally different to the way in which Iamblichus or Proclus would have used the term as Neoplatonists. However, Rorem's assessment is flawed, given there is no working definition of what theurgy is. A similar problem is found in the work of Andrew Louth. Louth,

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[48] *Ibid*, 51.
[49] *Ibid*, 51. This is done to authenticate Dionysius with apostolic authority as found in the Book of Acts 17:34.
[50] *Ibid,* 51.

like Rorem, accepts the importance of Neoplatonism to Pseudo-Dionysius, yet rejects any claim that the works can be deemed as theurgic. Louth describes Pseudo-Dionysius' links to Proclus through both men's use of triads, noting, that 'his [Pseudo-Dionysius's] metaphysical reality is also marked by Procline triads, as is his understanding of man's ascent to the divine.'[51] Moreover, Louth acknowledges Pseudo-Dionysius's indebtedness to the language of Neoplatonism, arguing that Pseudo-Dionysius is 'fond of the vocabulary of late Neoplatonism' and that his use of the term theurgy in his discussion of the Christian sacraments is only one example of his use of this vocabulary.[52] Louth affirms, however: 'one thing, however seems quite clear. Deny's writings are explicitly Christian.'[53] Pseudo-Dionysius's writings are whole-heartedly Christian, but my analysis has shown that they are also deeply theurgic in the classical sense as discussed in chapter two.[54] In viewing the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius in this way it allows for a deeper understanding of how practices found in antiquity were later assimilated into Christianity. Despite all attempts to prohibit such practices, through the careful use of language, some practices were able to survive, albeit under a different name, than others.

That Pseudo-Dionysius was inspired by the works of Iamblichus and Proclus can be seen from his writings and is not disputed by scholars. As discussed in chapter two, 'Iamblichus maintained that the release of this power was a divine

[51] Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, (Wilton: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989), 14.
[52] *Ibid*, 14.
[53] *Ibid*, 21.
[54] A point that is openly acknowledged in the Greek Orthodox tradition. See Valdimir Kharlamov, "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Eastern Orthodoxy: Acceptance of the Corpus Dionysiacum and Integration of Neoplatonism into Christian Theology" in *Theological Reflections* 16, (2016), 138-154.

activity, not human; in a word, it was theurgy, the activity of the gods'[55] Recalling Iamblichus' argument that the act of theurgy was a divinely inspired activity, we can find evidence for this in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius. In the *Divine Names* Pseudo-Dionysius describes the experience of unity with God. Our minds will be lifted from our earthly bodies and 'we shall have a conceptual gift of light from Him, and, somehow, in a way we cannot know, we shall be united with him.'[56] In this united state 'we shall be struck by his blinding light' and 'we shall be equal to the angels and sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.'[57] This passage echoes examples given in the previous chapter, which has been argued are examples of theurgy, in that the end result is to become 'equal to the angels and sons of God'. Our minds are lifted away from our bodies to join in this union. Unlike the mystical experience, which is expounded by Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius places the ascended soul as an equal, we 'shall be' equal, which can be read as becoming God-like.

Further evidence of the theurgic nature of Pseudo-Dionysius' writings can be found in his discussion on the significance of prayer. When we pray we 'stretch ourselves … upwards to the more lofty elevation of the kindly Rays of God,' where we can imagine 'a great shining chain hanging downward from the heights of heaven to the world below.'[58] This example shows how Pseudo-Dionysius fits into two more of the tenets; that the ascent is facilitated by the use of prayer, and the use of light as a representation of the ultimate good/God. He goes on to discuss the technique of prayer and its significance, stipulating,

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[55] Shaw, *Neoplatonic Theurgy*, 581.
[56] D.N. 592C.
[57] D.N. 592C. Cf. Lk. 20:36.
[58] D.N. 680C. This may also be a reference to the Golden Chain which features in Homer's the *Illiad*, Book VIII.

'We must begin with a prayer before everything we do, but especially when we are about to talk to God.'[59] Iamblichus taught that prayer does not affect the gods but rather those that pray. The experience of the person performing the ritual of prayer is in no way coercing God to do their bidding, but in fact, God is allowing them to partake in this act of devotion, which may result in the mystical experience. This idea is mirrored in Pseudo-Dionysius where he writes that 'we will not pull down ourselves that power' but through 'divine reminders and invocations we may commend ourselves to it and be joined to it.'[60] The language of ascent is also prevalent and Pseudo-Dionysius utilises these ideas through his angelic hierarchy.[61] The soul has the ability to be joined with the Divine through the angelic as they have 'intelligence, immortality' and 'existence', therefore the soul can 'strive towards angelic life.'[62] According to Pseudo-Dionysius, once we are uplifted to this source, 'they are able to share in the illumination streaming out from that Source.'[63] The notion of **humans being** able to share in the angelic nature becomes an important feature of Pico's *Oration* and for Pseudo-Dionysius, angels play an important role in the ascent narrative. It would be difficult to ignore the theurgic overtones of Pseudo-Dionysius and the examples explored here fit the required seven tenets set out in the introduction. For Ficino, these correspondences with Plato, the Neoplatonists and Hermeticists would appear as another example of an ancient wisdom, this time made perfect in the Christian message.

[59] D.N. 680D.
[60] D.N. 680D.
[61] D.N. 696B.
[62] D.N. 696C.
[63] D.N. 696C. For further on angelic hierarchy, see, Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy*.

The Italian Renaissance saw a renewed interest in the Greek Patristic Fathers.[64] As already noted, Augustine was seen as the doctrinal authority in Latin Christendom. Stringer suggests **there were** two simultaneous reasons for the breaking of Latin cultural hegemony in **the later** thirteenth century. 'In the West, Petrarch, followed by Salutati and the ***S[anto]. Spirito*** circle in Florence, broke with the intellectual assumption of scholasticism' and in the 'Greek East the Palaeologan renaissance[65] cultivated a renewed emphasis on the Greek classics.'[66] Thus, along with the Latin translations of Greek classical texts came translations of Greek patristic texts within the Renaissance humanist movement. A full assessment of the influence the Greek Fathers had on Renaissance thought is not feasible in this thesis, therefore an assessment of one key figure will serve as a case study. Origen (c. 185-c. 253) enjoyed a revival due to the humanist tradition and was especially admired by the Florentine Platonic Academy.[67]

The first printed edition of *Contra Celsum* (*Against Celsus*) appeared in 1481 and was the first newly translated version of the text in Latin since antiquity, translated by Cristoforo Persona (1416-85).[68] As noted in chapter one, Ficino saw Christian wisdom as the perfection of Platonic wisdom and the

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[64] The study of the Greek Patristic Fathers had fallen in and out of fashion in the Latin West over the centuries. In the later Middle Ages the decline can be attributed to Latin political hegemony in the Greek East. See; Charles L. Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers: Ambrogio Traversari (1386-1439) and Christian Antiquity in the Italian Renaissance*, (Albany: Statue University of New York Press, 1977), 89.

[65] The Palaiologos dynasty ruled the Byzantine Empire in the period between 1261 and 1453.

[66] Stringer, *Humanism and the Church Fathers*, 89.

[67] For a full discussion on Origen in the Renaissance see; Edgar Wind, "The Revival of Origen" in *Studies in Art and Literature for Belle da Costa Greene*, Dorothy Minor (ed), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 412-24. Daniel Nodes, "Origen of Alexandria among the Renaissance Humanists and their Twentieth Century Historians," in *Nova Doctrina Vetusque: Essays on Early Christianity in Honour of Frederic W. Schlatter, S. J.*, Fredric W. Schlatter, Douglas Kries, and Catherine Brown Tkacz (eds), (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 51–64.

[68] See Charles Stringer, "Italian Renaissance Learning and the Church Fathers," in Irena Backus (ed.), *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From Carolingians to the Maurists*, Vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 473-510, at 493.

wisdom of the Hebrews. As Allen suggests, 'from Ficino's viewpoint the Christian Platonism of the Areopagite, of Origen, of Augustine and of Henry of Ghent[69] was the true heir to Plato, not the pagan Platonism of the late *Platonici*.'[70] In *Contra Celsum* Origen is arguing for the defence of the Christian religion against Celsus and therefore we also find certain justifications that may have confirmed Ficino's notions of an ancient wisdom. In III.80 we see Origen align the Christian idea of ascent with the Platonists and Pythagoreans. Responding to Celsus' claim that Christians are 'led away with vain hopes', Origen responds that the 'implications of your attack is that both the Pythagoreans and the Platonists are lead away with vain hopes that the soul can ascend to the vault of heaven.'[71] Origen appears to be drawing a strong correlation with the Pythagorean/Platonic concept of ascent with the notions of spiritual ascent found in the Christianity, arguing that only through Christianity can ascent be rightfully achieved. On the similarities found between the Old Testament and Plato, in IV.39, Origen discusses Celsus's opposition to the story of the serpent in Genesis. Origen compares Plato's *Symposium* 203 B-E with Gen.2:8-9, drawing parallels with the "garden of Zeus" and the Garden of Eden. Origen acknowledges that it is unclear if Plato 'happened to hit on this by chance, or whether, as some think, on his visit to Egypt he met with those who interpret the Jews tradition philosophically.'[72] Origen also suggests that Plato may have then altered some of the wisdom he gained 'since he [Plato] took care not to offend the Greeks by keeping the doctrines derived from the wisdom of the Jews without making any

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[69] Henry of Ghent (c. 1217-29 to 1293). Studied under Albertus Magnus at Cologne. His doctrines have strong Platonic themes and he defended Plato against Aristotelian criticism. See; Gordon A. Wilson, *A Companion to Henry of Ghent*, (Leiden: Brill, 2010).
[70] In particular Plotinus. Michael J. B. Allen, "Marsilio Ficino on Plato, the Neoplatonists and the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity" in *Plato's Third Eye: Studies in Marsilio Ficino's Metaphysics and its Sources*, (Hampshire: Variorum, 1995), IX, 555-584, at 581
[71] Origen, *Contra Celsum*, III: 80. Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 247, 250.
[72] Origen, *Contra Celsum,* IV.39.

changes.'[73] For Ficino, Origen's discussion would be a confirmation of his thoughts on the correspondences between Mosaic and Platonic wisdom indicating an ancient religion.

