



Plato's Psychogony in the Later Renaissance: Changing Attitudes to the Christianization of Pagan Philosophy

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**PLATO'S PSYCHOLOGY IN THE LATER RENAISSANCE:
CHANGING ATTITUDES TO THE CHRISTIANIZATION
OF PAGAN PHILOSOPHY**

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In his *Comparatio Platonis et Aristotelis* of 1597, Jacopo Mazzoni, a professor of philosophy at Pisa, tells a curious story about Plato in early Greek Christianity:

It is also worth observing (Mazzoni writes) a story related to us by Nicetas, an ancient scholiast on [St. Gregory] Nazianzenus, while annotating [the latter's] second oration on Easter. He writes that once, when a certain Christian was in the habit of flaying Plato with curses and abuse, calling him the father of all heresies, Plato came to his abuser in a dream, and declared that Christ had rescued him from Limbo together with the holy fathers and had brought him to the glory of Heaven; and on that account the man should henceforth be careful not to abuse him any further.¹

Mazzoni goes on to say, "Certainly one must not make any rash assertions about this matter," but Mazzoni clearly had a purpose in deploying this anecdote, which he probably knew from Jacques de Billy's 1570 edition of Nazianenus.² What Mazzoni's purpose was in telling the story was surely to give pause to pious critics of Plato, who were particularly numerous and powerful in the later 1590s, as we shall see. The story illustrates one, rather naive approach to the underlying problem discussed in this paper, namely the Christianization of the Platonic tradition, and in particular, the different strategies of Christianization in different periods and among dif-

¹ Jacopo Mazzoni, *In universam Platonis et Aristotelis philosophiam praeludia, sive de comparatione Platonis et Aristotelis*, Venice: Guerilius, 1597, p. 200: "Dignum quoque observatione illud est, quod refert Nicetas, vetus Nazianzeni scholiastes in orationem secundam in Pascha, nempe quod, cum a quodam Christiano maledictis et convitiis proscinderetur Plato, ut omnium haeresium pater, noctu ad convitiatorem venisse, asseruisse se a Limbo simul cum sanctis patribus a Christo ereptum, et ad Coeli gloriam traductum, proinde caveret in posterum ne amplius sibi malediceret. Certe de hac re nihil temere est asserendum."

² *Divi Gregorii Nazianzeni cognomento theologi opera ... una cum doctissimis Nicitae Setronii commentariis ... quae omnia nunc primum latina facta sunt Jacobi Billii diligentia et labore*, Cologne: Birckmann, 1570.

ferent philosophical subcultures. A clearer grasp of this issue will give us a better understanding of Plato's *fortuna* in the early modern period, especially the fading interest in him in Catholic countries after the beginning of the seventeenth century. I shall focus on Plato's *Timaeus*, for that is the only dialogue of Plato on which there is a continuous tradition of commentary from the patristic period, through scholasticism and the Renaissance.³ It is also a text that is rich in challenges for the would-be Christianizer. To highlight the issues still more sharply, I shall concentrate on the *Timaeus*'s psychogony, or in other words its doctrines about the creation of soul, including both the world-soul and individual souls of human beings.

First, however, a few general remarks about the Christianization of Plato. Though Plato's *Timaeus* has been continuously studied by Christians from the second century after Christ, that study has served different functions at different times and places. The attitudes Christian theologians and philosophers have adopted to the text have also differed sharply. The early Church Fathers liked in some apologetic contexts to present the Christian church as a kind of philosophical sect, no doubt with the hope of enjoying the same respect and toleration enjoyed by the other philosophical sects of the ancient world, which were allowed a certain latitude in criticizing civic values and standing apart from civic life. The existing philosophical sects were of course hostile to this strategy and tended to regard Christian philosophy as a cheap imitation of real philosophy. They were particularly contemptuous of the Christian doctrines of creation *ex nihilo* and the resurrection of the body, which were deeply unphilosophical from the ancient point of view. Later on, in the fourth century, it was the doctrine of the Trinity that attracted their scorn – which was not surprising since it was a doctrine whose definition in the fourth century was undertaken partly with a view to limiting Platonizing influence on Christian theology.⁴

³ In general see *Le Timée de Platon: Contributions à l'histoire de sa réception*, Ada Neschke-Hentschke, ed., Louvain: Peeters, 2000; *Platon in der abendländischen Geistesgeschichte: Neue Forschungen zum Platonismus*, Theo Kobusch and Burkhard Mojsisch, eds., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997

⁴ Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and Classical Tradition*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984; Jaroslav Pelikan, *What Has Athens to do with Jerusalem? Timaeus and Genesis in Counterpoint*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997; T. D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993; for Arius' attempt to incorporate post-Plotinian Platonic philosophy into the Alexandrian tradition of Christian theology, see Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 2nd ed., London: SCM Press, 2001, esp. Part III and the reply to his critics in the *Ad-denda*.

