The Pagan Gods in Marsilio Ficino's Christian Platonism

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Abstract: The basic aim of Marsilio Ficino is to unify Christianity with Platonic philosophy, while referring to the "ancient wisdom" present in both. However, for him, Platonic philosophy comes hand in hand with ancient gods. To make use of them, Ficino claims to write not as a theologian but as "poet". Most typically, the ancient gods are allegories of astral influences on human affairs. But according to Platonists, stars are ensouled beings, gods expressing their effective powers – not just natural forces. Here, Apollo/Phoebus, the solar god and allegory of the Sun, is of special importance: for Ficino, solar and light metaphysics is generally crucial. In his *De vita*, he demonstrates how the stars, i.e. the ancient gods in their mythological context, help cure human bodies, including the subtle-material body, i.e. the animating "spirits". This "magical" cure is made possible through hidden and ubiquitous sympathies between all the stars, metals, stones, animals, flowers, and sensual qualities in general, which are all interlinked with certain gods. Although Ficino emphasises that this system of natural magic is limited to "nature", it seems that, in fact, his "imitating of the stars", and thus of the ancient gods embodying them, can ultimately have a higher, theological relevance.

Keywords: Marsilio Ficino; Pagan Gods; Christian Platonism.

1. Introduction

In his *opus magnum*, the *Platonic Theology on the Immortality of Souls*, Marsilio Ficino aims at substantiating Christianity by means of Platonic doctrines: a of "Christian Platonism".[1] This involved uniting two pillars of the "ancient wisdom" (*prisca sapientia*): Christianity, which goes back to Moses, as the ancient receiver of the Wisdom of God; and Platonism, the roots of which can be found in the works of Hermes Trismegistos, Zoroaster, and later Pythagoras and Plato, interpreted by the Neoplatonist philosophers.[2] Ficino embodied such a unity in himself when he, a Platonic philosopher and a physician, was ordained a priest in 1473.

For Friedrich Schiller, whose *Götter Griechelands* brought an 18th century literary revival of ancient gods, the deities represent an ideal of harmony, beauty and power, which was lost in the world in which spirit and sense are enemies.[3] Once again, he put antiquity against the world of Christianity. It is an attitude which had had an old tradition, although to join both was no less common. Of course, the Renaissance is *the* period when looking back to antiquity was the main program. The ancient motifs became ever-present in visual art, and also philosophers took the ancient Greek and Roman mythology as a mine to dig new ideas and combine them in their theories and concepts. If we look into some of Ficino's texts, we find pagan gods almost everywhere. Why? And is such an attitude fitting for a Christian philosopher and priest?

To answer these questions, two steps are necessary. First, we should turn our attention to how and in what sense ancient gods were used by Christian authors before Ficino.[4] And second, we will look at what, in fact, ancient deities meant for Ficino and what – if anything – was special in his attitude towards the ancient gods.

2. Pagan gods and Christianity before Ficino

"What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"[5] The famous question by Tertullian suggests a clear position which, however, was far from the reality of the first Christian centuries.[6] Already Justin Martyr saw Greek philosophy (Heraclitus, Socrates) as a prelude to Christianity as the true philosophy: whatever was said correctly by the Greek philosophers belongs also to Christians.[7] Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and, especially, Augustine later corroborated such a view in their ways.[8] This, however, pertains rather to philosophy than to mythology.[9]

It is true that authors like Tatian (a student of Justin) or Athenagoras of Athens cannot stand pagan gods.[10] But, in fact, the first Christian apologists were themselves educated in the Greek culture. Especially in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, Christianity was cohabiting with pagan mythologies relatively long. The knowledge of pagan mythologies was a sign of education and literary culture, not a part of religion. Ancient gods were interpreted allegorically and morally (but similarly was the Bible).[11] Euhemerism became a quasi-standard interpretation of the gods as eminent historical rulers or heroes. This approach made it possible to incorporate pagan motifs into the Christian discourse.[12]

Another way of admitting polytheistic pantheon into the monotheistic religion was shown by Plutarch in his *De Iside et Osiride*. What distinguishes various religions are just names of gods, not their essence. They are for him, similarly as for the Stoics, names of the cosmic realities: Intelligence, Providence, and Powers.[13] A similar attitude was demonstrated by Apuleius in his *Metamorphosis*.[14] From a more philosophical perspective, we can, perhaps, relate this to Proclus' identification of the "Henads", as the aspects of the divine and absolutely transcendent One, with pagan gods.[15] As such, they are heads of the vertical "chains of being" (*seirai*): these "series" are powers with

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specific qualities which, penetrating all world, make horizontal and vertical connections among all things based on a system of universal sympathies and antipathies.

