Kirsty Pattison (University of Glasgow)

Contemplating Italian Renaissance Magic: Can Theurgy Usefully Blur the Boundaries Between Religion and Magic?

Abstract
The relationship between religion and magic holds a precarious position in history. One common understanding is that religion petitions while magic coerces. This understanding has seen magic stand diametrically opposed to religion, a viewpoint which appears to develop in the early centuries of the Christian era. The Christian tradition has often regarded narratives of spiritual ascent, particularly accounts of the practice known as theurgy, as controversial, particularly due to concerns that they might clash with Christin doctrine. The term theurgy (Greek θεουργία or theourgia), which appears to have originated in the *Chaldaean Oracles*, is a compound word which literally translates as 'god work'. It was adopted in late antiquity to differentiate between the ritual acts and practice, in contrast to theology, which can be literally translated as 'god speech' or speech about god. The act of contemplation has been viewed as orthodox by Christian thinkers, while acts of theurgy have generally been rejected as magic. This paper explores how ideas of spiritual ascent and theurgy found in the narratives of the ancient philosophers and Jewish Kabbalists can contribute to a better understanding of the complexities of the relationship between religion and magic and blur the boundaries of magic as defined by Renaissance mages such as Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) and Giovanni della Mirandola (1463-1494). This paper explores the benefits the boundaries between religion and magic of setting a new definition for the practice of theurgy for our understanding by comparing this ancient practice with the ideas of Ficino and Pico.

Key words: Magic – Religion – Ritual – Renaissance.

The relationship between religion and magic holds a precarious position in history.[1] Magic and religion are often treated as separate practices, but the boundaries between what constitutes the concept of "magic" and "religion" are fluid and ever-changing. In exploring the idea of spiritual ascent through contemplative practice and its relationship to the Neoplatonic practice of theurgy, a deeper understanding of the boundaries between the Renaissance understanding of "religion" and "magic" may be possible. Focusing on two key thinkers, Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), at the heart of these discussions is a quest for divine truth, which centres on their understanding of misdated texts and the development of the *prisca theologia*. The *prisca theologia* or 'ancient religion' was first proposed by Ficino in the fifteenth century who believed that 'from such founding-figures and representatives as Moses, Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, Plato, and Orpheus, who had supposedly bequeathed this unitary wisdom tradition to humankind in times immemorial' (Goodrick-Clarke 2008, p.6). Ficino and Pico are the focus of this paper given the intellectual contribution of both men to this area of the Renaissance. 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 demonstrated that the Christian message has been with humanity since creation, although somewhat veiled until the coming of Christ. This is not an exhaustive study of the complexities across history of the ever-changing boundaries between "religion" and "magic" but instead a case study of two figures of the Italian Renaissance to in order to open conversations between the field of Esoteric studies and theology. This paper argues that the concept of contemplative spiritual ascent and its relationship to the concepts of "religion" and "magic" should be brought into theological discussions, something which is not yet commonplace in theological studies.

The Italian Renaissance Humanist Project.

The Renaissance humanist project of recovering sources from classical antiquity led many thinkers to investigate notions of true knowledge and wisdom while grappling with definitions of magic and its relationship to practices found in classical antiquity. Saint Augustine (354-460 CE), who was greatly admired by Ficino, wrote 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' (*Retractationes* 1.12.3). In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the influx of newly discovered ancient Greek texts into Western Europe, quickly translated into Latin, allowed for a revival of Platonic discourse as well as a renewed interest in the Church Fathers. Ficino, who lived under the patronage of Cosimo de Medici (1389-1464) in Florence, is distinguished by contemporary scholars for his extensive translations of and commentaries on the Platonic and Neoplatonic corpus'. Most notable is Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (1463; published 1471), which renewed interest in Hermeticism (Hankins 1990, p.267-360). At the same time, the philological interests of humanists led to an increase in engagement with Hebrew texts by such scholars such as Pico leading to the development of Christian Cabala.[2] Through his extensive translation work, Ficino began to see a pattern

1. This article draws from my unpublished masters by research thesis, Ideas of Spiritual Ascent and Theurgy from the Ancients to Ficino and Pico, available at http://theses.gla.ac.uk/id/eprint/81873. My sincerest thanks to Prof. Charlotte Methuen for her continued support and guidance.