In V.5 Origen discusses angels. He writes, 'it is unreasonable to invoke angels without having received superhuman knowledge about them.'[74] Origen explains that even if we did possess such knowledge that we are forbidden to 'pray to anyone other than the supreme God, who is sufficient for all things,'[75] a point that Augustine would reiterate as discussed earlier. In an earlier section Origen replies to Celsus that the task of angels is to 'ascend bringing the prayers of men into the purest heavenly region of the universe' and that they descend from heaven in order to bring 'each individual according to his merits some benefit which God commands them to administer to those who receive His favours.'[76] According to Origen to ensure the graciousness of the Holy Angels 'that they may do all they can on our behalf' is to, as far as our human nature allows, 'imitate their devotion, since they imitate God.'[77] For Origen therefore, the act of prayer and angels are interconnected. He also links prayer explicitly to ascent. In VII.44 he explains that the whole world is the temple of God and that a Christian 'prays in any place, and by shutting the eyes of sense and raising of the soul he ascends beyond the entire world.'[78] The ascent does not stop at the super-celestial realm, but 'being guided by the Divine Spirit, and being as it

[73] *Ibid*, IV.39.
[74] *Ibid*, V:5.
[75] *Ibid*, V:5.
[76] *Ibid*, V:4.
[77] *Ibid*, V:5. Imitation of the angelic nature opposed to the invocation of angels which would be viewed as magic. Cf. VII.29.
[78] *Ibid*, VII: 44.

were outside the world he sends up his prayer to God.'[79] Therefore, according to Origen, prayer is an integral aspect part of the idea of spiritual ascent.

Pico was also a scholar of Origen having read *De Principiis* and *Contra Celsum* in Florence before beginning to write his ***Conclusions*.**[80] In *De Principiis* Origen argues that spiritual natures 'both those belonging to the heavenly orders and those that form the human race',[81] are from the same creator, God. Moreover, any 'diversity and variety among these beings is shown to be derived not from the unfairness on the part of the disposer but from their own actions.'[82] Our natures are made holy through the 'reception or inspiration of the Holy Spirit', which is described by Origen as an 'accidental addition' to our given nature.[83] According to Origen there are those who are 'judged by God to replenish the human race' and they are 'the souls of men, some of whom, in consequence of their progress, we see taken up into the order of the angels.'[84] The humans that have achieved this status are called by Origen; "sons of God", "sons of the Resurrection",[85] or "sons of light".[86] Here we find not only a discussion of a transformative action where a human can ascend to the nature of a divine being, but we are also being told that the power to achieve such an elevation is in our own hands. Therefore, what we find in Origen is the idea of humanity's place in a unique position in the hierarchy of being, with the ability

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[79] *Ibid*, VII: 44.
[80] See Pasquale Terracciano, "The Origen of Pico's Kabbalah: Esoteric Wisdom and the Dignity of Man" in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 79.3, (2018), 343-361, at 343.
[81] Origen, *On First Principles*, G. W. Butterworth (trans), (1936, reprint: Notre Dame, IN; Ave Maria Press, 2013), I.VIII.2.
[82] *Ibid*, I.VIII.2.
[83] *Ibid*, I.VIII.3.
[84] *Ibid*, I.VIII.5.
[85] *Ibid*, I.VIII.5. Cf. Lk 20:36; Rom 8:14.
[86] Cf. Lk 16:8.

to turn toward evil and descend in nature, or to turn towards God and ascend to a form of divinity.

The rhetoric of Augustine had been successful in developing a unifying language of Christianity for the Latin speaking West. Augustine's success has been shown through the way in which, to this day, Pseudo-Dionysius's links to theurgy still receive an uncomfortable response in modern scholarship. Yet, what we find in Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius and Origen is a coalescing of ideas that draw on the seven tenets outlined in the introduction. For Ficino and Pico, these correspondences between the church fathers and more ancient texts prove the existence of an ancient wisdom, which was made perfect through the coming of Christ. However, the wisdom of Christianity confirmed not just the wisdom of the Greeks, but also the wisdom of the Hebrews, which would be important for the development of Pico's *prisca theologia* and Cabala. Before we can understand Pico's Cabala, an exploration of Ficino needs to take place.

Chapter Four

Ideas of Spiritual Ascent in Ficino.

Ficino's syncretism centres around the physical and spiritual well-being of the body and soul. Edelheit argues, I think correctly, that 'it is not possible to separate Ficino's theology from his philosophy, cosmology, and medicine. They are all bound together: humoral medicine, Neoplatonic cosmology and Christian theology.'[1] Valery Rees notes, 'Marsilio Ficino considered himself and was considered by others a doctor of souls. Following traditions of ancient wisdom, his concerns embraced an extensive study of the well-being of the healthy soul as well as issues of sickness and recovery.'[2] Thus, what we find in Ficino is a complex syncretism intricately woven throughout his works and discussed through his extensive collection of letters. This chapter will first consider the importance Ficino placed on his role as a 'doctor of souls' through the concept of the priest-doctor. Given that for Ficino our bodies are the keeper of the soul, the journey of spiritual ascent must begin there. **Ficino's magic has been seen by scholars as natural (rather than spiritual)** and employs the tradition of drawing-down theurgy, which as discussed in the introduction, will not be the focus of this thesis.[3] This chapter will consider whether ideas of spiritual ascent in Ficino can be considered theurgic and if so, can this aid us in understanding how Ficino perceived ancient religion and the attainment of wisdom.

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[1] Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico*, 163.
[2] Valery Rees, "The Care of the Soul: States of Consciousness in the Writings of Marsilio Ficino" in *Aries* 8, 1-19, at 1.
[3] Ficino's natural magic links to the correspondences and sympathies of the cosmos.

Ficino's understanding of himself as a "doctor of souls" is linked to his ideas regarding the role of the priest-doctor. Ficino had received some medical training before being ordained as a priest in 1473. The approaches Ficino identified for the healing of the body and soul are described in a letter to Francesco Musano of Lesi, in which he writes, 'the body is indeed healed by the remedies of medicine; but spirit, which is the airy vapour of our blood and the link between body and soul, is tempered and nourished by airy smells, by sounds, and by song. Finally, the soul, as it is divine, is purified by the divine mysteries of theology.'[4] In a letter to his fellow priest Pace,[5] Professor of Canonical Law, Ficino discusses the dignity of the priest, writing, 'let us, therefore, consider what it is to be a real priest. It is surely almost to be God. A priest is a kind of temporal God, but God is priest eternal.'[6] Thus, as Peter Serracino-Inglott suggests, 'Ficino understands priesthood to be not a mediatorship or brokerage between God and mankind, but the possession in a limited way of supernatural powers such as God has'.[7] Edelheit posits therefore that for Ficino, 'to perform a religious ceremony means to act on a spiritual level for the salvation of souls.'[8] Serracino-Inglott notes, 'it is because of thaumaturgical capability, the ability to perform miracles, that Ficino sees the priesthood first as angelic and then as provisionally divine.'[9] In this chapter it will first be shown that the role of the priest-doctor as conceived by Ficino demonstrates the influence ancient texts had on his conception of an ancient wisdom.

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[4] Ficino, "Medicina corpus, musica spiritum, theologia animum curat," (Medicine heals the body, music the spirit, and theology the soul), in *Letters* 1, at 40. Date of letter not given.
[5] No first name is given and there is no biographical information included in the notes on correspondences.
[6] Marsilio Ficino, "Dignitas sacerdotis" (The dignity of the Priest), in *Letters* 1, 121-122.
[7] Peter Serracino-Inglott, "Ficino the Priest" in Allen and Rees (Eds), *Marsilio Ficino,* 1-13, at 61.
[8] Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico*, 25-29.
[9] Serracino-Inglott, *Ficino the Priest*, 6.