In any case, Plato's *Timaeus* was a godsend to Christian apologists, because it allowed Christians to argue that the greatest of the ancient philosophers held views on creation and the soul that were akin to Christian doctrines. In general the patristic writers regarded Plato as the ancient philosopher who came closest to the Christian worldview. His philosophy was regarded as an antechamber to Christian truth for intellectual converts. Augustine's experience with Platonism as recounted in the *Confessions* is the best-known and most vivid example, but he was only one of a number of ancient Christian thinkers whose path to the Christian faith was made through the gate marked 'Plato'.

Finding parallels and intimations and foreshadowings of Christian truths in the works of the famous pagan sage was something that seemed to fill the heart of ancient Christians with joyous pride and reassurance, but it also, clearly, could be dangerous. Though Plato was useful for the purpose of apologetics – for engineering the conversion of intellectuals – he was dangerous when used too enthusiastically as a guide to theology. Many of the Church Fathers, not just Augustine, experienced something like buyer's remorse when they turned to the detailed study of Plato's works. Most of the Church Fathers were bishops or leaders of religious communities and had the disciplinary task of preventing enthusiastic Christian thinkers from taking on too much of a Platonic frame of mind, from Platonizing Christian doctrines too freely. There was always the temptation to see Christian accounts of creation and the soul as mere myths or symbolic accounts which could be explained scientifically or rationally by appeal to pagan philosophical teachings. That way lay the paganizing of Christianity – ever a danger in the ancient world.

So the Fathers were obliged to lay down bright lines between Christian dogma and Platonic doctrines, to point out Plato's theological errors and moral lapses. The Greek Fathers were particularly active in identifying the shortcomings of Plato's views of creation and the soul as recounted in the *Timaeus*. Plato may have been clear that God created the world, *Deo gratias*, but he was less clear that the world was created from nothing. In fact he seems to have believed that the so-called receptacle or substrate of creation had existed from eternity. He seems to have believed that inferior parts of the world and human nature were indirectly created through the agency of junior gods – not directly by God, as orthodox Christianity taught. He seems to have believed in reincarnation. He showed too much respect for civic religion and the traditional gods, even though he did not believe in them. He believed in the animation of the heavens and the world, a doctrine not approved by Orthodoxy. He seems to have believed in metempsychosis

or reincarnation and in the temporal priority of soul to body – a challenge to the correct Christian view that each soul was individually created by God at the moment of conception, and remained associated with one body forever, until the general resurrection.⁵

This general pattern – enthusiasm about Platonic parallels to Christianity, fear of Christianity losing its distinctive dogmatic shape under Platonic influence – repeated itself throughout the long history of Plato's reception in the West. But the circumstances and emphases could vary enormously. In the twelfth-century hexaemeral tradition begun by Bernard of Chartres, the study of Plato's *Timaeus*, and works of pagan philosophy in general, was justified on the grounds of Plato's proximity to Christian doctrine. The hexaemeral treatises were intended, precisely, to show the affinity between Plato and Christianity, answering monastic critics and other traditionalists who feared the renewed study of pagan literature in cathedral schools. The defense of Plato thus became the defense of humane learning, and this meant that students of Plato had few incentives to highlight the dangers of Platonic philosophy for Christian thinkers. That critique emerged only at the end of the twelfth century, when the position of secular studies was fully secure. At that point there was a general shift of philosophical interest away from Plato and on to Aristotle, for reasons I have discussed elsewhere, so the conflict between Plato and the Church never became acute.⁶

When Platonic study was revived in the early Renaissance, under the influence of Petrarch, the revival became part of a wide-ranging critique of scholastic philosophy and its obsession with Aristotle. Humanists in the Petrarchan tradition saw Plato as the ideal challenger to hegemonic Aristotelianism in the schools. Back to Antiquity! was the humanists' battle-cry, and it was endlessly pointed out that the ancient world had valued Plato more highly than Aristotle, that the ancient Church Fathers

⁵ See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: the Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.