The meaning of the pagan gods and of Christian God, with his trinitarian mystery, was, of course, an object of early disputes between pagan Neoplatonists and Christian philosophers. A common instrument to show the proper meaning of one's god was allegory.[16] Plato himself used, and debated the use of, allegories, and so did his followers. In the *Republic*, he presented his famous allegories of the cave and of the Sun.[17] In the *Cratylus*, he discussed etymological-allegorical interpretations of Homer.[18] At the same time, he criticized the rationalization of myths in the *Phaedrus* (229c6 ff.). And, in the famous passage of the *Republic*, he claims that Hesiod, Homer and "other poets" related "untrue myths". Such poets are not allowed in his republic: the youth would not be able to distinguish allegories from plain truth (*Rep*. 377b-379a; 386b).[19]

The Neoplatonists applied allegories to interpret the ancient myths and Plato himself.[20] Plotinus, for example, presented an allegorical interpretation of Plato's *Symposium*.[21] The way for the Christian use of allegories was pathed by Philo of Alexandria with his allegorical exegesis of both the Bible and Plato's *Timaeus*.[22] Augustin in his *City of God* takes pagan gods for deified heroes, principalities or powers which were situated in nature by their Creator.[23] However, for a pagan Neoplatonist this might indicate a mischievous deed and a false attempt to save what inherently was a nonsense. Porphyry, an author of the allegorical treatise *Cave of the Nymphs*, addresses, in his *Against the Christians*, the false use of allegory by Christian authors (Origen).[24]

Let us skip the ancient debates and look at the Middle Ages. According to Jean Seznec, there are four traditions in which the ancient mythological lore was transferred to later generations: the historical tradition (turning gods into historical figures), the physical tradition (connecting gods with planets), the moral tradition (allegorizing the myths in moral tales), and the encyclopaedical tradition (summarizing all previous tendencies and sources).[25]

One of these domains seems specific: astrology. In Europe, it was largely influenced by treatises of Arabic and Persian origin. As Klibansky, Saxl and Panofsky, the authors of the *Saturn and Melancholy*, say:

> In astrology generally, but especially in astrological notions of planetary rulers who have inherited the names and qualities of the great Olympic gods, ancient piety had been preserved in an apparently profane form; and it was to remain so much alive in the future that the very gods who had been turned into stars – that is to say, apparently stripped of divinity – were an object of pious veneration and even formal cults for hundreds of years afterwards, while those not turned into stars … continued to exist merely in learned compendiums and allegorical moral tracts…[26]

Thus, astrology was the only place where the pagan gods, or at least some of them, could live their authentic lives and retain their old attributes. But the very connection between the ancient gods and the stars/planets as physical bodies was only possible thanks to stoics and their rationalistic interpretation of the pagan myths, reducing them to their allegorical meanings and stripping off their "personal" character, making them purely natural powers.[27] Such astrological interpretations were particularly suited to the Neoplatonic metaphysical systems, such as that of Proclus or Macrobius, as they, after all, shared the same mythical and natural philosophical foundations.[28] For Proclus, gods became rulers of the astral influences, while for Macrobius, they were connected with the planetary spheres through which the souls were making their journey to the body; in both cases, however, they have become faculties of the soul.[29] The astrological symbolism which was using the names of the ancient gods reappeared in the Latin West during the "renaissance of the 12th century" when authors such as William of Conches and Bernardus Silvestris began re-reading Plato's *Timaeus* and the Hermetical *Asclepius*.

But there were also the compendia in which pagan gods entered the medieval cosmos as allegories of moral values and explained by means of etymologies and euhemerism. They stood in the tradition going back to Varro, Cicero, Virgil, Ovid, and Pliny, which was collected by authors such as Servius, pseudo-Lactantius, Fulgentius, Hyginus, Macrobius and Martianus Capella, and later entered the world of medieval thought through the encyclopaedical works of Isidore of Sevilla and Rhabanus Maurus. But for the knowledge of classical mythology in the Renaissance, most important were yet other works. A special importance fell to the so-called *Mythographus III*, an author possibly identical with Alexander Neckham (+ 1217), for whom the pagan gods became only names for various manifestations of God's influences in the world.[30] This was a standard handbook of ancient mythology up to Petrus Berchorius and his introduction to the *Metaphorphosis Ovidiana moraliter explanata* (1340), which not only brought an allegorical and moral interpretation of Ovid but aimed, again, at reconciling pagan myths with Christian teachings.

The medieval studies of ancient mythology culminated in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*.[31] Boccaccio presents the richness of pagan deities and their relationships and explains how to adapt them to the Christian faith. In the footsteps of Latin authors as Cicero, Apuleius, and Macrobius, Boccaccio was convinced that the mythological stories had a hidden meaning,[32] or rather many meanings which are useful to learn from the Greeks. He tried to unmask them by use of astrological and moral explanations, allegories, etymologies, and euhemeristic claims that the gods were just extraordinary human beings.[33] For him, poetry is of divine origin and, as such, it can give allegorical account of divine truths.[34] That is why Boccaccio asserts, in his *Life of Dante*, that the ancient poets were writing about very noble and sublime things, and that poetry and theology are almost the same.[35]

Before we finish our very brief and fragmentary overview, it is inevitable to mention another author who dealt intensively with paganism and pagan gods: Gemistus Plethon who was considered pagan not only by his contemporaries but also by many modern scholars.[36] We might expect Plethon's conception of gods to have had some bearing on Ficino: Plethon, a Greek scholar well versed with ancient philosophy and culture, visited the council of Florence, and his visit became crucial for the philosophical Renaissance. Ficino himself testifies for his importance when writing that Plethon had given lectures

on Plato during the time of the Council that made Cosimo de' Medici establish the Platonic Academy in Florence two decades later.[37] Plethon also handed the texts of Plato to Cosimo, which Ficino later translated into Latin and commented upon.