2. 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 paper, the Jewish tradition will use 'Kabbalah'. The Christianised tradition will use 'Cabala'. The only variation from this will be within a direct quotation.

in ancient discussions on wisdom which included ideas about spiritual ascent through contemplative practice, a practice known as 'theurgy'. Narratives of spiritual ascent, particularly accounts of theurgy, were controversial in the fifteenth century due to concerns that they might clash with Christian doctrine. The term 'theurgy' (Greek θεουργία or *theourgia*), which appears to have originated in the second century CE *Chaldaean Oracles*, is a compound word which literally translates as 'god work'. It was adopted in late antiquity to allow a distinction to be made between these practical ways of communing with God – i.e., ritual arts and practice – and theology, which can be translated as 'god speech' or speech about God, which was viewed as the theoretical approach. The act of contemplation has been viewed as orthodox by Christian thinkers, while acts of theurgy have generally been rejected as magic. However, can a deeper understanding of theurgy usefully blur the boundaries between "religion" and "magic", opening a dialogue between historians of magic, scholars of religion and theologians? One aspect that illustrates these issues is the way that "religion" and "magic" have been explained in scholarship.

The Problematization of "Religion" and "Magic".

In today's culture it is often assumed that terms such as "religion" and "magic" have a coherent meaning. Nonetheless, problems arise in scholarship when we try to set out clear definitions highlighting the instability of the term's "religion" and "magic" and the fluidity of the boundaries between these concepts across time. The difficulty with defining "magic" as J.N. Bremmer argues, is that it 'assumes that the definition of religion is already agreed upon' (2002, p.268). The intellectual history of "magic" began to receive serious academic consideration at the end of the nineteenth century. The "intellectualist" understanding of magic evolved from two pioneering anthropological works; *Primitive Culture* (1871) by Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) and *The Golden Bough* (1890; 1900; 1906-1915) by James George Frazer (1854-1941). For Tylor "religion" was defined as belief in spiritual beings. Frazer expanded on Tylor's approach developing an evolutionist triad which proposed that "magic" was the primitive stage in human development giving way to "religion", which in turn was superseded by "science" (Hanegraaff 2006, p.716). Frazer argues that 'magic typically sought to coerce or command spiritual forces while religion aimed to supplicate their aid' (1994, p.26-44). Against this background sociologists Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) and Marcel Mauss (1872 – 1950) developed the "functionalist" approach to magic. For Durkheim magical acts were conducted in private and for personal gain, while 'religious beliefs proper are always held by a defined collectivity that professes them and practices the rites that go with them' (2001, p.42). However, these generalisations are not always helpful since the boundaries between what is regarded as "religion" and what is regarded as "magic" are, and always have been fluid, and ever-changing.

The concept of "magic" remains a central feature in scholarly discourse as a tool to aid in the defining of "religion" (Styers 2004, p.6-25). However, it is important to note that the concept of "religion" is closely intertwined with Christian culture, more specifically Protestant ideals. Wouter Hanegraaff argues that 'the concept of "religion" emerged, during the early modern period, in response to a crisis of comparison caused by the increasingly overwhelming evidence for global diversity in human belief and modes of worship' (2016, p. 597). Through the works of Protestant reformers, the period of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries developed discourse that would become an important feature of reformatory and counter-reformatory discourse. It should be noted that these discussions are not commonplace in theological discussions of this period. The ideas presented by Protestant discourse in turn led to people in various social and historical contexts being categorised as engaging with magical practices when they themselves would not consider themselves to be performing magic at all (Bailey 2006, p.1-23). The period of the reformations would witness established traditions of the church, such as the

doctrine of transubstantiation, condemned as magic, redrawing the boundaries between the "correct religion" and "magic", and the ushering in of a new era of Christianity (Scribner 1993, p.475-94). Those who remained faithful to Catholic doctrine were therefore seen as operating outside of the new "right" religious doctrines. The notion of magic as an "outsider" practice was not new to Christianity. To further understand this perspective, an understanding of the etymology of the word magic is helpful.

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 (2012, p.169). This shows that the etymological foundation of the word implies something that is both religious and "foreign". The best-preserved classical Greek source using the term magi is the mid-fifth century BCE text *Histories* by Herodotus (c.484-c. 425 BCE), (1.101, 1.132). The connection between the magi and Zoroaster was made when Pliny the Elder (23/24-79 CE) named him as the inventor of magic in his *Natural History* (30.2.3). Hanegraaff notes that 'these origins became highly important from the Renaissance on, as seen in the attempts of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola ... to promote a positive understanding of magic as the "ancient wisdom" of Zoroaster' (2012, p.169). This correlates with Augustine's understanding mentioned above that there was an ancient religion that was perfected with the coming of Christ. For Ficino and Pico, the ancient wisdom was coherent with Christian Theology, and informed the way in which both thinkers defined religion.

