MARSILIO FICINO AS A CHRISTIAN THINKER: THEOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF HIS PLATONISM

Jörg Lauster

1. Introduction

Five hundred years after Marsilio Ficino’s death the celebrations in England, France, Italy and elsewhere have demonstrated once more that Ficino has an honoured place in Western philosophy. Whether the physician of the Medici, the canon of Florence cathedral and the head of a philosophical circle earned this place thanks to his work as translator and commentator of Plato and Plotinus or to his own writings or—as is most likely—to both, depends on one’s point of view. It is not advisable to separate these two aspects of Ficino’s work. Ficino did not carry through his enormous project of translation and commentary merely to satisfy a philological interest. Rather, he pursued the idea of a Christian Platonism and for that purpose a knowledge of the writings of Plato and Plotinus was indispensable. He gave an exact account of why Christian theology can and should use Platonic reasoning, and developed a theory about the history of revelation in antiquity which allowed him to presume a divine origin for Platonic philosophy, and which served as an historical argument to demonstrate the affinity of Christianity with Platonism. One of the most important results of this is the way in which Ficino tried to abolish the separation between religion and philosophy with his programme of docta religio and pia philosophia.\(^1\)

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\(^1\) In the following essay I try to resume the basic results of my research on Ficino’s theory of redemption in *Die Erlösungslehre Marsilio Ficinos. Theologiegeschichtliche Aspekte des Renaissanceplatonismus*, Berlin and New York, 1998.


\(^3\) Cf. Marsilio Ficino, *Opera omnia*, 2 vols, continuously paginated, Basel, 1576;
In developing this programme Ficino naturally had to deal with theological questions that the tradition of Christian thinking presented. Nearly everywhere in his work are allusions, passages and even treatises reflecting his engagement with Christian theology. Some writings, moreover, are so dominated by these themes that we can simply call them theological works. The foremost piece is, of course, *De Christiana religione*, Ficino’s great apology for the Christian religion. In the first part of the work, in addition to his famous remarks on the relationship between philosophy and religion, he explains how the authority of the Christian religion can be upheld with good reasons against the Jews and Moslems. The second part argues in detail against the criticism and rejection of particular Christian doctrines, for example, the theory of the Trinity or the Incarnation. Ficino treats theological questions repeatedly in his twelve books of letters, especially in Book II. Among these letters *De raptu Pauli* should be especially noted. Here Ficino uses the example of St Paul’s *raptus* to heaven to explain his theory of the soul’s ascent to God through the various cosmic degrees. In the *Opera omnia* we also find a collection of sermons, the *Praedicationes*, in which Ficino discusses very detailed problems of Christian theology, as, for example, the resurrection of the body or the doctrine of the Sacraments. Finally, Ficino wrote a commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. This work exists only as a fragment, the commentary coming to a premature end at Rom. 5:12. The reason for that rupture may have been Ficino’s death. At least we can say that it is one of his latest works. Allusions suggest that he intended to comment on all the letters of St Paul. If Ficino


*4 It may not be superfluous to mention that I am using here and in what follows the modern conception of theology as reflection on the concerns of the Christian religion, and not the conception of Ficino himself, who could call his main philosophical work *Theologia Platonica*.

*5 Cesare Vasoli has demonstrated that Ficino wrote a ‘philosophical’ first part and then compiled a second from the texts of various medieval theologians, particularly Paul of Burgos; see C. Vasoli, ‘Per le fonti del *De christianae religione* di Marsilio Ficino’, *Rinascimento*, 2a ser., 28 (1988), pp. 135–233.