At the beginning of his *Laws*, Plethon announces "the theology according to Zoroaster and Plato". For him, Zoroaster was an ancient wise to whom he, in his commented edition, ascribed the authorship of the so-called *Chaldean Oracles*. This influenced Ficino to acknowledge Zoroaster's primacy in the history of the *prisca sapientia*.[38] However, Plethon's conception of pagan gods is very specific, and it seems to hardly have any reasonable influence on Ficino. Unlike his predecessors who dealt with pagan gods and their myths, his use of the names of pagan gods is strictly philosophical and rationalising (as if following Plato's advice considering the rational myths in his *Republic*[39]) For him, their names designate philosophical principles in his cosmological system. So far, this could be an approach similar to that of Proclus. But Plethon, when speaking of the Greek gods, avoids the, in his opinion, mistaken accounts of the poets and elaborates on them solely "in accordance with philosophy". In this systematic elaboration, he departs way far from traditional genealogies of gods, their classical attributes and roles. This was, certainly, not Ficino's way.[40]

3. Ficino and the Pagan Gods

3.1. Allegories

We know that Ficino's younger colleague, Pico della Mirandola, was considering writing a treatise on pagan myths and their hidden meaning, called *Poetica Theologia*. Pico was sure that the ancient mythographers were hiding their secrets and so they covered them with "enigmatic veils and poetic dissimulation" that needed to be revealed.[41] Although Ficino did not write any such work in which he would undertake a systematic exegesis of the ancient gods, nor did he plan to, many explanations are scattered all over his works. His interpretation, however, seems very different from Pico's. Ficino uses the names of astral and non-astral deities and ultimately relates them to his astrological-magical theories and allegorical interpretations of the invisible realm. This is especially, but by no means uniquely, true of his books *On Life* and the twin-treatises *On the Sun* and *On Light*.

In the beginning of his book *On the Sun*, Ficino refers to his translation and commentary of Plato. He emphasises Plato's comparison of the Sun to God which became the leading motif of the present book.[42] The book deals with the "mystery of the Sun", and Ficino calls it a "gift of Phoebus" (i.e., the Sun) which he is sending to Pietro Medici as to a "patron of the Muses and a great disciple of Phoebus". Phoebus-Apollo is summoned as a guarantee of his ruminations, a leader of the Muses who "sing with him". Mercury, "the inventor of disputations", also "plays with Apollo", while he contemplates over more serious things with Saturn and Jupiter.[43] This is to support Ficino's reservation that, in his book, he will debate his subject – the Sun – not "dogmatically" but "in a manner of Apollo and quasi-poetically", as a "play" and an "allegorical and anagogical [i.e., mystical] exercise of the wits".[44] He does not aspire to a metaphysical or physical explanation but intends to proceed from the visible to the invisible "by means of similes taken from light", and thus to arrive "from the Sun to God, who has made the Sun his sanctuary", indeed his "visible image" and his "representative". As he adds elsewhere:

> In the book *On the Sun*, I do not so much teach astronomical things as I seek moral allegories through them and examine their anagogical relation to divine things. ... in the books *On Life* and *On the Sun*, I mix philosophical and poetic things quite freely...[45]

Obviously, the names of the pagan gods are part of a "poetical" way to deal with the subject otherwise reserved for theology which, however, uses another, "more dogmatic", style.

But to use poetical language does not mean that Ficino's exposition is *only* a play. As he remarks, he follows "a pythagorical and, indeed, divine principle" according to which we cannot speak of divine things "without light" – i.e., without divine "illumination" *and* without the examples of the "visible light".[46] Similarly as for Plato and Boccaccio, real poetry is imbibed with divine influence.[47] This is the ecstatic drunkenness which Ficino describes in his commentary on Plato's *Republic*,[48] and the first of four levels of the "divine frenzy", as he distinguishes them elsewhere.[49] That is also why "poetry" enables, for Ficino, a higher elevation of the human spirit than philosophy and theology - although it is hardly usable to establish a theological or political system.

As a Christian, Ficino uses the method of Neo-Platonic allegorical exegesis in combination with biblical exegesis and with the use of Dionysian symbolic theology. In his book *On the Sun*, he provides a "rather poetical" interpretation of planets and their interrelationships, mixing astronomical observations with Greek and Roman mythology, observations of nature and Platonic concepts. Most of Plato's words, says Ficino, demand an allegorical interpretation.[50] Thus:

> When he [i.e. Plato] says 'God' he means Apollo; when he says 'Muses' he means the souls of the spheres of the world. Of course, Jupiter is the mind of God, from which comes Apollo, the mind of the world-soul and the soul of the whole world, together with the eight souls of the celestial spheres, those nine souls being called the nine Muses because as they move the heavens harmoniously they produce musical melody which, when distributed into nine sounds, namely, the eight notes of the spheres together with the one harmony of them all, gives rise to the nine Sirens singing to God. Wherefore Apollo is led by Jupiter, and the Muses are led by Apollo, that is, the chorus of Muses is led by the mind of the world-soul, because just as that mind is illuminated by Jupiter, so does it illuminate the souls of the world and of the spheres. Now the levels through which that frenzy descends are these: Jupiter seizes Apollo; Apollo gives light to the Muses; the Muses arouse and stir up the gentle but invincible souls of the poets; the poets, being inspired, inspire their own interpreters; the interpreters move the listeners. Some souls are seized by some Muses and others by others, because some souls are allotted to some spheres and stars and others to others, as is maintained in the Timaeus. ... Apollo, moreover, is the soul of the Sun, and his lyre is the body of the Sun. The four strings are the four movements of the Sun: yearly, monthly, daily, oblique. The four tones – the Neate, the Hypate, and the twin

Dorians – are the four threefold groupings of the signs, from which the four qualities of the seasons arise.[51]