Ancient Wisdom and the *Prisca Theologia*.

The Renaissance understanding of an ancient wisdom is linked to the development of Ficino's *prisca theologia*. As previously noted, the notion of the *prisca theologia* rests on the tradition of misdated texts. One of those texts that was crucial to the Renaissance understanding of the *prisca theologia* was the *Chaldaean Oracles*. Ruth Majercik explains they 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' (1989, p.1). During the Renaissance, the *Oracles* came to be attributed to the Persian Zoroaster through a translation by the Byzantine scholar Georgios Gemistos Plethon (ca. 1355-1472). However, as C.M. Woodhouse notices, scholars now recognise that 'there is no authentic ground for associating them with Zoroaster or the Persian Magi' (1986, p.48). Ficino followed Plethon's understanding of the *Oracles* connection to Zoroaster. The effect being that the term theurgy was attributed to a much earlier date than the second century CE.

The second misdated text is that of the *Corpus Hermetica* translated by Ficino who believed that the author Hermes Trismegistus was a contemporary at the time of Moses (Campanelli 2019, p.54). The preface to Ficino's *Corpus Hermeticum* contains a clear example of his *prisca theologia*:

> Mercurius Trismegistus [Hermes] 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' 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 (as translated in Walker, 1972, p.25-6).

The chain of transmission was understood by Ficino as not as a transmission from person to

person, but as individual cases of ancient theologian and philosophers who had received a similar revelation from God, even although this message was veiled. What Ficino believed these thinkers had in common are descriptions of contemplative spiritual ascent and the practice of theurgy. Pico draws from the same ancient sources as Ficino but included ideas from the Jewish Kabbalah. For Pico, the 'Christian Kabbalah was a specific manifestation of *prisca theologia*' (Hanegraaff 2012, p.9). Pico saw the Kabbalah as a living tradition, one that remained until his own time, in contrast the religions of the Egyptians, Persians and Greeks which survived only through texts (Hanegraaff 2012, p.56). Therefore, Pico incorporates his understanding of the kabbalah into his own 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 (as translated in Walker, 1972, p.23).

Not only does Pico consider the Mosaic tradition of the same lineage as the doctrines of Pythagoras and Zoroaster, but also suggests that the sacred knowledge that was transmitted was theurgic, which he equates with Cabala and magic. This understanding therefore informed the way in which Ficino and Pico defined their concept of religion.

The concept of "Religion" for Ficino and Pico.

In an undated letter to his fried Antonio Zilioli, Ficino argues that 'philosophy and religion are true sisters' (letter 18 1999, p.32). Ficino goes on to explain:

> 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 (1999, p.32).

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 religion, to which philosophy can 'raise us up'. The discovery of new sources in the Renaissance allowed thinkers to appreciate ancient wisdom as a *praeparatio evangelica*. As noted previously, the wisdom bestowed upon the ancient theologians and philosophers was veiled. The coming of Christ revealed these great mysteries. One aspect which all of Ficino's *prisci theologi* consider in their writings is discussions and practices of spiritual ascent. Thus, "religion" and "ancient wisdom" are intertwined for Ficino and can be traced through similarities in the narratives of spiritual ascent through contemplative practice. Pico draws similar conclusions demonstrated in his *prisci theologi* incorporating the Jewish Kabbalah. In a world in which correspondences were seen as part of God's design, the idea of an ancient wisdom and religion could flourish. To understand how ideas of spiritual ascent and theurgy were viewed by Ficino and Pico, an assessment of the history of theurgy is required.

Re-framing Theurgy.

Fritz Graf notes that 'the decisive step toward blending magical and philosophical traditions was made by the creation of theurgy, as expressed in the *Chaldean Oracles*' (2006, p.721). These ideas were further developed by the Neoplatonists, in particular by Iamblichus (c.245-c.325 CE) whose understanding of theurgy shapes his understanding of Plato. According to Andrew Louth, the term θεουργία (theurgy) 'seems to have been fashioned in 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' (1986, p.432). Iamblichus held that theology was *logos*, "talk about the gods", which was a human activity. However, theurgy was the work of the gods 'capable of transforming man to a divine status' (Shaw 2014, p.5). It is the idea that the act of theurgy is divinely given that is important for this discussion. Therefore, an understanding of what makes a practice theurgic is necessary.