⁶ James Hankins "Anti-platonism in the Renaissance and the Middle Ages," *Classica et Mediaevalia: Revue Danoise de philologie et d'histoire*, 47 (1996): 359-376, reprinted in my *Humanism and Platonism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols., Rome: Edizioni di Storia e letteratura, 2004, 2: 27-44, and Peter Dronke, *A History of Twelfth-century Western Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988; for the study of the *Timaeus* before 1350, see Paul Edward Dutton, *Material Remains of the Study of the Timaeus in the Later Middle Ages*, in *L'enseignement de la philosophie au XIIIe siècle: Autour du "Guide de l'étudiant" du ms. Ripoll 109*, Claude Lafleur and Joanne Carrier, eds., Turnhout: Brepols, 1996, pp. 203-230.

had had the name of Plato frequently and admiringly in their mouths, while the name of Aristotle was almost unknown to them. Augustine's *City of God*, which called Platonism the pagan philosophy closest to Christianity, was always cited. And when the works of Plato and the Platonists began to be printed in great numbers, these Augustinian passages always appeared in epigraphs and liminal quotations, to shield authors and printers from charges of impiety. For Petrarch and his followers, in fact, it was the godless Aristotelians who were the impious ones, with their Averroism and indifference to Christian truth. It was Petrarch and his followers who held out the pious hope that if Christian philosophy were re-founded on a Platonic basis, Christianity would be in a better position to combat the unbelief and impiety spreading through the Christian world, undermining its moral character and weakening its resolve to resist the Turkish menace.⁷

Ficino's work was in this sense a culmination of the Petrarchan tradition. Indeed, it was Ficino who first made Platonism into a serious movement of theological reform directed against the corrupt philosophy of the schools. From this perspective, Ficino's work can be seen as an extended exploration and divulgation of the materials of ancient Platonism, with a view to restoring and enriching the full wisdom of the Christian faith. This implied a challenge to received traditions and dogmatic formulations and an apologetic defense of Platonic theology. Ficino was, I think, sincerely determined to stay within the bounds of orthodoxy, but this does not mean that he accepted existing dogmatic formulations passively. In fact he was, within the limits of the time, a boldly experimental thinker, the kind of thinker who needs to rethink and reimagine what dogma means, who needs to reinvent dogmas and fill them with new meaning. That is what Platonism helped Ficino to do. And this is ultimately the project of Ficino's *Platonic Theology*. That enormous undertaking sought not only to illustrate the value of Platonism in defending the doctrine of immortality – for Ficino the key to all other moral reforms – but also to set out, in what was meant to be a single, breathtaking vision, the Platonic understanding of the soul and the cosmos.

⁷ James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols., Leiden-London: E. J. Brill, 1990. For the *Timaeus* in the early Renaissance, see Idem, "The Study of the *Timaeus* in Early Renaissance Italy," in *Natural Particulars: Nature and the Disciplines in Renaissance Europe*, A. Grafton and N. Siraisi, eds., Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999, pp. 77-119; and Idem, "Pierleone da Spoleto on Plato's Psychogony (Glosses on the *Timaeus* in Barb. lat. 21)," in *Roma, magistra mundi. Itineraria culturae mediaevalis. Mélanges offerts au Père L.E. Boyle à l'occasion de son 75e anniversaire*, 3 vols., Louvain-la-Neuve: F.I.D.E.M., 1998, I, pp. 337-348, both reprinted in my *Humanism and Platonism*, 2: 93-154.

The silent dialogue with Aquinas' *Summa contra Gentiles* which continues throughout the eighteen books of this work is, I believe, meant to show the Thomist reader, and other traditionalist readers, that the theological conclusions Thomas wishes to demonstrate are better supported if one begins from Platonic postulates than if one begins from the defective Aristotelian vision of reality. In this sense, the project is analogous to – a more subtle and persuasive version of – Pico's kamikaze attack on traditional Christian theology in his *Nine Hundred Theses*, which similarly aimed to lay new philosophical foundations for Christian truths.⁸