In his commentary on Plato's *Laws*, Ficino similarly explains the "allegorical teaching" and shows what is *signified* by the Muses, Apollo and Bacchus.[52] Commenting on the fifth book of the *Laws* where foundations of the ideal city are discussed,[53] he shows how the pagan deities are connected with the twelve signs of the zodiac and also with parts of the human body: "just as the body is a unit, though composed of many limbs", so also "the state must be a single unit, though composed of many citizens".[54]

However, the *Laws* and the anti-poetical parts of the *Republic* are not what Ficino usually has in mind when invoking Plato. For him, Plato spoke in stories and parables, more like a priest and a prophet than a philosopher, and his words purify the soul from agitation, separate the mind from the senses, and above all turn the mind to God to be enlightened by him; all this with the help of parables and dialogues that convince us more strongly and move us more deeply.[55] Thus, obviously, the allegory is *not* only another way how to say the same. What is crucial is the idea that the knowledge of God cannot be acquired by rational arguments but *by means* of symbols, allegories and analogies (*comparationes*). On the one hand, Ficino is well aware that God, or the Good itself, is unattainable and incomprehensible.[56] On the other hand, he seems to believe that this is true, primarily, for the rational cognition. Thus, for him, allegories are not merely a preferred rhetorical device for describing and provisionally grasping the ineffable, but indeed a practical means of *achieving* it. In his interpretations of Plato, Ficino points out repeatedly that humans can only reach their goal, that is the knowledge and love of God or the divine light, by way of their purification and likeness to the divine. This is an essential part of Ficino's thought.[57]

In this perspective, the pagan gods *cannot* be only different names for philosophical principles, as in the case of Plethon's rationalist interpretation of the pagan pantheon. In the sense of what has just been said, they must be capable to *move* us.

3.2. Natural magic

In my opinion, such a practical approach can be traced back to Ficino's *magia naturalis*. Here he makes an intense use of astrological symbolism which is built upon Greek and Roman mythologies and genealogies of the gods. At the same time, the natural magic relates, for him, to the allegory of the Sun and to the metaphysics of light: the most sublime perceptible entity in the world is light, and therefore it is light that serves as *the* image of the invisible, spiritual realm.[58]

Now, let us have a look at the *Three Books on Life* where Ficino develops his conception of the natural magic. Right at the beginning of the book, in the foreword to Lorenzo de' Medici, he invokes *Bacchus* – not Apollo-Phoebus, the solar god, as we might expect. Bacchus is the "supreme prelate of priests" because a perfect priest must be "deeply drunken with God" and thus "reborn". It also signifies, according to Ficino, that he is not writing with "gravity" but "rather in a style that is free and jocose". And he remarks that the mention of Bacchus may "be a sign not without meaning", because he "*heals* more salubriously" than Phoebus.[59] On the other hand, as Ficino often remarks, Apollo-Phoebus and Bacchus are inseparable brothers. Phoebus is the inventor of medicines and teacher of poetry who "gives us of his life not only by herbs but through the lute and music".[60]

All this is related to the fact that this text is not only a theoretical treatise but a practical instruction. In fact, the *De vita* is intended as a vade-mecum for scholars who, because of the character of their intense and focused studies, are in danger of excessive melancholy (the cold and dry bodily humour, related to the element of earth). It proposes advises which are *healing*. In the first two books of the *De vita* trilogy, such a healing, or prophylaxis, is focused, primarily, on the material body. The third book, however, is mainly concerned with processes in the "subtle" body – i.e., not only the sensory but also the cognitive, emotional and volitional components, for which the movements of the subtle-bodily "spirits" are responsible.[61] Ficino keeps assuring us that his "natural magic" is indeed limited to the "natural", medical contexts. But there are hints in his other works that it may have overlaps to higher ontological levels.[62]

The healing process uses the "three Graces", as emphasized by Ficino, i.e., the three beneficial "stars": Jupiter, Sun, and Venus.[63] Their positive influence is explained by use of astrological and mythological contexts. The most favourable for humans is the influence of Jupiter, whose "quality is very balanced, and whatever we ask of the Sun or Venus we get from him in his way"; moreover, it leads to philosophy, the discovery of truth and religion. Practically, this means the use of various plants, medicinal mixtures, stones, colours, scents and sounds which traditional astrology and astro-medicine associated with various planets and their characteristics. Thus, they were in a hidden sympathy with the planets, in accordance with the Neoplatonic "series". The aim here is to prepare and purify our bodily "spirits" by natural remedies and bring them to the proper harmony with the "spirit and life of the world". The "spirit", according to Ficino and the medical tradition, is a superfine entity that mediates between the material body and the immaterial soul. For Ficino, the same holds true for the world itself which is also a living being:[64] the immaterial soul of the world and the material world are connected by the world spirit.[65] It is diffused and coloured, so to speak, by means of the rays of the stars and planets and it is present in all things from which we can draw it. This omnipresent entity is, basically, the transmitter of life, the principle of which is the soul. The substance of the spirit itself is of a solar, Jovial, Venusian and Mercurial nature, while Saturn, Mars and Luna have little in common with the healthy spirit, but on the contrary make it dull and foolish.[66]

Therefore, we should accommodate us to the influence and qualities of the three ancient deities primarily, Jupiter, Apollo and Venus. We should even *imitate* them.[67]