Ficino writes in his *Oratio de laudibus medicinae* that 'among the Egyptians and the Persians the same men were both priests and doctors' and that 'Plato writes in *Charmides* that those Magi who were physicians of both soul and body, [were] followers of **Zalmoxis** and Zoroaster.'[10] For Ficino, therefore, medicine 'emanated from the Godhead itself'.[11] In *Nobilitas, utilitas et usus medicinae* Ficino mentions two letters sent by Hippocrates which confirms that 'medicine is a gift from the gods' and that 'medicine is related to prophecy, because our ancestor Apollo is father of both arts.'[12] Ficino looked for comparisons in his ancient texts that confirmed the perfection of ancient wisdom in the Christian message. In the case of the priest-doctor, this perfection comes in Christ himself whose, ministry witnessed many healing miracles.[13] Christ then bestows this gift of healing to his twelve disciples.[14] It has already been noted that Ficino praised Paul highly and he believed that Paul was also given the gift of healing after his conversion.[15] Ficino saw a rich heritage throughout history of the priest-doctor, a tradition that was handed directly from God and was traceable through the *prisca theologia,* and was also present in Plethon's understanding of *the Oracles*. Kaske and Clark argue, 'Pletho's religion, as well as its precursors, the theurgy of Iamblichus and especially of the *Chaldaean Oracles*, would have attracted Ficino as a poet but repelled him as a Christian and distracted him as a doctor.'[16] However, this

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[10] Ficino, *Letters* 6, 24.
[11] *Ibid*, 22.
[12] *Ibid*, 24.
[13] There are twenty-six examples of the healing miracles of Jesus contained across the four gospels. Examples include Mk 7:31-37; Matt 9:1-8; Lk 13:10-17; Jn 9:1-38.
[14] Of the authority to heal given to the disciples, see; Matt 10:1 and Lk 9:1-2, 6. The healing miracles of the disciples are found in the Book of Acts. Examples include Acts 3:1-11, 5:16, 8:14-17.
[15] On the healing acts of Paul, see; Acts 14:8-10, 16:16-18, 20:9-12, 28:7-9.
[16] Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, 66.

assessment seems unlikely given Ficino's understanding that both the Persians and the Egyptians received a form of primitive revelation from God and that the Persians and Egyptians also symbolise the foundation of the priest-doctor ideal.[17] It seems odd that these common markers across history would be distracting to Ficino as a doctor. It is persuasive that in assessing the importance of medicine for Ficino, he saw a divine emphasis on the well-being of the body as well as the soul throughout history.

A similar approach can be traced through Ficino's ideas regarding spiritual ascent. A note on terminology is however in order. A search of Ficino's works appears to yield no examples where he uses the word theurgy.[18] This may in part reflect the reverence Ficino held for Augustine; as Levi notes, 'it is at first sight paradoxical that Ficino should so ostentatiously have claimed the authority of Augustine for a life work which centred on the Christian rehabilitation of the pagan philosophy which Augustine spurned.'[19] However, Levi posits, I think correctly, that 'Augustine's defence of immortality depended on the immateriality of the soul argued in Plotinus, so that link between Plato, Plotinus, Augustine, and the soul's immateriality as a foundation for its immortality may have been formed in Ficino's mind at the very beginning of his literary activity.'[20] Given Augustine's denunciation of the practice of theurgy, while Ficino may have found compelling parallels in the Neoplationic, Hermetic and Chaldaean discussions of spiritual ascent with those of Pseudo-Dionysius, his

[17] Edelheit suggests that the biblical ideal of the priest-doctor is found in the character of Melchizedek. Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico*, 208-209. Melchizedek is a priest-king of pre-Israelite Jerusalem who greeted Abraham. See; Gen. 14:18 – 20 and Ps. 110:4. Cf. Heb. 7:1-17.
[18] This includes his translations and commentaries on Pseudo-Dionysius.
[19] Levi, *Ficino, Augustine*, 99.
[20] *Ibid*, 105.

position as a theologian deeply rooted in the ecclesiastic tradition may have caused him to refrain from using the term theurgy itself. What is striking, however, is his appeal to authors in the theurgic tradition, including Iamblichus, Zoroaster, and Pseudo-Dionysius and to their theurgic ideas. Allen suggests, 'Ficino was not trying to be original; he was trying to synthesize'.[21] This certainly appears to be the case in Ficino's idea of the priest-doctor. Therefore, Ficino's notions regarding spiritual ascent could indicate the way in which he tried to synthesize the practices found in Late Antiquity with orthodox Christianity. Thus, using the seven tenets as a guide, a link can be established between the language of spiritual ascent in Ficino and the practice of theurgy.

Both the health of the body and the health of the soul are, according to Ficino, the responsibility of the priest-doctor. Ficino notes that the body and soul are 'inseparable, intimate partners.'[22] However, for Ficino, our bodies, because they are matter, are unstable and subject to illness and decay. This correlates with the first tenet, reflecting the fact that a similar discussion is found in the Platonic schools of thought. The soul's function is the animation of the body. Ficino writes: 'everything that a man is said to do, his soul does itself; the body merely suffers it to be done.'[23] Our souls are trapped in matter which is subject to corruption and decay. The uniqueness of humanity is that human souls can move within the chain of being and this movement, whether ascending or descending is attached to our will. An individual can choose to remain a slave to sense desire or can turn inwards to begin the journey of ascent. For Ficino,

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[21] Marsilio Ficino, *The Philebus Commentary*, Michael J. B. Allen, (Ed. & Trans.), (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 23.
[22] Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, Sears Reynolds Jayne (Trans.), (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1944), at 26.
[23] Ficino, *Comm. Symp.*, 157.

although the body is material, this ascent begins with the love of the body. He writes, 'our ladder of love must begin with love of the body, that the desires of the body are not wicked in themselves, but are wicked only as man loses the sense of proportion which enables him to see that earthly desires are only the beginning of the path up which we trudge to the perception of divinity.'[24] As noted above, humans occupy a unique place in the chain of being and it is our souls, not our material bodies, which occupy this place. The souls of humanity are placed third in the hierarchy of being. Ficino argues, 'after God, an unmoving entity, it is correct to place angel next, an unmoving plurality; and then after angel, soul, which is more distant from God still, since it is a plurality subject to movement.'[25] Thus we find in Ficino the first and second tenets of theurgical practice: matter is subject to corruption through the choice of the will and there is a hierarchy of being which one can ascend.

For Ficino, prayer plays a significant role not only in the health of the body,[26] but also functions as a tool of ritual purification in preparation of the ascent.[27] Ficino explains that 'nothing is dearer to me than to speak with God.'[28] Prayer forms an important aspect of humanity's journey to God since wisdom should be 'sought in faith, asked for in hope and demanded by love.'[29] The two primary ways of approaching God, according to Ficino, are 'the way of

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[24] *Ibid,* 26. Cf. Ficino, *Commentary on the mystical Theology of Pseudo-Dionysius*, Michael J. B. Allen (Ed. & trans.), (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2015), Ch.15, at 43.
[25] Ficino, *Theo. Plat*. III.1.5. For a detailed analysis on the role of angel in this hierarchy see, Michael J. B. Allen, "The absent angel in Ficino's Philosophy" in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36, (1975), 219-240.
[26] On the power of prayer in healing see Ficino, "vota non sunt spernenda" in *Letters*, 1, 125-27.
[27] The importance of prayer for Renaissance Christianity and views on its efficacy need not be discussed here.
[28] Ficino, *Letters* 1, 178.
[29] Ficino, *Letters* 6, 6. Cf. Matt. 21:22.

inquiry and argument, and the way of prayer and supplication. The former strives to know the Good [God], the latter is our guide to attaining it.'[30] This is because, 'by prayers the rational soul is inwardly changed, and made ready to accept gifts from above.'[31] At the same time, the journey of the rational soul may be accompanied by 'guiding angels', who 'lead them towards the divine', for, 'all angels commonly illuminate souls, and also every single soul has an assigned angel as its **principal guide**.'[32] In *De Triplici Vita* 3.23 Ficino observes: 'every person has at birth one certain daemon, the guardian of his life, assigned by his own personal star,' and these daemons are also 'if you will angels.'[33] Kaske and Clarke highlight that for Ficino, 'daemons fill the same mediating role which they fill in his Platonic and Hermetic translations and commentaries, namely, as "medios inter homines et stellas".'[34] It is apparent, therefore, that Ficino believed that prayer and the assistance of a mediating power might help humans ascend. This correlates with the third tenet of theurgic practice.

The fourth tenet focuses on the assumption that God is the ultimate Good. Ficino's conception of God was undoubtedly broad, however there is no reason to question Ficino's devotion to Christianity. Jayne explains, 'for Ficino, God is unity over and above all parts of the universe. He is whole; yet He is more than the sum of the parts. He is uniform and omni-form at the same time. It is this breadth of conception which keeps Ficino from being a pantheist.'[35] Jayne continues that for Ficino God is 'like the Christian God, a personality, the

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[30] Ficino, *On Dionysius*, D.N. LXVII.3. Cf. *Theo. Plat*. XIII.5.6.
[31] *Ibid*, D.N. LXIX.5.
[32] *Ibid*, D.N. LXXXV.6. Cf. Ps. 91:11-12; Heb. 1:14.
[33] Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, 371-375.
[34] Kaske & Clarke, *Introduction*, 63.
[35] Jayne, *Introduction*, 23.

personality of the universe.'[36] In Ficino's commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius' *Mystical Theology* he states, 'God on high exists above all attribution because He is infinite Goodness,'[37] For Ficino, 'everything is in God; God loves himself; therefore everything loves God. The motive force in the whole universe, then, is love.'[38] Indeed, Ficino understands love to be the glue which binds together his whole philosophical/theological idea; as Jayne comments, 'it links his theology to his epistemology, and both with his ethics.'[39] Since God is the ultimate Good in the universe and the first principle, Ficino argues that if God were to give us the desire to ascend without the means to do so then God would be no better than a 'wicked tyrant, if he ordered us to attempt things that we can never achieve.'[40] As noted in chapter two, Ficino sees God as the ultimate good as expressed in the revelation of both scripture and the Platonic Corpus.

