PRISCA THEOLOGIA IN MARSILIO FICINO AND IN SOME JEWISH TREATMENTS

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1. Unilinear and Multilinear Theories of Prisca Theologia

Those aspects of Renaissance thought which constitute 'occult philosophy' operated with two basic forms of religious lore both claiming, or at least attributed to, hoary antiquity: the Greek and Hellenistic corpora translated by Marsilio Ficino into Latin, and the Kabbalistic literature, studied in Hebrew or in Latin translation. This double, coincident and sudden encounter invited the emergence of strategies of validation and legitimation to appropriate them in an intellectual and religious atmosphere dominated by Christian dogmatics. Indeed, Christian intellectuals in the West encountered, for the first time, fully-fledged treatises which included doctrines that proposed Platonism and the various versions of Neoplatonism not only as authoritative philosophical sources but also as transmitters of religious doctrines, which were expounded in an esoteric manner. This theory is known as prisca theologia. In the last generation scholarship has paid due attention to this theory in the Christian Renaissance, contributing seminal studies to the topic.¹

Ficino’s contribution to this theological strategy was decisive, and much of what happened after his translations and commentaries was the reiteration of his ideas about chains of transmission of the ancient lore. In the following essay, an attempt will be made to accentuate some aspects of Ficino’s historiography of knowledge which have not yet been highlighted. The brief discussions of the Jewish material will not only add points of comparison but, in the case of Ficino, may throw light on nuances in his fluctuating view of *prisca theologia*, which was also shaped by his debate with Judaism.² In any case, it is clear from some of the discussions below, as well as some that cannot be addressed in this framework, that Kabbalistic contents, some of which are not to be found in other forms of Judaism, helped in the adoption and adaptation by some Jewish intellectuals of themes that permeate the *corpus* translated by Ficino. I would say that the privileged status enjoyed by Kabbalah, conceived of as an ancient Jewish mystical theology, in Ficino’s circle should be taken into consideration when dealing with his views of *prisca theologia*, as is the case with other Renaissance instances, most remarkably Leone Ebreo’s *Dialoghi d’amore*.³

There were two main theories that allowed the adoption of those doctrines into a Christian monotheistic framework: the first contends that they agree with Christian theology because they were influenced by a primeval tradition which included or at least adumbrated the tenets of Christianity; the alternative argues that the affinity between these two bodies of thought has no historical explanation but is the result of a revelation or a series of revelations imparted separately

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³ See Idel, ‘Kabbalah and Ancient Philosophy’. In general I would say that the discussions of *prisca theologia* in the studies mentioned in n. 1 above have neglected both Kabbalah and Leone Ebreo’s views. See, however, the important study of Bernard McGinn, ‘Cabalists and Christians: Reflections on Cabala in Medieval and Renaissance Thought’, in *Jewish Christians and Christian Jews: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, ed. by R. H. Popkin and G. M. Weiner, Dordrecht and London, 1994, pp. 11–34.