3.3. Images

A specific way of how planetary influences – or the pagan gods who personify them -- can be used by us, according to Ficino, is by means of their magical images or talis-

mans. Although Ficino repeatedly expresses the reservation that he personally does not recommend this part of natural magic but only refers to it, given the space he dedicates to this topic, it is hard to believe him.[68] Thus he says:

> Then there are the particular written characters of the signs and planets as delineated by the Egyptians. They want all these, therefore, to be engraved on images. For example, if anyone looks for a special benefit from Mercury, he ought to locate him in Virgo, or at least locate the Moon there in an aspect with Mercury, and then make an image out of tin or silver…[69]

Or:

> To obtain long life, the ancients used to make an image of Saturn from the stone Feyrizech, that is, sapphire, in the hour of Saturn, when he was ascending and fortunately placed.[70]

This, again, pertains, to the idea of drawing life from the soul of the world and of making our *spiritus* as "heavenly" as possible[71] -- now with the help of images which can condense so to speak the planetary, and generally heavenly, influences. This way, the magical planetary images, i.e., the pagan gods, can be used to "heal" our subtle-material body: our thoughts, our will, our emotions, our feelings.

Finally, Ficino offers an even more spectacular way of healing which consists in exposing our "spirits" to the "image of universe" (*imago universi ipsius*). This method is described in the 19th chapter of the third book *On Life*. As he says, one should "sculpt an archetypal form of the whole world" in bronze and then imprint it, at the right time, "in a thin gilded plate of silver", but not in "the day of Saturn". The engraving should be done "on the birthday of the year, especially if then Jupiter and Diana [i.e. Venus]" are present. It is important to work not only with "lines" but also with colours. It is good to "add to the spheres, for a true imitation of the heavens, golden stars, and to clothe Vesta herself or Ceres, that is, the earth, with a green garment". Such and image should then be not simply observed but "reflected upon in the mind":

> In like manner, in the very depth of his house, he should construct a chamber, vaulted and marked with these figures and colours, and he should spend most of his waking hours there and also sleep. And when he has emerged from his house, he will not note with so much attention the spectacle of individual things as the figure of the universe and its colours. … You, however, will fashion a better image within yourself when you know that nothing is more orderly than the heavens and that nothing can be thought of that is more temperate than Jupiter; you should hope at last to attain benefits from the heavens and from Jupiter…[72]

Obviously, this "universal image" should attract the beneficial powers of the "Three Graces", and especially those of Jupiter. The gods mentioned here are representants of planets, and thus of various qualities of the "spirit" drawn from the heaven, as the next chapter explains. They are not just allegories but real forces and powers. According to those (Arabic authors) who believe it, Ficino says here, these astronomical and magical images and statues enclose "the spirits of the stars". As he remarks, "some regard the spirits of the stars as wonderful celestial forces, while others regard them as daemons attendant upon this or that star".[73] They can "take possession of human bodies and speak, move themselves or other things, and work wonders through them". Some also believe that the "daemons who inhabit the cosmic fire are insinuated into our bodies through fiery or ignited humours, and likewise through ignited spirits and fiery emotions". Similarly, "through rays caught at the right time and through fumigations, lights and loud tones, the spirits of the stars can be introduced into the compatible materials of images and can work wonders on the wearer or bystander":

> The Arabs say that when we fashion images rightly, our spirit, if it has been intent upon the work and upon the stars through imagination and emotion, is joined together with the very spirit of the world and with the rays of the stars through which the world-spirit acts. And when our spirit has been so joined, it too becomes a cause why (from the world-spirit by way of the rays) a particular spirit of any given star, that is, a certain vital power, is poured into the image - especially a power which is consistent with the spirit of the operator.[74]

3.4. The Sun

As we have saw in the beginning, a specific position belongs to Apollo-Foebus, the god of the Sun, or rather the Sun itself. Here, the peculiarity of Ficino's approach to the ancient gods is, perhaps, most visible. For him, the Sun is not a body, a natural object, but, as all planets, primarily an animating soul which is identical with its moving god. It is one of the Three Graces, so that

> whoever could grasp the light and heat of the Sun in all its purity and the quality with which they exist in it, and adapt them to his own use and in his own way, would take from thence eternal youth, or live at least one hundred and twenty solar years.[75]

The case of the Sun is special, however. Its light is not a natural light but has been infused in it directly from God.[76] Not from the pagan god Apollo, but from the Christian Triune God. But the light and "spirit" are similar and close related entities for Ficino. Thus, we may assume that if we receive the vital spirit and the light of the Sun, on the one hand, we receive its life-giving natural power, but, on the other hand, we receive here something from beyond of the purely natural.

4. Conclusion

In a way the pagan gods represent astral powers for Ficino. These are not philosophical principles like Plethon's. If anything, they are the heads of the "series" of beings, as in Proclus. For Ficino, however, the mythological stories are of great importance as they reveal how the gods interact with each other and which ones can rely on as our benefactors. Gods are not just imaginative allegories that could be fully rationally explained. They are, in Ficino's view, autonomous powers, even souls, which can be "invocated" for help. The "world spirit" of the living world is imbued with them, and, trhough it, they can foster our own "spirits". They can be used to enhance our life if we know how to get into contact with them and how to "imitate" them.