The image of the divine ray is abundant throughout Ficino's work. Drawing on Plato's *Phaedrus*, Ficino argues that the soul contains two lights, 'the one natural or innate, the other divine and supernatural.'[41] In his commentary on the *Divine Names*, Ficino discusses the way in which humanity can have knowledge of divine things through the divine ray: 'We understand only as much about the divine gifts and powers as the divine ray itself, having been

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[36] *Ibid*, 23.
[37] Ficino, *On Dionysius*, M.T. XXIV.1. Cf. *Ibid*, M.T. IV.2; D.N. LXVII.1; CLXXXVII.
[38] Jayne, *Introduction*, 24.
[39] *Ibid,* 24.
[40] Ficino, *Theo. Plat*., XIV.1.4.
[41] Ficino, *Comm. Plat. Symp*., 158. This discussion is linked to Aquinas and his argument that humans have two intelligences. The first is passive for understanding and the second is active for "essentializing". These discussions are linked to Aquinas' discussions regarding the knowledge of the angels which Ficino appears to draw his discussions regarding the angelic mind. See, Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.q.54. a.4; q.55.a.2; q.55.a.3; q.56.a.1,2,3; q.57.a.1-5; q.58.a.1-5.

transmitted through the serene minds of the saints, has revealed them to us.'[42] However, there are limits to human ability in contemplation, as Ficino explains:

> (1) Because we can perceive nothing beyond what the [divine] ray reveals to us; (2) because the ray itself descends into us with less than its full brightness, [since] it is not going to reveal to us the divine nature itself, or all that God contemplates in Himself, or all even that the angels contemplate in God's presence… (3) it is because that ray reveals things to each man only according to his capacity.[43]

The image of the divine ray in Pseudo-Dionysius links to the idea of the divine ray found in the sixth book of Plato's *Republic*. Ficino regarded Pseudo-Dionysius as the most important Christian Platonist. In his introduction to *The Divine Names* Ficino notes:

> Although we speak of Dionysius elsewhere as the follower of the devout philosopher Plato, we are of the opinion nonetheless that he must be situated not only before the rest of the Platonists on account of his being the summit of Platonic doctrine, but also, on account of the new light of Christian truth, before Plato himself.[44]

It is therefore likely that Ficino was convinced of the connections between Plato and Pseudo-Dionysius and their similar ideas regarding spiritual ascent and the importance of the divine ray. As indicated earlier, for Ficino, the soul also possesses two lights. Our natural light is dim, and therefore is only able to grasp natural things. Thus, we must prepare ourselves to receive the higher light to

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[42] Ficino, D.N. III.3.
[43] *Ibid,* D.N.III.4.
[44] *Ibid*, D.N. I.1.

awaken the divine light in us.[45] This process is connected to the inner experience.

To prepare for ascent and receiving the higher light Ficino explains: 'Know yourself, offspring of God in mortal clothing. I pray you, uncover yourself. Separate the soul from the body, reason from sense desires; separate them as much as you can; and your ability depends on your endeavour.'[46] This inner knowledge of oneself is discussed in Ficino's *Commentary on Plato's Symposium* where he states, 'man who is not conscious of himself is certainly not conscious in himself.'[47] In his *Commentary on the Divine Names* Ficino describes the process of turning inwards like a stone being thrown into water since this action creates many circles.[48] This is because 'from a soul entering into itself many circles are successively born. First, it pays attention to itself, and from its own actions it recognises its own powers and nature.'[49] This inner understanding allows one to participate in the rational soul. Finally, 'in the circle through the angelic understanding, the soul contemplates God, the light of all understanding.'[50] This process brings about a separation of the soul from the body.[51] Ficino argues that the experience of separation of the soul from the body can be found across history. For instance, 'for fifty years Epimenides of Crete slept, that is in my opinion, he lived separated from his senses.'[52] Other

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[45] See Ficino, *On Dionysius*, M.T. II.1, IV.5; D.N. I.5, VII.2.
[46] Ficino, *Letters*, 164. Cf. Ficino, *Comm. Plat. Symp*, 161.
[47] Ficino, *Comm. On Plat. Symp*., 144.
[48] Ficino, *On Dionysius*, D.N. CVII.
[49] *Ibid*, D.N. CVII.12. Other examples of turning inwards include, Ficino, *Theo. Plat*. I.6.4-5 and *Letters* 5, 13.
[50] *Ibid*, D.N. CVII.13.
[51] See; Ficino, *On Dionysius*, M.T. XV.1.
[52] Ficino, *Theo. Plat*. XIII.2.2. Epimenides is a semi-mythical 7th or 6th century BCE Greek seer and philosopher poet. According to Diogenes Laertius, he met Pythagoras in Crete. For a full discussion see; Diogenes Laertius, "The Seven Sages: Epimenides" in *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, Robert Drew Hicks (trans), (Loeb Classic Library, 1925).

ancient figures that Ficino suggests underwent similar experiences were Pythagoras, Zoroaster, Socrates, and Plato. Thus, Ficino claims that 'Plato, though he had withdrawn far from his body frequently in the intensity of contemplation, eventually left his body's chains behind entirely in this very state of abstraction.'[53] Ficino also suggests that for an hour every day, 'Xenocrates was abstracted from his body.'[54] Such philosophers may be called divine because they have 'abandoned their body and taken refuge in the citadel of the soul.'[55] He reiterates Augustine's story of a priest at Calama, 'who was accustomed to withdraw himself from his body of his own free will, especially when he was soothed by plaintive harmony.'[56] For Ficino, what is happening in these experiences is that the soul is joined in unity with God. Therefore, the inner experience leads to the final tenet, a unification with God/the One.

Ficino explains what happens when the soul is joined in unity with God:

> Through this unity the soul is united to God, to the centre of all, to the pure unity; through this unity to soul reconciles the elements not only of this [human] body but even of the world's body; and through this unity alone is able to attain God.[57]

The quest of the ascent and the desire to become Godlike is 'no less natural to men than the effort to fly to birds; for it is always and everywhere present in all men.'[58] Humanity strives to become like God because it is God who 'has sown

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[53] Ficino, *Theo. Plat.*, XIII.2.2.
[54] *Ibid*, XIII.2.2. Ficino also suggests that Heraclitus, Democritus and Plotinus are all recorded as partaking in this practice.
[55] *Ibid*, XIII.2.2.
[56] *Ibid*, XIII.2.6. Cf. Augustine, *De civ. Dei*, 14.24.
[57] *Ibid*, XIII.5.3.
[58] *Ibid*, XIV.1.2.

this endeavour in our souls.'[59] Deification or the doctrine of theosis is grounded in both the old and new Testaments and was also discussed by the church Fathers.[60] In the early twentieth century, Adolf von Harnack and Wihelm Bousset argued that early Christians had assimilated the notion of deification in describing their eschatological hope due to the influence of Graeco-Roman culture.[61] More recently, scholars such as Paul R. Hinlicky and Bruce D. Marshall have rejected the idea that deification was assimilated from pagan culture, arguing that the notion of deification is rooted in biblical texts.[62] Ficino understood aspirations towards deification to have existed in both the ancient Hebrew and Greek worlds and to have been perfected in the coming of Christianity through Christ. Subsequent to the incarnation, the rapture and conversion of Paul is the most important evidence of the transformative power of unification with God for Ficino.[63] Jayne suggests that for Ficino, deification involves 'not the mystic ecstasy of Plotinus, in which the man loses his identity; it is a rational changing of personality, from that of man, to that of God. Humanity and divinity are united as potentiality and actuality.'[64] Humans can achieve this because God has enabled them to do so. Jayne also identifies a further difference between Ficino's deification and that proposed by Plotinus: 'Ficino insists that man's union with God, once accomplished, was permanent,

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[59] *Ibid*, XIV. 1.2.
[60] Psalm 82:6 is the most important old testament reference used in these discussions. Cf. Jn. 10:22-30. See also; Jerome H. Neyrey, "I Said: You are Gods: Psalm 82:6 and John 10" in *Journal of Biblical literature*, 108.4 (1989), 647-663. Jonathan A. Draper, "'If those to whom the W/word of God came were called gods…'- Logos, wisdom and prophecy, and John 10:22-30" in *Theological Studies*, 71.1 (2015), 8 pages.
[61] See; Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?* Thomas Bailey Saunders (trans), (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989),232-6 (first published as *Das Wesen des Christentums*, 1900); Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus*, John E. Steely(trans), (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1970), 420-53 (first published 1913).
[62] See Paul R. Hinlicky, "Theological Anthropology: Towards Integrating Theosis and Justification by Faith" in *JES* (1997), 38-73. Bruce D. Marshall, 'Justification as Declaration and Deification', *IJST* 4/1 (2002), 3–28.
[63] Ficino's *De Raptu Pauli* (On the rapture of St Paul) is a dialogue between St Paul and Ficino that uses Neoplatonic notions to discuss the account of **St Paul's** ascent found in II Cor. 12:2-4.
[64] Jayne, *Comm. On Plat. Symp*., fn. at 141. Cf. Lauster, *Christian Thinker*, 59-60, 67.

whereas Plotinus thought of it as a phase in the cycle of reincarnation.'[65] In this way, the culmination of the ascent and the act of unification with God brings about a transformation of the human soul. The entire process however belongs to God, as Ficino notes:

> But the blessed neither hurl their rays at God nor do they receive God Himself. Rather, they derive light from God Himself, and once they have derived it, God is not joined to the blessed person but the blessed person to God. For the blessed person does not take God in; rather God takes up the blessed person.[66]

The language used in this passage agrees with the traditional understanding of theurgy as "God-work". It is not the coercion of the practitioner that draws down the power of God; rather it is God that has recognised the divine light within the practitioner and allows the union to take place. The process is God-given, as is the experience of the unification. While Ficino has avoided using the term theurgy in his works, it can be seen that he is deeply indebted to the concept.