The Ficinian project, Platonism as a theological reform movement, continued to inspire Christian theologians down the beginning of the seventeenth century, before dying out in Catholic countries for reasons I will shortly try to explain. Yet the movement for a long time did not make much headway. Its most important proponents in the early sixteenth century were connected with the Augustinian order, men like Ficino's student Giles of Viterbo; Giles' follower Nicolaus Scutellius of Trent, who translated Proclus and Iamblichus; and Ambrosius Flandinus, called Parthenopaeus, a Neapolitan who worked and taught as a suffragan bishop in Mantua and wrote commentaries on the *Parmenides*, *Timaeus* and *Timaeus Locrus*. Together with the more famous Agostino Steucho, Vatican librarian and author of the *De perenni philosophia*, Flandinus turned Platonism into a weapon to fight the Lutherans. This was an interesting move in light of Francesco Patrizi's later claim (1590) that Platonism would be better than Aristotelianism for the task of protecting Catholic truth from Protestant heresies. This was probably a prudent position to take as well, since, with the Church under attack, ecclesiastical authorities were less inclined to experimentalism in theology than they had been before 1517.⁹

However, it was not until the later 1570s that the Ficinian project really began to find some serious institutional support. Before that time, students of Plato were reluctant to challenge the position of Aristotle in Christian

⁸ Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, ed. and tr. Michael J. B. Allen and James Hankins, 4 vols. to date, I Tatti Renaissance Library, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001-2004. For Ficino's dialogue with Aquinas, see Ardis B. Collins, *The Secular is Sacred: Platonism and Thomism in Marsilio Ficino's Platonic Theology*, The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974. For Ficino's study of the *Timaeus*, see Alexandre Etienne, *Visages d'un interprète: Marsile Ficin et le Timée: De la découverte à la réception de la physique*, Thèse, Lausanne, 1998.

⁹ On Giles of Viterbo, see *Egidio da Viterbo OSA e il suo tempo: Atti del V Convegno dell' Istituto Storico Agostiniano, Roma-Viterbo, 20-23 ottobre 1982*, Rome: Edizioni "Analecta Augustiniana", 1983; on Steucho, see Charles B. Schmitt, "Perennial Philosophy from Agostino Steucho to Leibniz," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27.4 (1966): 505-32.

theology or in the universities. The usual stance was one of mutual respect and concordism between Aristotelians and Platonists. Scholastics influenced by humanism, like Agostino Nifo or the Dominican Giovanni Crisostomo Giavelli, were eager to show their knowledge of and appreciation for the newly available Platonic texts. Humanists like Francesco Catani da Diacceto or the Bavarian master Georg Acanthius were anxious to demonstrate that Plato could be harmonized with Aristotle and therefore was not dangerous to Christianity, or at least no more dangerous than Aristotle. In general the temperature of the debate was rather low. Commentators seemed to accept that Plato had something of value to add to Christian philosophy, but could not be relied upon to be free of error. Gone was Ficino's rhapsodic enthusiasm for Plato's proto-Christian wisdom, his high ambition to remake the foundations of Christian theology.¹⁰

Two commentators on the *Timaeus* from the mid-sixteenth century can be taken, I think, as typical of the period. The first is Sebastian Fox-Morzillo, a Spanish scholar trained at Louvain in humanistic disciplines, later tutor to Philip II's son Carlo.¹¹ Fox, who knew Ficino's translation but not his commentary on the dialogue, brings to bear a wide range of other texts to interpret the work, including Plutarch's *De animae creatione in Timaeo*, Augustine's *City of God*, Macrobius's commentary on the *Dream of Scipio*, Proclus, Hermes Trismegistus, Bessarion's *In calumniatorem Platonis*, and other works of Plato.¹² In numerous places in the dialogue he asserts a consensus between Plato and Aristotle, or Plato and Christianity, on points of cosmology. For example, glossing Plato's distinction between the "divided" and "undivided" constituents of the soul, Fox assimilates these to Aristotle's distinction between the agent intellect and the irrational parts of the soul. Fox asserts that Plato was trying to explain how the soul could be simultaneously "made" (*factus*) and "eternal", and was using the divided/

¹⁰ For the study of the *Timaeus* by Galileo and his predecessors, see James Hankins, "Galileo, Ficino, and Renaissance Platonism," in *Humanism and Early Modern Philosophy*, Jill Kraye and M.W.F. Stone, eds., New York-London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 209-237, and in my *Humanism and Platonism*, pp. 155-185. To the bibliography given there on the "Plato-Galileo" problem, add: Wolfgang Detel, "Bemerkungen zum Platonismus bei Galileo," *Neue Hefte für Philosophie*, 15/16 (1979): 130-155.