Claire Fanger suggests there are three basic 'elementary structural traits' to the practice of theurgy. These 'involve rituals to affect the soul's purification, tend to involve intermediary beings (gods, angels, daemons) and culminate in a revelatory experience (2012, p.16). Fanger's traits provide a broad generic approach to identifying rituals that come under the term theurgy. Given the importance of the *Chaldean Oracles,* an assessment of the features of Chaldean theurgy should be considered. Majercik places the *Oracles* in a 'middle Platonic milieu' suggesting 'affinities with both Gnosticism and Hermeticism' (1989, p.3). Thus, Majercik identified 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 (1989, p.4).

George Luck considers theurgy as 'an initiation into the highest mystery of all, union between man and god' (2000, p.111). Fanger's traits makes no mention of a union between the practitioner and divinity focusing on "revelation", while Majercik hints at the possibility of a transformative experience yet it is not specific that the practitioner is the focus. This article argues that the aspect of deification is a vital component of the Renaissance conception of theurgy. If ideas of spiritual ascent and theurgic practice are the vehicle by which ancient philosophers and theologians received knowledge of the ancient religion, a revival of their practices would raise serious questions for the Church in crisis during the Renaissance. Who has the authority to decided what is a genuine revelation from God, or a false revelation from the devil in disguise (2 Cor. 11:14)? Using Fanger and Majercik as a guide I propose a new framework by which to assess the theurgic nature of texts. This expanded seven-point framework has been developed with Ficino and Pico's understanding of correspondences in mind and is based on a Christian theological understanding of theurgy.

By expanding on Fanger's traits and drawing on the observations of Majercik, this framework is designed as a more robust framework by which to assess texts. 1. Humanity is perceived as inherently flawed. 2. One ascends through a hierarchical system. (The hierarchy is linked to the theory of emanation found in the Enneads by Plotinus which describes the origin of the material universe, which is multiple, generating from the One, which is unitary. The Plotinian fourfold scheme suggests this hierarchy is found in the One, Intellect, Soul and Nature). Within the hierarchical system there may be beings (gods/angels/daemons) that

mediate between man and the ultimate Good/God. 3. The soul's ascent through the hierarchy is made possible through the acts of ritual and prayer. 4. God/The One, is the Ultimate Good and the highest level of reality. 5. The language used is apophatic (negating concepts that might be applied to the One/God) with a cataphatic (positive) emphasis on God/The One as light. 6. There is a strong emphasis on inner experience and the knowledge of self. 7. The goal is a union with God/the One, culminating 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 the use of "magical formulae" (*voces magicae*), interaction with spiritual beings, and the ability to draw deities into inanimate objects such as statues and stones. Opinions regarding the orthodoxy of such practices in the Christian West rests on traditions of Christian doctrine, many of which were born in the spiritual milieu of late antiquity.

Theurgy in Late Antiquity.

In Greek late antiquity, theurgy was an intrinsic part of philosophy. According to Algis Uždavinys, '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' (1994, p.xiii). The contemplative practice of Platonic philosophy did not originate with the Neoplatonists. Plato writes in *Theaetetus*, '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' (176b). These ideas were developed by Neoplatonists Plotinus (c.204/5-270 CE), Iamblichus (c.245-c.325 CE), Proclus (c. 410 – 485 CE) and Damascius (c. 458- c. 538). For Plotinus, the process of emanation out from the one also encompasses the process of return which establishes perfect balance in the Universe (*Enneads* V.1.1-12). Plotinus argues that 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' claim of a partially descended soul and with that the rejection of the idea that philosophy alone could aid the soul to the One. Iamblichus argues in *De Mysteriis*, '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 (II 11.96-97.2). The techniques and understanding of who or what enables the ascent of the practitioner vary depending on which thinker is read.