Ficino's ideas regarding spiritual ascent, the importance of the priest-doctor based on the *prisca theologia* and his understanding of the history of revelation indicate the way he viewed the concept of ancient religion. The similarities found across traditions regarding spiritual ascent, perfected in the coming of Christianity and evidenced in scripture and the early Church Fathers, demonstrated the existence of an ancient God-given religious wisdom. The concept of ancient religion for Ficino is intricately bound to the health and well-

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[65] *Ibid*, n. 141.
[66] Ficino, *On Dionysius*, D.N. XXI.6.

being of the body and soul, both physically and spiritually. Ficino's synthesis of ancient traditions with Christianity speaks to an inherent truth that has been in existence since the beginning of time, placed in humanity by God at conception. This universal concept of truth can be accessed by way of spiritual ascent, which was known in ancient texts as theurgy. Ficino's reluctance to use the term itself demonstrates the effectiveness of Augustine's rhetoric on the Latin speaking west. However, this would not be the case for Pico.

Chapter Five

Ideas of Spiritual Ascent in Pico della Mirandola.

Chapter one noted that Pico links the "sublime secrets of the divine intellect" with the practices of theurgy, magic, and cabala. Like Ficino, Pico drew on a range of philosophical and religious traditions which he saw as compatible with orthodox Christianity. Unlike Ficino, Pico included into his syncretism the Jewish tradition of Kabbalah. Discussing Pico's syncretism Liana Saif explains, 'his [Pico's] syncretism – bolder than Ficino's – is achieved through coding various levels of reality – physical, psychic and divine – using terms from various systems, particularly Kabbalah, astrology and mythology.'[1] While the ancient practices found in the Greek Philosophers, the *Hermetica* or the *Chaldaean Oracles* were no longer living religions, the Jewish Kabbalah appeared to Pico as a continued ancient tradition. The oral law had been handed to Moses on Mount Sinai and had been transmitted through history by the Jewish Kabbalists. Wirszubski suggests, 'Pico's attraction to the Kabbalistic way of discovering or recognising truth accounts for much that is entirely new in his Christian kabbala.'[2] This chapter will first examine the way Pico views magic before exploring the role of magic in his ideas of spiritual ascent. Kabbalah plays a significant role in Pico's syncretism and therefore the second section of this chapter will assess the Jewish influences that Pico used to develop his Christian Cabala. This chapter will conclude by comparing the ideas regarding Pico's conception of spiritual ascent with the seven tenets outlined in the

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[1] Liana Saif, *The Arabic Influences on Early Modern Occult Philosophy*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 124.
[2] Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism*, (Israel: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1989), 9.

introduction before evaluating what this tells us about the way in which Pico viewed magic and religion.

In 1486, when Pico was just twenty-three, he published his *Nine Hundred Theses* intended to be debated in Rome with the leading scholars of the time. These were accompanied by the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, written by Pico to introduce the planned disputation of the *Nine Hundred Theses*.[3] However, due to the controversial and allegedly heretical nature of several of the theses, Pope Innocent VIII suspended their publication and distribution and appointed a high-level commission to investigate the text. The commission initially deemed thirteen theses heretical.[4] In an attempt to defend his ideas, Pico wrote the *Apologia*.[5] The response was a condemnation of the entire *Nine Hundred Theses*, and as a result, the book was universally banned by the church with almost all copies being burned.[6] Consequently, the *Oration* was never published in Pico's lifetime. Yet, the *Nine Hundred Theses* and the *Oration* remain important texts for understanding Renaissance thinking on a number of subjects. Farmer observes, 'Pico's text covers a wider range of traditions than any other known fifteenth century work,' to the extent that it can be viewed as something like a 'handbook on late fifteenth century thought.'[7] The theses

[3] The title of the *Oration* is not by Pico but was given posthumously. First published by Pico's nephew Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola in 1496 under the title "*elegantissima orazione*" ("most elegant oration"). It received the subtitle "*De hominis dignitate*" in the 1504 Strasbourg edition.
[4] For a detailed discussion see; William G. Craven, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Symbol of His Age*, (Genèvae: Librairie Droz, 1981), 47-76. Of the original thirteenth condemned theses only one regarded magic and none of the theses on Kabbalah were condemned.
[5] The *Apologia* contained thirteen sections, each one to defend against the condemned conclusions.
[6] A further response to Pico came from Pedro Garsia, who countered both the *Nine Hundred Theses* and the *Apologia* in *Determinationes magistrales contra conclusiones apologeticas Joannis Pici Mirandulani Concordiae comitis* in 1487. See, Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico*, 294.
[7] S.A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486),* (Tempe: Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1998), 10.

included propositions relating to many scholarly questions of the fifteenth century, including, moral philosophy, metaphysics, logic, astrology, epistemology, numerology, theology, magic, amongst many more. According to Farmer, 'Pico is making two remarkable claims: firstly that his theses included "all the most ambiguous and controversial questions on which the principal schools battle"; and secondly that his text brought forward many other things that were "utterly unknown and untried".'[8] Specifically, the *Theses* include *Twenty-six Magical Conclusions According to My own Opinion* and the *Oration* provides insights into the way Pico defined "magic". The *Nine Hundred Theses* and the *Oration* therefore provide ample evidence of how Pico viewed themes of spiritual ascent, magic, and Cabala. Two other texts which aid in understanding Pico's thought are his *Commento,*[9] and the *Heptaplus*. Crofton Black suggests, 'In the *Commento* he gives details of three stages of cognition by which man can attain a direct knowledge of intelligibles; in the *Heptaplus*, although he maintains the psychological structure which makes this attainment possible, he emphasises that it is not the normal mode of thought during this life.'[10] Black contends, I think correctly, 'the theme of intellectual ascent therefore provides us with a perspective in which to view all of Pico's philosophical works up to 1489.'[11] Pico draws heavily on Ficino's understanding of the *prisca theologia* which the previous chapter has shown illustrates that an ancient wisdom is inherent through ascent narratives of the ancients. Therefore, this chapter

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[8] *Ibid*, x.
[9] See; Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Commentary on a Canzone of Benivieni*, Sears Jayne (trans), (New York: Peter Lang, 19984).
[10] Crofton Black, *Pico's Heptaplus and Biblical Hermeneutics*, (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 203. This change may be due to Pico trying to distance himself from the controversy caused by his Nine Hundred theTheses.
[11] *Ibid,* 205.

explores the extent to which Pico's ideas regarding spiritual ascent help illuminate the way in which he viewed magic and kabbalah.

In the *Oration*, Pico argues that there are two kinds of magic: 'one is based entirely on the deeds and powers of demons (and is, in truth, an execrable and monstrous thing); the other, when keenly examined, is nothing but the perfection of natural philosophy.'[12] Pico explains that the Greeks describe these two kinds of magic as "γοητείαν" (***goeteian***) and "μαγεία" (***mageian***), and concludes: 'the former is condemned and abhorred not only by the Christian religion but by all laws and every well-ordered state. The latter is approved and embraced by all wise men and by all peoples devoted to heavenly and divine things.'[13] Philosophers who, Pico says, 'crossed the seas to learn the latter, taught it when they returned, and considered it chief among the arcane doctrines' include Pythagoras, Empedocles, Plato and Democritus.[14] According to Pico, the form of magic that perfects natural philosophy was taught by **Zalmoxis** and Zoroaster; it teaches the 'loftiest of mysteries, [and] comprises the deepest contemplation of the most secret things and ultimately the knowledge of all nature.'[15] The **twenty-six magical conclusions** also argue this position, assuming that 'magic is the practical part of natural science'.[16] However, unlike the magic of Ficino, which does not feature directly in the

[12] Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man,* Francesco Borghesi, Michael Papio, and Massimo Riva (eds), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 227. This is a different division from the one discussed in chapter two which states that the opposite of *goetia* is *theurgia*.
[13] *Ibid*, 227.
[14] *Ibid*, 231. Cf. Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, John Healy (trans), (London: Penguin, 1991), 30.2; Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, 1.1.
[15] *Ibid,* 233-245, at 245. **Zalmoxis** is a God of the Getae in Thrace who grants immortality to his followers. See, Herodotus, *Histories*, 4.94-96.
[16] 9>3. Farmer, *Syncretism*, 495.

hierarchy of ascent (as discussed in the previous chapter), Pico argues for its direct inclusion.