It is important to keep in mind the overall context of Ficino's *De vita*: its aim is to cure the melancholic malady of scholars. Ficino keeps repeating that he does not stretch it any further. He is certainly no "polytheist", as gods for him are limited by nature. Still, his project of the natural magic may be more daring. This is, perhaps, best visible on his conception of the Sun which, as the symbol of the invisible God and as a bearer of the divine light, overlaps into the realm of the super-natural.[77] As Michael Allen has shown, the higher goal of Ficino's "photological magic" can be convincingly inferred from his attempt to link the biblical motifs of the transfiguration by light that occurred with Moses on Mount Sinai and Christ on Mount Tabor to Platonic and Neo-Platonic contexts. "Follow" the light from its coarsest forms to its subtlest is understood very realistically by Ficino. The "illumination", for him, means that our spirit is imbued with light of a certain degree and certain quality, and through it both the soul and the body are penetrated with light. Thus, natural magic, following the luminous influences of the stars, or pagan deities, and imitating them, can be seen, ultimately, as a path to the resurrected, transfigured, Christ-like body.

Notes

[1] See M. Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, transl. M. Allen, London 2001, vol. 1, "Proem", pp. 9-11.

[2] See M. Ficino, *Platonic Theology* XVII,1, vol. 6, p. 6, where Hermes is the father of the ancient wisdom; for Zoroaster as the first sage, see idem, *In Plotini epitomae*, "Prooemium", in: idem, *Opera omnia*, Basel 1576, p. 1537. On various interpretations, contemporary criticisms and implications of the *prisca philosophia*, see M. Mulsow, "Ambiguities of the Prisca Sapientia in Late Renaissance Humanism", in: *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65, 2004, pp. 1-13.

[3] A. G. Hill, Wordsworth, Boccaccio, and the Pagan Gods of the Antiquity, in *The Review of English Studies* Feb. 1994, Vol. 45, No. 177, pp. 26-41, here p. 30.

[4] This question is, of course, very complex and it can be approached from various perspectives. My attempt is but a brief (and uncomplete) sketch. In the context of the Renaissance, it has been scrutinized, to mention just the notorious works, by Jean Seznec in his *Survival of the Pagan Gods* (French ed. 1940, English 1953), Edgar Wind in his *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance* (1958), Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl in their *Saturn and Melancholy* (1964, German ed. 1990, new English ed. 2019), and Joscelyn Godwin in his *Pagan Dream of the Renaissance* (2002).

[5] Tertullian, "On the Objection of the Heretics," in D. Ayerst, A. S. T. Fisher (eds.), *The Records of Christianity*, vol. 1, Oxford 1971, pp. 95-96.

[6] See, e.g., W. R. Cook, R. B. Herzman, *The Medieval World View*, New York 1983, pp. 56-60.

[7] Justin Martyr, *1Apol.* 46,3; *2Apol.* 46,2; see R. Fialová, *Justin Mučedník a jeho Bible*, Prague 2018, p. 48; M. Simon, "Early Christianity and Pagan Thought: Confluences and Conflicts", in *Religious Studies*, Dec 1973, Vol. 9, No. 4, pp. 385-399, here p. 385.

[8] See R. Herzman, "Confessions 7.9: What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem?" in *The Journal of Education*, 1997, Vol. 179, No. 1, pp. 49-60.

[9] Yet Justin can make use also of the pagan mythologies to show that, although being of legendary character, they are no more and no less credible the teachings of Christians. See M. Simon, "Early Christianity and Pagan Thought", p. 392.

[10] See P. Dudzik, "Tatian a jeho Promluva k Řekům", in: Tatian, *Předmluva k Řekům*, Prague 2016, p. 56-59; Athenagoras of Athens, *Legatio pro Christianis*, I, chap. 13-30, where Athenagoras uses the euhemerist interpretation of pagan gods.

[11] W. Liebeschuetz, "Mythology in the Christian Empire", in: *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* Fall 1995, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 193-208, here pp. 195-6.

[12] A very specific case is, however, Hermes Trismegistos who, as it were, went the other way round. From the ancient Egyptian god Thovt, melting with the Greek Hermes, he evolved into the ancient father of all wisdom who was, at the same time, the greatest king, the greatest priest, and the greatest philosopher. He had been taken for a historical personality by the Renaissance authors who, like Ficino, had been seeking the "ancient wisdom" (*prisca sapiential*), until Isaac Casaubon proved in 1614 that the Hermetic texts were much younger.

[13] Plutarch, *De Is. Et Osir.* 67; quoted in M. Simon, "Early Christianity and Pagan Thought", p. 394-395.

[14] Apuleius, *Metam.* 11,5.

[15] Proclus, *Comm. in Tim.* I, p. 210 (ed. E. Diehl, Leipzig 1903-1906), *passim*; quoted in R. Klibansky, E. Panofsky, F. Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, Nendeln 1979, p. 151, n. 80.

[16] The allegoresis of Homer's poems is of an old date, see E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, Princeton 2013, chap. 11 "Poetry and Philosophy", pp. 203-207.

[17] Plato, *Republic*, 506c-509d; 514a-517a.

[18] Cf., e.g. Plato, *Cratylus* 407a8-b2.

[19] Cf. A. L. Ford, *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece*, Princeton 2002, pp. 86 f.

[20] Srv. W. Scheuermann-Peilicke, *Licht und Liebe. Lichtmetapher und Metaphysik bei Marsilio Ficino*, Hildesheim 2000, pp. 56 ff.

[21] Plotinus, *Enn.* III,5; see J. Charrue, *Plotin, Lecteur de Platon*, Paris 1978; R. Chlup, *Proclus*, Cambridge 2012, pp. 40-41, 191-200.

[22] See, e.g., D. T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the "Timaeus" of Plato*, Leiden 1986; idem, *Exegesis and Philosophy. Studies on Philo of Alexandria*, Aldershot 1990.