Porphyry (c. 234-c.305) claimed that the act of theurgy was an attempt to coerce the gods. Shaw notes that Iamblichus' position was a response to Porphyry's claim (1999, p.579). In chapter twelve of *De Mysteriis* Iamblichus writes, 'the gods in their benevolence and graciousness unstintingly she their tight upon theurgists, summoning their souls to themselves and orchestrating their union with them' (I.12). Proclus' discussion of theurgy stems from his readings and understanding of the Chaldean Oracles. 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' (1989, p. 11; C.f. Frag 28). Hermeticism discusses similar practices within its texts. In the first text of the Corpus Hermetica known as *Poimandres*, a conversation between an unnamed character and a deity known as Poimandres takes place. The overall theme of their discussion is the ascent. Verse twenty-six of *Poimandre*s states, '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' (C.H. 1:26). The common features found within the three traditions relate to what Ficino identified as a universal religion. Therefore, it is possible that Ficino believed that the practice of theurgy was 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.

The Christian Perspective of Theurgy.

The Neoplatonic-Chaldean-Hermetic conceptions of theurgy allow a practitioner to transcend to the One/God and thus become like God. However, in what had become defined as orthodox Christian theology by the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, the incarnation of Christ was a unique historical experience brought into being by the substance of the father. The ability of Christ to absolve sin is dependent on his divine status. If anyone could become God-like, Christ would have no soteriological significance. Tertullian (c. 155-c.220 CE) argued in *De Idolatria* that, 'Idolatry is the chief crime of mankind, the supreme guilt of the world' (1987, p.23). Both old and new Testaments take a clear stance on idolatry with Galatians 5:19-21 placing idolatry and sorcery/witchcraft together in the list of practices that would prevent those from partaking in the kingdom of God. Both Irenaeus (c.130-c.202 CE) in *Adversus Haereses* and Origen (c.184-c.253) in *Contra Celsum* theorised about magic in their works. However, it was Augustine's conclusions regarding theurgy as a magical practice that would become prevalent in western Christendom. Augustine begins his attack on theurgy in *City of God* (c.426 CE), Book Ten, criticising 'spells and charms 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 name of "theurgy"' (*Civ. Dei* X.9). For Augustine, this art is false and to be refuted: '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; we must listen to the teachings of salvation' (*Civ.Dei* X.10). Augustine exhorts Christians to 'listen to the teachings of salvation', propounding the view that the practice of theurgy cannot aid the practitioner in attaining salvation; any claims to salvation through this practice he considers false and aided by demonic powers. Demons are presented in Augustine as intermediaries between the gods and humanity, and it was this intermediary position that encouraged humans to engage in magical practices (*Civ. Dei* VIII.18). 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 recognised as "religion" and "magic"' (1994, p.381). In Augustine, theurgy is firmly on the side of demonic magic.

To further understanding the uncomfortable relationship between Christianity, the sixth-century Greek theologian known as pseudo-Dionysius must be explored. Unlike Augustine, pseudo-Dionysius uses the language of theurgy positively to set forth his views on divine meditation. Writing in Greek, pseudo-Dionysius uses the term *theourgia*; however, Latin translations of his texts never use *theurgia*, instead the translators use terms such as '*divina operatio'* or '*operatio Dei'* instead. Shaw asks, 'why are Christian theologians reluctant to admit that Dionysius was a theurgist?' (1999, p.542). The answer to Shaw's question is clear: the rhetoric against the practice of theurgy by Augustine placed theurgic practice so firmly in the category of "magic" that theurgy was hence-forth perceived in the Latin West as using demonic forces to achieve its goals and was therefore avoided. Shaw notes that even in Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem's translation of the *Complete Works of Pseudo-Dionysius* (1987), the term *theurgia* and its cognates were not translated as such, even though they appear in the Greek text forty-seven times. Ficino translated works of Pseudo-Dionysius in the fifteenth century and avoided using the word theurgy. Ficino held Dionysius to be the disciple of Paul mentioned in the Book of Acts (17:34), the embodiment of the way the Pagan message is perfected in Christ for those who open their heart to Christianity. Given Augustine's denunciation of the practice of theurgy, Ficino's position as a theologian deeply rooted in the ecclesiastical tradition may have caused him to refrain from using the term "theurgy" itself, although throughout Ficino's work influenced of Neoplatonism are found.

Ideas of Ascent in Ficino and Pico.

Ficino read Plato through the lens of Neoplatonism and believed 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. As noted above, the most controversial aspect of theurgy is the transformative experience. Ficino explains in his *Theologia Platonica* 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 (*Theo.Plat*. XIII.5.3).