In the *Oration*, Pico sets out his syncretic pathways to unification. Copenhaver notes, 'Pico divided his programme into a lower level, which is discursive, and a higher level, which is experimental and intuitive.'[17] This curriculum contains a seven-point approach to the ascent. Copenhaver explains that it starts with 'moral philosophy for purification (1) and ascend[s] through dialectic[s] for clarification (2) and natural philosophy for information (3) towards theology for meditation (4).'[18] These make up the lower part of Pico's programme. 'At higher levels, magic (5) and Kabbalah (6) lead to unification with God or divinization (7).'[19] In the *Nine Hundred Theses* Pico states at 9>15. 'No magical operation can be of any efficacy unless it has annexed to it a work of Cabala, explicit or implicit.'[20] Thus, magic and Kabbalah are **complementary** traditions placed by Pico in the final steps of ascent. As Copenhaver contends, 'magic connects with Kabbalah as a spiritual technique – like theurgy in Neoplatonic philosophy – to open routes to God ordinarily closed to humans.'[21] Given that magic and Kabbalah are symbiotic in Pico's higher levels of ascent, an understanding of Jewish influences on Pico is required.

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[17] Copenhaver, *Magic and the Dignity of Man: Pico della Mirandola and His Oration in Modern Memory*, (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 2019), 360. See conclusions 9>14 and 11>12 in Farmer, *Syncretism*, 499 & 525.
[18] *Ibid*, 360.
[19] *Ibid,* 360.
[20] Farmer, *Syncretism*, 499.
[21] Copenhaver, *Magic and Dignity*, 346.

Pico was introduced to Jewish Kabbalah through his acquaintance with three Jewish scholars, Elijah del Medigo, Flavius Mithridates, and Jochanan Alemanno, as noted in chapter one. Two other Jewish authors who inspired Pico's understanding of the Kabbalah were Recanati and Abulafia. Peter Forshaw suggests **the Jewish thinkers mentioned above** 'represent the bipartite division Pico proposes in his *Cabalistic Conclusions Confirming the Christian Religion*.'[22] This is a reference to conclusion 11>1, where Pico explains, 'in a first division I distinguish the science of Cabala into the science of *sefirot* and *shemot* [names], as it were into practical and speculative sciences.'[23] For Pico, speculative kabbalah is concerned with the *sefirot*, while the science of divine names is attributed to practical or ecstatic Kabbalah. The Doctrine of the *sefirot* represents the ten aspects of God contained within the *Ein-Sof*.[24] Scholem notes, 'the world of the *Sefiroth* is described, for instance, as a mystical organism' and the 'two most important images used in this connection are that of a tree and that of a man.'[25] The image of the *sefirot* as man will be discussed later in this chapter. The image of the tree sees each *sefirot* connected by a network of pathways known as the paths of wisdom which lead to the gates of intelligence for each of the *sefirot*. These gates are held to be guarded by angels.[26] Forshaw notes, 'although Pico does not enter into a detailed or systematic discussion of the important Kabbalistic doctrines of the *sefirot*, the **'paths of wisdom'**, and the **'gates of intelligence'**, he does show that he is aware of these teachings and understands their relation to kabbalistic

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[22] Peter J. Forshaw, "Kabbalah" in Christopher Partridge (ed), *The Occult World*, (London: Routledge, 2015), 541-551, at 543.
[23] Farmer, *Syncretism*, 519.
[24] The *Ein-Sof* represents the Infinite. 'This represents the true hidden essence of God, which is entirely unknown to humans and is rarely discussed in Kabbalistic texts.' Eliezer Segal, *Introducing Judaism*, (London: Routledge, 2009), 91.
[25] Scholem, *Major Trends*, 214.
[26] *Ibid*, 218-222.

theories of creation and revelation.'[27] The final seventy-two conclusions contain Pico's Christianisation of the sefirotic system in which Christology and trinitarian theology feature.[28] In this process, Copenhaver suggests, 'The Sefirot and God's names are actors in dramas of theology, cosmology, angelology, and anthropology whose themes are exile, death, atonement, and redemption—stories that Pico transposes onto the Christian Trinity and Jesus Christ, the Messiah.'[29] This process therefore demonstrates how Pico synthesised Kabbalah with Christianity to prove the primacy of the Christian message which had, in Pico's mind, become corrupt over time.[30]

The second type of Kabbalah proposed by Pico was inspired by the works of Abulafia **of whom** Pico's teacher Alemanno was a follower, known as practical or ecstatic Kabbalah. Idel defines Abulafia's ecstatic Kabbalah as 'highly anthropocentric, envisioning the mystical experience of the individual at itself the *summum bonum*, regardless of the possible impact of this mystical status on the inner harmony of the Divine'.[31] Lachter explains that Abulafia 'propounded a kind of Kabbalah that, in addition to many of the typical theosophical motifs, focused on meditative techniques and the recitation of divine names, letter permutation, numerical symbolism of Hebrew letters (*gematria*), and acrostics, designed to bring one to a state of ecstatic union with God to attain prophetic

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[27] Forshaw, *Kabbalah*, 543.
[28] Pico's reinterpretation saw the upper three sephirot linked to the trinity.
[29] Copenhaver, *Magic and dignity*, 346.
[30] It should also be recognised that Pico, and those Christian Cabalists that came after him, believed Christian Cabala would be an effective tool in the conversion of Jews to Christianity. See, Robert Bonfil, *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); John Edwards, *The Jews in Christian Europe: 1400-1700*, (London: Routledge, 1991).
[31] Idel, *New Perspectives,*xi.

illumination.'[32] The importance of the Hebrew language and its purported connection to magic was noted by Pico in magical conclusion 9>22, 'No names that mean something, insofar as those names are singular and taken per se, can have power in magical work, unless they are Hebrew names, or closely derived from Hebrew.'[33] As discussed in chapter two, Neoplatonists also employed the use of *voces magicae* as an aid for contemplative practice. Pico, however, is indicating in his conclusion that only the Hebrew language has such power in magical works.[34] For Copenhaver, 'meditation to induce ecstasy is the use of the holy names and characteristic of Abulafia, but [Pico] and other Cabalists taught that the names also enlarge theological understanding and reveal sources of magical power: theory and practice both start with names.'[35] Copenhaver's point is indicative of the ways in which a practice can be seen as religious in one aspect, yet be viewed as magical at another, with the introduction of contemplation on names specifically in Hebrew. Contemplation using names or words was a well-established Christian practice by the medieval period.[36] Pico's conclusion on the magical connection with the Hebrew language provides a strong example of how he synthesised magic with the Kabbalah in the higher levels of spiritual ascent. Moreover, Copenhaver equates Pico's discussions

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[32] Hartley Lachter, "Introduction: Reading Mysteries: The Origins of Scholarship on Jewish Mysticism" in Frederick E. Greenspan (ed), *Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah: New Insights and Scholarship*, (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 1-30, at 7.
[33] Farmer, *Syncretism*, 501. Cf. Conclusions 2>80 and 3>55. On the notion of Hebrew words as magic see, Gideon Bohak, "Hebrew, Hebrew, Everywhere? Notes on the Interpretation of Voces Magicae" In *Prayer, Magic, and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique World*, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003) 69-82.
[34] 2>80. If a first and not accidental language exists, it is clear through many conjectures that it is Hebrew. Farmer, *Syncretism*, 397. One of the most important Hebrew words used was the tetragrammaton. For a history see, Robert J. Wilkinson, *Tetragrammaton: Western Christians and the Hebrew Name of God*, (Leiden: Brill, 2015).
[35] Copenhaver, *The Secret of Pico's Oration*, 76.
[36] *Lectio Divina*, is partially shaped through the allegorical tradition of exegesis found in Origen and Augustine among others. It is 'a method by which reading and interior exploration of scripture can open the soul to a possible union with God.' See, E. Ann Matter, "Lectio Divina" in Hollywood & Beckman (eds), *Christian Mysticism*, 147-156, at 156. ***Meditatio*** would also uses scripture in a similar way. See, Thomas H. Bestul, "***Meditatio***/Meditation" in Hollywood & Beckman (eds), *Christian Mysticism*, 157-166.

regarding magic and Kabbalah with the Neoplatonic theurgy. To this we now turn, with an assessment of Pico's work against the seven tenets.