¹¹ For bibliography on Fox see *L'Europe des humanistes (XIVe-XVIIe siècles)*, J.-F. Maillard et al., eds., Paris: CNRS and Brepols, 1995, p. 191; Jill Kraye, "Ficino in the Firing Line: A Renaissance Neoplatonist and His Critics," in *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, Michael J. B. Allen and Valery Rees with Martin Davies, eds., Leiden-London-Köln: E. J. Brill, 2002, pp. 377-397.

¹² *Sebastiani Foxii Morzilli Hispalensis in Platonis Timaeum commentarii*, Basel: Oporinus, 1554.

undivided vocabulary symbolically to express his point. The undivided soul flows from the mind of God, its exemplar, whereas the divided soul was a corporeal substance in divisible nature.¹³ (This is a solution, by the way, which resembles Telesio's later attempt to combine Lucretius' materialism with Christian orthodoxy by positing a that humans possess both a material and a non-material soul.) Fox also reads Plato's discussion of the mathematical proportions according to which the soul was constructed as a kind of symbolism or anagogy. He was just trying to explain how a substance could be both material and immaterial, i.e., both one and many, and used arithmetical, geometrical and musical examples to explain his thought. A harmony, for example, was both a unity and a diversity. A line was an infinite unity made up of an infinite number of unities. In the same way our souls were eternal and immaterial but could exist in finite and temporal bodies.¹⁴

All this sounds like Fox was making Plato safe for Christianity, but this would be a false impression. His main aim seems to be general edification, not theological reform. He mildly points out numerous cases in which Plato cannot be made to agree either with Christianity or with Aristotle. Aristotle's critique in *De anima* I of Plato's theory of the self-movement of the soul constitutes an irreconcilable difference between the two philosophers.¹⁵ Fox also states baldly that Plato believed that the human body was created by junior gods from the four elements; he does not use any of the desperate exegetical shifts to which the twelfth-century Platonists resorted in order to save theological appearances. Plato clearly taught that the world was eternal, Fox reports, and goes on to say that, for Plato, individual souls emanate from the World Soul, to which they return upon the dissolution of the body.¹⁶ In some cases it is not clear whether Fox is fully aware of the theological problems in Plato's psychogony, for example when he follows Plato in saying that souls are temporally as well as ontologically prior to bodies.¹⁷

¹³ Ibid., pp. 113-119.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 122.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 150.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 112-113.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 113: "Plato aperte mundum esse aeternum hic docet. ... Quamvis enim animus ante corpus fuisse dicatur *genitusque* a Deo vocatur, ratione quadam intelligendum id est, quatenus participatione aeternitatis divinae, utpote Dei imago, aeternus est; quatenus vero ab illo profluit in tempusque profertur, *factus* nominatur." The solution is taken from Bessarion, *In calumniatorem Platonis*, edited in Ludwig Mohler, *Kardinal Bessarion als Theologe, Humanist und Staatsman*, 3 vols., Paderborn: Schöningh, 1923-42, 2: 153.

In my second Timaeian commentary, written by Mattheus Frigillanus of Beauvais in 1560, Platonic enthusiasm is more pronounced.¹⁸ “Matthaeus Frigillanus” was falsely identified by Jöcher’s *Allegemeines Gelehrten-Lexicon* in the eighteenth century as a pseudonym for Marsilio Ficino, as a result of which the poor man has dropped out of the biographical dictionaries, but he seems to have been a philosophy master teaching at the University of Paris in the 1560s and well connected at the French court.¹⁹ In one of his slender publications he gives us a list of his works, *quae per graviores occupationes in erudienda iuventute vix typis mandare potuit*, a predicament with which one can sympathize. The works included a compendium on Aristotle’s logic, lemmatic commentaries on four dialogues of Plato and on Alcinous’ *De doctrina Platonis*, as well as a few other short texts on the soul, time and natural philosophy.²⁰ He seems to have had also some interest in medicine and a familiarity with the works of Galen, including the *De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis*, which comments on Plato’s physiological doctrines in the *Timaeus*. In addition he uses Euclid (perhaps via Theon of Smyrna), Cicero, Hermes Trismegistus, Lactantius, Apuleius, Justin Martyr, Proclus, and Plutarch’s *De animae procreatione in Timaeo*. Following Ficino, he identifies the *Timaeus* as a dialogue *ad doctrinam* (for teaching), rather than *ad reprehensionem* (for criticism), and says its sources are Pythagorean and Platonic rather than Socratic. Much of it, he maintains, including the opening narrative of Atlantis, needs to be read allegorically.