The quest of the ascent and the desire to unite with God is 'no less natural to men than the effort to fly to birds; for it is always and everywhere present in all men' (*Theo. Plat*. XIV.1.1). Ficino held that humanity strives to unite with God because it is God who 'has sown this endeavour in our souls' (*Theo. Plat*. XVI.1.2). Ficino understood aspirations towards deification to have existed in the Old and New Testament as well as in the Platonic, Hermetic and Chaldaic texts. Sears Reynold 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' (1944, fn.p.141). Humans can achieve this because God has enabled them to do so. The entire process 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 (Ficino, 1944: p.141).

This passage corresponds 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 who 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 unification. Although Ficino avoids using the term 'theurgy' in his works, he is deeply indebted to this concept. Ficino's synthesis of ancient traditions with Christianity alludes to a perceived inherent truth that has been in existence since the beginning of time. The universal concept of truth can be accessed through spiritual ascent, that is, by processes or practices known as theurgy.

As discussed above, for Pico, magic, cabala, and theurgy are all synonymous, part of the ancient religion rooted in ideas regarding spiritual ascent to acquire wisdom. Magic and cabala provide the power for and efficacy of the act of ascent, which from the very beginning is aided by the angelic hierarchies. This process allows for a unification and transformative experience. While Ficino discusses unification without explicitly using the term 'theurgy', Pico uses the term to a limited extent. However, this is likely due to the lack of written material left by Pico due to his untimely death by poisoning at the age of thirty-one that leaves us wanting for a more detailed account of how he viewed notions of spiritual ascent and the practice of theurgy. What we do find in Pico is a discussion of a transformative process, namely in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, written as the opening speech to his Nine Hundred Theses to be presented at Rome (1486). Pico proposes a transformative experience which allows humans to

become 'angel-like'. Drawing a comparison of unification with the Greek tradition, Pico argues in his *Commentary on a Canzone of Benivieni* that 'this is the friendship that the Pythagoreans call the end of all philosophy, that peace which God makes in His heavens, that which angels who came down to earth announced to men of good will so that these men would, ascending to heaven, being transformed by it into angels' (1984; p.153). Pico confirms this transformation, contending in his Oration that: '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' (2012; p.125). The transformation into an angel is for Pico connected to the Enochian and Kabbalistic tradition of the Biblical Enoch (Gen. 5:21-24). As 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' (2019; p. 383). 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' (Pico, 1984; p. 147). Thus, in Pico's understanding, ascent culminates in a transformative experience. However, it is not an experience with the One or the Ultimate Good, nor a deification as such, but it does allow for man to transform into a divine power. 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* (1487) resulted in the banning of all nine hundred theses as heretical and the to the damning publication of Pedro Garsia's *Determinationes magistrales*, which denounced both Pico's *Conclusions* and *Apologia*. One man's Christian orthodox writings are perceived as another man's magic.

Conclusion.

As has been shown, Ficino and Pico held that the tradition of an ancient wisdom was tightly bound with the notion of spiritual ascent, the practice of theurgy. Ficino argued that 'philosophy and religion are true sisters', and this paper argues that one of the ways Ficino came to this conclusion was through ideas of spiritual ascent and theurgy found in the texts of the *prisci theologi*. The similarities that Ficino and Pico saw in their respective *prisca theologia* suggest that both men developed a syncretic approach to Christian theology which blurred the lines between the concepts of "religion" and "magic". In expanding the framework by which the Christian approach to theurgy is defined, it is evident that the boundaries between religion and magic are not stable, blurring and ever-changing depending on who is writing and what era they are writing in. Therefore, exploring the ways that Renaissance thinkers such as Ficino and Pico viewed "religion" and "magic" may be useful in understanding the way theological issues surrounding ideas of spiritual ascent and theurgy were discussed in the reformations and counter-reformations period.

Bibliography

Augustine. 1984. *City of God*. Trans. Henry Bettenson. London: Penguin.

Bailey, Michael. 2006. The Meaning of Magic. *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*. 1(1). 1-23.

Bremmer, Jan N. 2002. Magic and Religion. In Jan N. Bremmer & Jan R. Veenstra (eds.), *The Metamorphosis of Magic from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, 267-271. Leuven: Peeters.

Campanelli, Maurizio, 2019. Marsilio Ficino's portrait of Hermes Trismegistus and its afterlife. *Intellectual History Review* 29(1). 53-71.