Humanity's position in the world is a central feature of Pico's syncretism. As explored in chapter one, a key feature regarding the notion of ascent is the idea that humanity occupies a unique place in the hierarchy of being as well as embodying a mirror image of the macrocosm. Idel suggests that in medieval and Renaissance Jewish thought, 'by virtue of the precise parallelism between the macrocosm and the microcosm, every human act resonates on the cosmic level.'[37] Therefore, 'this conviction reflects theurgical and magical understandings of Kabbalah which become even more evident from the late fifteenth century in both Spanish and Italian Jewish texts.'[38] Humanity operates in a unique place in the cosmos with their actions having a direct influence on the macrocosm.[39] Pico suggests, 'what man the magus makes through art, nature made naturally making man.'[40] This implies that the whole cosmos is united in humanity's nature. For Pico, humanity exists in a unique place in the hierarchy of being and can choose whether to descend to the senses and a life of materiality, or to choose to ascend to the heights of the higher intelligences. Pico proposes that all created creatures are 'constrained within the laws' that

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[37] Moshe Idel, "Man as the "possible" Entity in Some Jewish and Renaissance Sources" in Allison P. Coudert and Jeffrey S. Shoulson (Eds.), *Hebraica Veritas? Christian Hebraists and the Study of Judaism in Early Modern Europe*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 33-48, at 36. See also; Joseph Dan, "Medieval Jewish Influences on Renaissance Concepts of Harmonia Mundi" in *Aries* 1.2, (2001), 135-152.
[38] Idel, *Man as the Possible*, 36.
[39] This is linked to the image of the sefirot as man. On the Jewish mystical text at the heart of this doctrine see the translation and commentary by Martin S. Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qoma*, (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983). For a discussion regarding the link between the human body and God in Jewish thought see, Byron L. Sherwin, "The Human Body and the Image of God" in Dan Cohn-Sherbok (ed), *A Traditional Quest: Essays in Honour of Louis Jacobs*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 75-85
[40] 9>10. Farmer, *Syncretism*, 499.

were proscribed to them at creation.[41] However, humans are 'constrained by no limits' and may determine their nature 'according to your [individual] own free will.'[42] We are able to do this because humans were created 'neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal' and 'through your own decision' can 'rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine.'[43] Pico suggests that the unique position of man has been known since the Persians: 'that man is the midpoint between fixed eternity and fleeting time, the bond (as the Persians say) or rather the wedding-Song of the world, and only slightly inferior, as David affirms, to the Angels.'[44] Borghesi and Riva in their commentary on the *Oration* suggest that Pico's reference to the "Persians" might be a reference to a "Chaldaic" source.[45] The connection with the Persians and David is evidence of what Pico saw as the truth of ancients religions connection to the Jewish Kabbalah. This understanding of the relationship between world and eternity therefore correlates with the second tenet that ascent and theurgy are achieved through hierarchical systems and Pico demonstrates that this knowledge is found not only in the ancient Hebrew tradition but also in the Persian and Greek traditions.

Prayer and ritual are significant in the process of ascent. Copenhaver contends that the 'devotional practices described by the [*Magical]*

[41] Pico, *Oration*, 117.
[42] *Ibid*, 117.
[43] *Ibid,* 117.
[44] *Ibid*, 111. On the wedding-song of the world see *Chald. Oracles* Fag. 6.
[45] There has been much debate regarding the sources Pico claims to be Chaldaean. The Chaldaean material discussed in the *Nine Hundred theses*
contains material not found in either Psellus or Pletho's translations of the texts and the numbering system Pico uses also does not correlate with either of these translations. Farmer proposes two explanations for his source. The first is that Pico's tutor Flavius Mithridates forged Chaldaean materials and presented them to Pico as genuine. The second theory is that Pico fabricated the claim himself to distinguish his work from Ficino who had produced a translation of the Oracles earlier. Farmer, *Syncretism*, 487.

Conclusions are not just prayer and ritual but also mystical ascent to union with God – the union also urged in the *Oration*, where magic and Kabbalah are final steps of the ascent.'[46] It has been noted above that the ritual of meditation using the practice of Hebrew divine names was important for Pico. Magical conclusions 9>19[47] and 9>20[48] associate the power of words with the creation of the world in God's speech found in Gen. 1. In the *Heptaplus* Pico suggests, 'It is neither ridiculous nor useless nor unworthy of a philosopher to devote great and unremitting care to holy prayers, rites, vows, and hymns jointly sung to God.'[49] This indicates that at the lower levels of the ascent where philosophy plays an important role, the place of prayer is important. The power and efficacy of these prayers are strengthened in rituals which are found in the higher levels of ascent through magic and Cabala.

Angelic influences can aid the practitioner in their journey of ascent. The two lowest levels of the ascent are moral philosophy and dialectics. Pico suggests, 'Let us call upon Raphael, the heavenly physician, to set us free with moral philosophy and dialectics, as if healing drugs.'[50] Bori suggests that 'man's task is the emulation of the highest angels, and dialectics is the necessary intermediate stage in this mystical process.'[51] Drawing on the help of further archangels Pico states:

> Then, once we have been restored to health, Gabriel, the strength of God, will abide in us and, leading us through the marvels of nature and

[46] Copenhaver, *Magic and Dignity*, 346.
[47] Voices and words have efficacy in a magical work, because in that work in which nature first exercises magic, the voice of God. Farmer *Syncretism*, 501.
[48] Every voice has power in magic insofar as it is shaped by the voice of God. *Ibid*, 501.
[49] Pico, *Heptaplus*, 6.5. (This also contains the section regarding the *prisca theologia* and prayer).
[50] Pico, *Oration*, 181. Cf. Tob. 3:25. For Raphael as a healer see Tob. 3.25-26 and 11.8ff.
[51] As translated in footnote 52, Pico, *Oration*, 137.

> showing us everywhere the merit and power of God, he will finally deliver us to Michael the highest priest, who will in turn bestow upon us, who will have completed our service to philosophy, the insights of theological priesthood, as if a crown of precious stones.[52]

Here the archangels are represented as guides through the journey of the ascent. Pico argues 'if what Paul writes is true, […] all ministering spirits are sent to minister to those who are destined for salvation as their inheritance.'[53] The idea of angelic spiritual guides draws parallels with the Neoplatonic notion of daemons, to which, as was noted in the previous chapter, Ficino also drew comparison. The connection of angels and prayer was also noted in the work of Origen whom Pico greatly admired. Therefore, Pico's discussions surrounding prayer, ritual and the aid of beings agrees with the third tenet.

There is nothing in Pico's works to suggest that he did not view God as the ultimate Good. However, unlike Ficino, this concept of God is not mentioned repeatedly. There is nothing in the *Nine Hundred Theses* that challenges this and nor should it be expected since this would not be questioned by orthodox Christians. Therefore, the next tenet to be discussed is the metaphor and imagery of light in Pico's works. In the *Heptaplus*, Pico attributes light to Abraham and places him as the founder of religion. Abraham was 'the first to free himself from the law of nature and to meditate upon the divine law… therefore light is properly synonymous with him.'[54] This indicates that Pico expressly links light and illumination with religion. In the section titled *Platonic*

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[52] Pico, *Oration*, 181.
[53] Pico, *Heptaplus*, 5.6. Cf. Heb. 1:14. "Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation."
[54] Pico, *Heptaplus*, 7.1.

Conclusions According to his Own Opinion Pico asserts in 5>3, 'Whoever understands the way in which superior things illuminate middle things knows that the Platonists, by the congregation of souls on Mount Ida, and the congregation of souls on Mount Sinai in hearing the Law, mean the same thing.'[55] This thesis demonstrates that Pico believed the Greeks and ancient Hebrews had access to the illumination of the divine truth. This conclusion demonstrates the way Pico viewed ascent through philosophy, perfected in Cabala through the illumination of divine truth.[56]

The significance of the inner experience can be found in what Farmer describes as Pico's mysticism. Similar to Ficino, this is linked to Pico's understanding of the inner experience in the ascent. Farmer suggests, 'Pico's mysticism, despite numerous claims to the contrary, reflected the standard medieval compromise balancing human responsibility against the need for divine grace.'[57] As discussed above, humans have been given the ability to decide their fate in life and this is connected to the ability of the will. The inner experience is linked to contemplation. Pico notes, 'If you see a pure contemplator, oblivious to his body and absorbed in the recesses of his mind, this is neither an earthly nor heavenly creature: this is a still more eminent spirit, clothed in human flesh.'[58] In his *Heptaplus*, Pico suggests, 'Therefore, advancing in the footsteps not of beasts but of Moses, let us enter into ourselves, into the inner chambers of the soul, with the Prophet himself opening the way for us, so that we may successfully recognize in ourselves not only all the worlds but also our

[55] Farmer, *Syncretism*, 439. Cf. Plato, Laws, 681c. See also Ex. 19.
[56] See also, 11>55, *Ibid,* 335.
[57] Farmer, *Syncretism*, 39. Due to misreading's of the *Oration* it was common during the Renaissance for Pico to be noted as a voluntarist Pelagian.
[58] Pico, *Oration*, 133.