[23] Augustine, *City of God* XVIII, 14.

[24] A. Smith, "The Pagan Neoplatonists' Response to Christianity", in: *The Maynooth Review / Revieú Mhá Nuad,* Dec. 1989, Vol. 14, pp. 25-41, here p. 29.

[25] J. Seznec, *The Survival of Pagan Gods*, New York 1961.

[26] R. Klibansky, E. Panofsky, F. Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, p. 133 and 155, n. 97.

[27] Ibid., p. 139.

[28] Ibid., p. 151.

[29] Ibid., p. 158.

[30] Ibid., pp. 171-173.

[31] See J. Solomon, chap. 20 "Gods, Greeks, and Poetry (Genealogia deorum gentilium)", in: M. Kirkham, W. Sherberg, J. L. Smarr (eds.), *Boccaccio. A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*, Chicago – London 2013, pp. 235-244.

[32] See C. G. Osgood, *Boccaccio on Poetry, Being the Preface and the Fourteenth Books of Boccaccio's Genealogia Deorum Gentilium in an English Version with Essay and Commentary*, Princeton 1930, p. 44.

[33] See *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, vol. I: Books I-V. I Tatti Renaissance Library, 46 by Giovanni Boccaccio and Jon Solomon, review by: W. G. Regier, *MLN*, January 2012, Vol. 127, No. 1, Italian Issue (January 2012), pp. 160-162, here p. 161.

[34] Boccaccio, *Genealogia* 14.22.1 and 15.8.4; quoted in J. Solomon, "Gods, Greeks, and Poetry (Genealogia deorum gentilium)", p. 237.

[35] Boccaccio, *Life of Dante*, trans. P. H. Wicksted, London, 1904, pp. 72-73.

[36] On Plethon, see V. Hladký, *The Philosophy of Gemistos Plethon*, Farnham 2014. Another author of the period whose work was seen as a revival of paganism, is the poet Marulus (1450-1524), see Ch. Fantazzi, "Introduction", in Michael Marullus, *Poems*, Cambridge, Mass. 2012, p. xix.

[37] V. Hladký, *The Philosophy of Gemistos Plethon*, pp. 2 and 282 f.

[38] V. Hladký, *The Philosophy of Gemistos Plethon*, p. 203.

[39] Plato, *Republic*, 379a ff. and 519d.

[40] Cf. V. Hladký, *The Philosophy of Gemistos Plethon*, p. 283.

[41] E. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, New Haven 1958, p. 24.

[42] See Plato, *Republic* 508a-509b.

[43] M. Ficino, *De sole*, Proemium and chap. 1.

[44] This is, of course, a hint at the medieval teaching on the fourfold sense of the Scripture, one literary and three spiritual meanings, i.e., allegorical (what to believe), moral (what to do) and anagogical (what to hope for). Typically, Ficino leaves aside the literary meaning.

[45] Ficino to Angelo Poliziano, 20th August 1494, *Epistolae*, XII, in: *Opera omnia*, p. 958: *in libro de Sole, non tam Astronomica doceo, quam per haec morales allegoriasque ad divina perquiro. ... tam in libris de vita, quam de Sole et lumine cum Philosophicis poetica miscens, liberius sum interdum et forte licentius evagatus…*

[46] M. Ficino, *De sole*, chap. 1. On "poetic" speech, see M. Ficino, *De sole*, chap. 12; idem, *In Platonis Ionem ... Epitomae*, in: *Opera omnia*, p. 1282; idem, *In Parmenidem. Sexta suppositio*, 1, in: *Opera omnia*, p. 1199, etc.