Frigillanus, by contrast with Fox, is rather more eager to sell his Platonic wares to Christian buyers. In the preface to King Francis II (d. 1560) the commentator tells us, echoing Petrarch and the Byzantines, that Plato is almost entirely neglected in comparison with Aristotle, yet Plato is divine, Aristotle merely daimonic. The famous opening of the dialogue, “Unus, duo, tres”, says Frigillanus, with massive unoriginality, is a symbolic reference to the Trinity. He follows the Middle Platonic and Christianizing tradition in seeing the Platonic Ideas intradeically as ideas in the mind of God; human ideas by contrast, are pale reflections of these: *finita, caduca, mendax, accidentaria et per se propriaque vi nihil efficiens*. Plato is superior to Aristotle

¹⁸ *Matthaei Frigillani Bellovacensis In Timaeum Platonis ex mediis philosophorum et medicorum spatiis scholia*, Paris: Richard, 1560, folios unnumbered.

¹⁹ *L'Europe des humanistes*, p. 193.

²⁰ *Matthaei Frigillani Bellovacensis De animi immortalitate ex Theosophiae et philosophiae proceribus compendiosum Stephanoma, simul et de partibus iuris brevis συγῆμα*, Paris: Richard, 1563.

because, although both believed the world to be eternal, Plato knew it was also dependent on a first cause and therefore eternally created. The idea of reincarnation is certainly not Christian, indeed it is diabolical (*semper certe hoc apud philosophos egit diabolus*), but perhaps Plato only meant to suggest allegorically that men who continue in their vices become like beasts. Occasionally there are signs of caution, as when Matthaëus declares that one may not believe that either the world or the heavens is animated, and that this pagan fiction was unnecessary and unworthy of belief by a Christian. Yet it is hard to know what to make of this declaration, since earlier in the same commentary Matthaëus had made three declarations that rather undercut his show of righteous horror at Plato's paganism. He had said, first, that God made the world animated because it was more beautiful that way; second, that it is irrational to think that part of the world can be animated but the whole not; and third, that the animation of the world could be read as a veiled reference to the heavenly source of the soul. It was analogous, Matthaëus says, to Aristotle's argument in *De generatione animalium* that the mind came extrinsically to the body.

For if somebody asked Aristotle where that mind came from, he could not have answered that it came from some corporeal part of the world, but [he would have had to say] that it came just from God; and it is certain that Moses felt exactly the same way, when he said that the earthly mud from which man was constructed was animated *ab extra* by God.²¹

Matthew makes other statements that push the envelope of Christian orthodoxy in the effort to Christianize Plato; he is clearly intent on showing Plato's concord with Aristotle or even his superiority to Aristotle from the point of view of Christian theology. He drew the line, however, at saying that Plato had a clear knowledge of the Trinity.

Plato understood there to be eternal gods: a God who always exists, the Idea sown within Him; and the Divine Mind. Hence some people would have it that Plato in some degree recognized the Trinity, but in too pagan a fashion (*nimis ethnice*). For, although by the name of God who always is and who engenders one could understand the Father; and by the name of Idea, the Son; and by the name of Mind, the Spirit, one must still not

²¹ Frigillanus, *In Timaeum*, [f. 8v]: "Nam si quis Aristotelem rogasset a quibus locis illa mens veniat, non potuisset respondere ab aliqua mundi corporis parte, sed dumtaxat a Deo; neque (certum enim est) aliud sentit Moses, quando tradit terrenum et luteum hominis figmentum exterius a Deo animatum esse."

talk about plural gods. Others understand [Plato's] eternal gods to be intelligible substances.²²

Yet for all his efforts to show Plato's harmony with Christianity, Matthaeus leaves numerous problems unresolved, sometimes simply shrugging his shoulders and remarking that "the [Christian] theologians think otherwise." One never gets a sense of in his writings of a larger ambition to displace Aristotle and rethink Christian theology from a Platonic point of view such as one finds in Ficino.