Father and our home.'[59] Thus, the higher levels of the mystical ascent are contemplative, inner experiences, and this is revealed by Moses as well as Plato. The culmination of the ascent is a unification. Pico notes in Conclusion 28.44. 'When the soul comprehends whatever it can comprehend and is conjoined to the superior soul, it will strip its terrestrial garment from itself, and be uprooted from its place, and be conjoined with divinity.'[60]

Pico describes the transformative experience at the height of unification as becoming angel-like. Riva suggests for Pico the end result is that, 'man's task lies precisely in the emulation of the angels and in what they represent.'[61] Moreover, Riva argues, 'Pico is trying to communicate to his intended audience his own deeply felt enthusiasm, his own vision and comprehension of the divine as a transformative, metamorphic power, directed both outward and inward.'[62] In his *Commento*, Pico suggests of the ascent, 'anyone who can do this well, certainly "ought to be followed like a god", as Plato says. Such a man is obviously divine, an angel on earth, able to ascend and descend on **Jacob's** ladder at will, in the company of other contemplative angels.'[63] As noted above, Pico's ideas of ascent are interwoven with his angelology and emulation of the Cherubic life is the goal of the contemplative life.[64]

Thus, in Pico, magic and theurgy as defined **in this thesis** are synonymous and part of the ancient religion rooted in ideas regarding spiritual ascent to gain

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[59] Pico, *Heptaplus*, Proem, 4.
[60] Framer, *Syncretism*, 363. The "superior soul" is most likely the "intellectual nature".
[61] Pico, *Oration*, 70.
[62] *Ibid*, 71-72.
[63] Pico, *Commentary*, 158.
[64] Pico*, Oration*, 143.

ancient wisdom. Following Pico's curriculum philosophy is the basis of humanity's journey, which as it ascends is joined to theology. Magic and Kabbalah provide the power and efficacy of the act of ascent, which is aided from the very start by the angelic hierarchies. This process allows for a unification and transformative experience in which humans have the ability to become angel-like. Drawing the comparison of unification with the Greek tradition Pico argues, 'This is the friendship that the Pythagoreans call the end of all philosophy, that peace which God makes in His heavens, which that angels who came down to earth announced to men of good will so that these men would, ascending to heaven, be transformed by it into angels.'[65] Pico confirms this transformation contending, 'If man then goes on beyond even the perfect form of human love, rising from one perfection to another, he will arrive at a level where he unites his soul entirely with its intellect, and become an angel instead of a man.'[66] The transformation into an angel is connected to the Kabbalistic tradition of the Biblical Enoch.[67] Copenhaver notes, 'This angel magic – a theurgy to emulate Enoch's transformation into Metatron – is a joyous surrender of human personality when all traces of the individual dissolve in God's supernal peace.'[68] Pico suggests that when human existence passes to intellectual existence, 'he is by that death transformed into an angel,' and that this is what is meant by the Kabbalists when they say, 'that Enoch was transformed into Metatron, the angel of divinity, or in general, that any other man is transformed into an angel.'[69] Thus, in Pico's understanding ascent

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[65] Pico, *Oration*, 153.
[66] Pico, *Commentary*, 125.
[67] See Gen. 5:21-24.
[68] Copenhaver, *Magic and Dignity*, 383.
[69] Pico*, Commentary*, 147. Metatron does not feature in the Hebrew Bible and his name appears in short passages in several places of the Talmud. For a full discussion see Andrei A. Orlov, *The Enoch-Metatron Tradition*, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

culminates in a transformative experience. However, it is not an experience with the One or the Ultimate Good, nor a deification as such. The fact that Pico refrained from arguing for a deification could be due to two points. The first, as has been discussed throughout this thesis is that the incarnation of Christ is the only incarnation. However, suggesting a unification with angels does not question this Christian doctrine. As such, Pico uses the Kabbalistic figure of Enoch and his transformation into Metatron as the culmination of ascent, in line with his curriculum as set out at the beginning of this chapter. The second, is the influence of Origen. The Church Fathers symbolised a purer form of Christianity and as discussed in chapter three, Origen proclaims the importance of living an angelic life and that those who do so, 'may be taken up into the order of the angels and are called **Sons of God**.' Therefore, Pico may have found in Origen the Christian perfection of the Kabbalist tradition of Enoch.

Pico's view of religion is therefore the same as Ficino's. Religion is seen as a divinely inspired truth, given to humanity by God at creation, that Pico demonstrates was made available to both the ancient Hebrews and the Greeks. **In this way, Pico expands his *prisca theologia*.** For Pico magic, is another path to illumination, this time attributed to the Greeks. What gives power to magic is its relationship to the Jewish Kabbalah. Thus, the lesser tradition of magic, which is ascribed to the Greeks and still a higher practice than philosophy, gains power through the Kabbalah, which Pico in turn perfects in the development of the Christian Cabala. This chapter has sought to show that the themes which Pico ascribes to the ascent are theurgic in nature. Pico's syncretism is complex, but it has emerged that for him theurgy, magic, and Kabbalah are all pathways

to illumination with Christian Cabala understood as the perfection of the ascent narrative.

Conclusion

Ficino argued that 'philosophy and religion are true sisters' and that for this reason 'the whole philosophy of the ancients is simply religion united with wisdom.'[1] One such practice which, according to the misdated texts used by both Ficino and Pico founded in the religion of the ancients, was theurgy. As has been seen in this thesis, while spiritual ascent through contemplation is viewed as orthodox by Christian thinkers, theurgy has been rejected as magic. However, the ideas of spiritual ascent articulated by thinkers such as Ficino and Pico bring theurgic and contemplative aspects together, mitigating against such clear definitions. The misdating of texts such as the ***Corpus Hermeticum***, ***Chaldean Oracles***, read together with works by Jewish Kabbalists, the works of Pseudo-Dionysius (also misdated) and the early Church Fathers offered Ficino and Pico - and with them other Renaissance thinkers – a new perspective on the history and transmission of divine mysteries. Taken together, these texts supported the idea of a single, pristine ancient religion, the *prisca theologia*. The similarities which Ficino and Pico saw in the ascent narratives of these different religions not only led them to develop a syncretic approach to Christian theology, but also blurred the lines between magic and religion.

Drawing on the revised tenets for the definition of theurgy proposed in the introduction, this thesis has shown that many of the practices intended to support spiritual ascent cross over between notions of religion and magic. Traditional definitions of theurgy highlight its connection to ritual acts, and the ascents found in the works of Ficino and Pico are indeed ritualistic. Andrew

[1] Ficino, *Letters* 6, 32.

Louth suggests that a theurgist is able to do divine things and Ficino substantiates this in his discussion of the priest-doctor. The literal translation of theurgy as "God-work" also applies to Ficino in particular who believed that his translations and commentaries were an act of divine Providence. Pico also appears to believe his work is divinely inspired in the Christianising of the Jewish Kabbalah. Thus, both the traditional definitions of theurgy and the seven tenets show Ficino and Pico's work to be theurgic in nature. Ficino's discussion regarding spiritual ascent was not challenged by the Church authorities. In contrast, while the initial condemnation of Pico only questioned one of his magical conclusions, his subsequent *Apologia* saw the entire theses banned as heretical. This led to the publication of Pedro Garsia's damning volume against Pico's magic, as presented in both the *Apologia* and the *Nine Hundred Theses*. However, Pico believed that magic combined with the Kabbalah provided an orthodox Christian ascent of the intellect. Both men held that the past was the key to unlocking the true nature of wisdom. Ficino and Pico saw themselves as orthodox Christians and throughout their works proved the primacy of the Christian message in their syncretism.[2] This agrees with Michael Bailey's assertion that any definition of magic is subjected to 'social and historical contexts' or 'at least certain cultural authorities.'[3]

Renewed interest in the Church Fathers represented not just a liberation from Scholastic theology, but saw Ficino and Pico challenge scholastic ideas of revelation and human opinion. Figures such as Origen represented a

[2] Further evidence of these approaches might be provided by an exploration of Ficino's natural magic and his doctrine of the four frenzies in relation to theurgy, and of the significance of prophecy in Ficino's and Pico's understanding of cabala, but this is beyond the scope of this thesis.
[3] Bailey, *Meaning of Magic*, 2.

reconciliation between classical literature and early Christian views. Origen embodied the ideal synthesis of Platonic wisdom perfected in the Christian message. Ficino believed that it was in Origen, as well as Augustine, that the Christian message was restored after the unknown "catastrophe" of the early church. In *Contra Celsum* Origen argues that ascent is only achieved through the practices of Christianity, yet acknowledges that the Platonists and Pythagoreans claim this practice for themselves. Pico's understanding of the culmination of the ascent draws from not only the Jewish Enoch/Metatron tradition, but also from Origen. Origen suggests that it is our moral obligation to strive to live an angelic-life and in doing so, humans can become "Sons of God". The Doctrine of Theosis (deification) is a feature of many of the Church Fathers and as such confirms the Christian message found in the culmination of ascent narratives.

Discussions surrounding the efficacy and orthodoxy of rituals would become an important feature during the Reformations and Counter-Reformations, as ritual traditions of the church found themselves condemned as magic, redrawing the boundaries between religion and magic once more. More recent scholarship beginning in the seventeenth century with Isaac Casaubon, has shown that the texts previously held to be ancient, were in fact, in the case of the ***Corpus Hermeticum*** and ***Chaldean Oracles***, products of the religious milieu of the second and third centuries CE. Therefore, the idea of the *prisca theologia* **waned as the seventeenth century advanced**. However, the way in which Ficino and Pico approached the similarities of ancient religions and their synthesis with Christianity demonstrates the beginning of ideas found in the study of comparative religion. One area of comparative religious study that benefits from the points raised in this thesis is mysticism. Exploring the ways

Renaissance thinkers such as Ficino and Pico viewed the concept of spiritual ascent and its relationship to religion and magic suggests that practices of magic should be brought into conversation with the traditions of mysticism, something which is not, as yet, commonplace in either religious studies or theology. As has been shown in this thesis, this reflects in large part the fact that the practice of theurgy and its denouncement by Augustine as superstitious magic has had a long-lasting effect on the way in which these ideas are still perceived in the Latin west.

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