[47] Plato, *Ion*, 533e ff.; *Republic*, 366b (poets as the „sons of gods and prophets of gods").
[48] M. Ficino, *When Philosophers Rule*, transl. A. Farndell, London 2009, pp. 9-10: „The second kind is above the influence of the Moon and is caused by a draught of nectar, so that the mind, being put outside itself and above itself, forgets mortal infirmities and in absorbing matters divine is dazzled by their primal brilliance; or rather, by savouring their taste, is taken out of its old ways by some unfamiliar warmth. But soon the mind sees clearly, enjoys wholesome tastes, and is properly nourished. Indeed, the divine Idea, by which the mind was made, penetrates the mind when it returns, as flavour penetrates taste. Its first action is to gently wash from the mind all that is foreign to it. Then it fills the mind completely, giving it greater delight by so doing. Its third action is to bring the mind back to itself, flooding it with inexpressible joy, when the mind first becomes intellect through the soul and finally becomes God through the intellect. And it no longer savours as it previously did, but it savours new things in a new way. And just as, in our experience, a strong imagination forms and moves the body, so in that realm the body together with its senses, being subject to the soul, is directly moved and shaped by the powerful action of the mind, so that body and senses are wondrously soothed by the ineffable sweetness of the mind."
[49] M. Ficino, *Summary of Plato's Ion or On Poetic Frenzy*, in: M. Ficino, *Gardens of Philosophers*, transl. A. Farndell, London 2006, p. 54: "There are thus four kinds of divine frenzy: the first is poetic frenzy; the second, that of the Mysteries; the third, prophecy; the fourth, the movement of love. Now poetry is from the Muses, mystery from Dionysus, prophecy from Apollo, and love from Venus. Indeed, the soul cannot return to the One unless it itself be made one. But having been made many, it has fallen into a body: it has been split into various operations, and it attends to separate items."
[50] M. Ficino, *In Parmenidem. Sexta suppositio*, 1, in: *Op. omn.,* p. 1199: *Itaque ferme omnis [Platonis] verborum facies poscit allegoriam*.
[51] M. Ficino, *Gardens of Philosophers*, p. 57-8; idem, *In Platonis Ionem Epitome*, in: *Opera omn*ia, p. 1283: *cum Musas, sphaerarum mundi animas ... Iupiter quidem mens Dei est ... Iupiter rapit Apollinem. Apollo illuminat Musas. Musae suscitant et exagitant lenes et insuperabiles vatum animas. Vates inspirati interpretes suos inspirant. Interpretes auditores movent.*
[52] M. Ficino, *When Philosophers Rule*, p. 83: „In this matter the Muses signify the divine discovery of truth granted to religious people by God; Apollo signifies the pleasing expression of this discovery, as well as prophecy; and Bacchus signifies abstraction of mind and the admirable work of religious men."
[53] Plato, *Laws*, 745b ff.
[54] M. Ficino, *When Philosophers Rule*, p. 105.
[55] M. Ficino, *In commentaria Platonis … Prooemium*, in: *Opera omn*ia, p. 1129.
[56] E.g., M. Ficino, *De sole*, chap. 2.
[57] Srv. W. Scheuermann-Peilicke, *Licht und Liebe*, pp. 64 f.
[58] See M. Ficino, *De Sole*, chap. 2: *Res nulla magis quam lumen refert naturam boni. Primo quidem lumen in genere sensibili purissimum eminentissimumque apparet*; idem, *De lumine*, chap. 16: *Denique lumen es, quasi numen quoddam in mundano hoc templo, Dei similitudinem referens*.
[59] M. Ficino, *Three Book on Life*, transl. C. V. Kaske, J. R. Clark, Tempe 1998, p. 103 (italics mine).
[60] M. Ficino, *Three Book on Life*, "Proem", p. 105.
[61] See M. Ficino, *Three Book on Life*, I, chap. 2, p. 111: "This instrument is the spirit, which is defined by doctors as a vapor of blood-pure, subtle, hot, and clear. After being generated by the heat of the heart out of the more subtle blood, it flies to the brain; and there the soul uses it continually for the exercise of the interior as well as the exterior senses". For the most subtle "spirits" of the black bile, similar to *aqua vitae*, see ibid., I, chap. 6, p. 121; cf. ibid., II, chap. 14, p. 207: "the spirit, which is constituted from the subtler portions of the humors, has naturally a fifth form most tempered and bright and therefore celestial…"; on the subtle „quality of the spirit", see ibid., III, chap. 11, p. 293.
[62] See M. B. Allen, "Transfiguration and the Fire within: Marsilio Ficino on the Metaphysics and Psychology of Light", in: P. J. Forshaw (ed.), *Lux in Tenebris. The Visual and the Symbolic in Western Esotericism*, Leiden 2017, pp. 50-65; to this, we will return later.
[63] See M. Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, III, chaps. 5 and 6.
[64] M. Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, III, chap. 11, p. 289 (i.e., *De vita coelitus comparanda*, 11, in: *Opera omnia*, p. 544); idem, *In Platonem* (*Introductio ad disputationem de amore. Oratio sexta*, 3), in: *Opera omnia*, p. 1342; et al.
[65] See M. Ficino, *Three Books on Life* III, chaps. 1; 3; etc.
[66] See M. Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, III, chap. 11.
[67] M. Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, III, chap. 6, p. 275: "Finally, when you fear Mars, set Venus opposite. When you fear Saturn, use Jupiter. And see to it that you engage in some continual motion so far as possible … imitate so far as possible the action of the heavens. But if you can pass through larger spaces in your motion, you will thereby imitate the heavens all the more and will get in contact with more of the strengths of the celestials which are diffused everywhere"; chap. 14, p. 313: "you should imitate both the dignity and the gifts of the Sun in your life"; chap. 21, p. 357: "not to think we are speaking here of worshipping the stars, but rather of imitating them and thereby trying to capture them"; ibid., p. 359: "Thirdly, observe the daily positions and aspects of the stars and discover to what principal speeches, songs, motions, dances, moral behavior, and actions most people are usually incited by these, so that you may imitate such things as far as possible in your song, which aims to please the particular part of heaven that resembles them and to catch an influence that resembles them … song is a most powerful imitator of all things. It imitates the intentions and passions of the soul … when it imitates the celestials, it also wonderfully arouses our spirit upwards to the celestial influence and the celestial influence downwards to our spirit"; chap. 22, p. 365: "our reason (either through the imagination and the spirit together, or through deliberation, or through both) by imitation is so able to adapt itself to Jupiter on account of its dignity and nearness to him that it can receive Jupiter and the rewards of Jupiter".
[68] See M. Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, III, chaps. 17 and 18.
[69] M. Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, III, chap. 18, p. 333.
[70] M. Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, III, chap. 19, p. 335.
[71] See M. Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, II, chap. 14, p. 205-209.
[72] M. Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, III, 19, pp. 343-347.
[73] M. Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, III, 20, p. 351.
[74] Ibid.
[75] M. Ficino, *De Sole*, chap. 12.
[76] M. Ficino, *De Sole*, chap. 11.
[77] On the following, see M. J. B. Allen, "Transfiguration and the Fire within: Ficino on Metaphysics and the Psychology of Light", p. 50 ff.