Copenhaver, Brian P. 2019. *Magic, and the Dignity of Man: Pico della Mirandola and His Oration in Modern Memory*. Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press.

Copenhaver, Brian p. 1992. *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Durkheim, Émile. 2001. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fanger, Claire. 2012. Introduction. In Claire Fanger (ed.), *Invoking Angels: Theurgic Ideas and Practices, Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries*. 1-33. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Ficino, Marsilio. 2004. *Platonic Theology*, Trans. Michael J.B. Allen with James Hankins and William Bowen, Vol.1-6. Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press.

Ficino, Marsilio. 1999. *Letters* vol.6. London: Shepard-Walwyn.

Ficino, Marsilio. 1944. *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*. Trans. Sears Reynolds Jayne. Columbia: University of Missouri.

Frazer, James. 1994. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion, Abridgement from the 2nd and 3rd Editions.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Goodrick-Clarke, Nicholas. 2008. *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Graf, Fritz, 2006. Magic II: Antiquity. In Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek and Jean-Pierre Brach (eds.), *The Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*. 719-724. Leiden: Brill.

Hanegraaff, Wouter J. 2006. Magic I: Introduction. In Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek and Jean-Pierre Brach (eds.), *The Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, 716-719. Leiden: Brill.

Hanegraaff, Wouter J. 2012. *Esotericism and the Academy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hanegraaff, Wouter J. 2016. Reconstructing "Religion" from the Bottom Up. *Numen* 63(5). 576-605.

Hankins, James. 1990. *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, Vol.1. Leiden: Brill.

Herodotus, 1998. *The Histories*. Trans. Robin Waterfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Iamblichus. 2004. *De Mysteriis*. Trans. Emma C. Clarke, John Dillon and Jackson P Hershbell. Leiden: Brill.

Louth, Andrew. 1986. Pagan Theurgy and Christian Sacramentalism in Denys the Areopagrite. *The Journal of Theological Studies* 37(2). 432-438.

Luck, George. 2000. *Ancient Pathways and Hidden Pursuits: Religion, Morals, and Magic in the Ancient World*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.

Majercik, Ruth. 1989. *The Chaldaean Oracles: Text, Translation, and Commentary*. Leiden: Brill.

Marcus, Robert. 1994. Augustine on Magic: A Neglected Semiotic Theory. *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes* 40. 375-388.

Mauss, Marcel. 2001. *A General Theory Magic*. London: Routledge.

Pattison, Kirsty Laura. 2020. *Ideas of Spiritual ascent and Theurgy from the Ancient to Ficino and Pico*. University of Glasgow: MTH thesis. http://theses.gla.uk/id/eprint/81873.

Plato. 1987. *Theaetetus*. Trans. Robin Waterfield. London: Penguin.

Pliny the Elder, 1991. *Natural History*. Trans. John Healy. London: Penguin.

Plotinus. 1991. *The Enneads*. Trans. Stephen MacKenna. London: Penguin.

Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni. 2012. *Oration on the Dignity of Man,* Eds & trans. Francesco Borghesi, Michael Papio, and Massimo Riva. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni. 1984. *Commentary on a Canzone of Benivieni*. Trans. Sears Reynolds Jayne. New York: Peter Lang.

Scribner, Robert. 1993. The Reformation, Popular Magic, and the 'Disenchantment of the World'. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23. 475-94.

Shaw, Gregory. 2014. *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*. Kettering: Angelico Press.

Shaw, Gregory. 1999. Neoplatonic Theurgy and Dionysius the Areopagite. *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7. 572-599.

Styers, Randall. 2004. *Making Magic: Religion, Magic & Science in the Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tertullian, 1987. *De Idolotaria: Critical Text, Translation, and Commentary*. Eds. & Trans. J.H. Waszink and J.C.M Van Winden. Leiden: Brill.

Tylor, E.B. 1871. *Primitive Culture*, Vols. 1-2. London: John Murray.

Uždavinys, Algis, 1994. *The Golden Chain: An Anthology of Pythagorean and Platonic Philosophy*. Bloomington: World Wisdom Inc.

Walker, D.P. 1972. *The Ancient Theology: Studied in Christian Platonism*. London: Duckworth.

Woodhouse, C.M. 1986. *Gemistos Plethon: The Last of the Hellenes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.