For the reappearance of that ambition we have to wait until the 1570s, when there was a concerted movement to revive the Ficinian project. First in Bologna, Pisa and Ferrara, then in Rome itself, there were new efforts to give institutional shape to the Platonic reform of Christian theology. These efforts took the form of founding chairs of Platonic philosophy at the universities of those cities, to be occupied by men trained in scholastic philosophy but who could defend and propagate the Platonic reform of Christian philosophy. Most important was the chair set up at Pisa by the Medici grand dukes, who saw themselves as continuing the historic commitment of the Medici to Platonic philosophy. The chair was occupied for half a century by four professors, Francesco de'Vieri the Younger (appointed 1576), Jacopo Mazzoni (1588-97), Carlo Tommasi da Cortona (c.1597-1606), and Cosimo Boscagli (d. 1621). Francesco Patrizi da Cherso, the greatest expert on Plato of the late Renaissance, was for fourteen years (1578-92) the occupant of a special chair of Platonic philosophy at the University of Ferrara; in 1592 he moved to the Sapienza in Rome where he taught Plato until his death.²³

The texts produced by the new Plato professors leave no doubt that the variety of Platonism now being promoted was of a much more militant kind

²² Ibid. [f. 23v]: "Deos sempiternos intelligat Plato, Deum qui semper est, et ideam illi insitam, praeterea mentem divinam; unde quadam ex parte volunt Platonem agnoscere Trinitatem, sed nimis Ethnice. Nam licet nomine Dei qui semper est et qui genuit, possit intelligi pater; nomine ideae, filius; nomine mentis, spiritus; non tamen plures Dei dicendi sunt. Alii aeternos deos intelligunt omnes substantias intelligibiles."

²³ Charles B. Schmitt, "L'introduction de la philosophie platonicienne dans l'enseignement des universités à la Renaissance," in *Platon et Aristote à la Renaissance*, Paris: Vrin, 1976, pp. 93-104.

Schmitt also mentions an unsuccessful attempt to establish a chair in Platonic philosophy at the University of Bologna. On the title page of Mazzoni's *Comparatio* (above, note 1), Mazzoni describes himself as "in almo gymnasio Pisano Aristotelem ordinariè, Platonem vero extra ordinem profitentis", which suggests that Plato in Mazzoni's time was an extracurricular author.

than had been found earlier in the century; in some respects it was more militant than even Ficino's Platonism. Ficino was the unquestionably the main inspiration for this revived Christian Platonism. In the preface to his *Compendio della dottrina di Platone, in quello che ella è conforme con la Fede nostra*, in which the new Platonic chair was announced, Francesco Verino begins by quoting silently Ficino's famous preface to Plotinus, which seems to describe – but does not – Cosimo de' Medici's founding of an *Accademia di Platonici*. Verino goes on to describe Platonism as “an entirely Christian philosophy” revealed anciently to certain pagan theologian as a foretaste of Christian truth, and still an indispensable part of Christian education. Thanks to this philosophy,

there was no longer any room to believe impious fables about the gods invented by the poets, and the Peripatetic philosophers were warned to better interpret Aristotle, and not posit that the soul was mortal with Alexander or that there was only one soul for everyone, like Averroes. Rather, [they should teach] that each person had his own soul which remained immortal after death and was rewarded or punished according to its works, and that God exercised most careful Providence over us – truths which glorify his Divine Majesty and contribute to good and pious behavior. Knowledge of Plato has always been understood to shape human souls to good behavior and to honor the Divine Majesty, ... and in almost every respect Platonic philosophy conforms to the Christian faith. ... And thus it has pleased your Most Serene Highness, in imitation of great Cosimo il Vecchio de' Medici ... [to see to it that] this Divine philosopher is publicly taught, so that his doctrine may by means of Your Most Serene Highness rise again in the minds of good men and men of understanding.²⁴

This Platonic reform movement at length reached its zenith with the publication of Francesco Patrizi's *Nova de universis philosophia*, published in 1593 and dedicated to Pope Gregory XIII “and to all Future Roman Pon-

²⁴ Francesco de' Vieri, *Compendio della dottrina di Platone, in quello che ella è conforme con la Fede nostra. Di Messer Francesco de Vieri cognominato il Secondo Verino. Dedicato da esso alla Serenissima Reina Giovanna d'Austria, et Gran Duchessa di Toscana*, Florence: Giorgio Marescotti 1577, sign. a7 recto. The passage quoted in the text is based on Ficino's preface to Plotinus in Ficino's *Opera omnia*, 2 vols., Basel: Heinrich Petri, 1563, 2: 1537. The text is reproduced with discussion in my article, “The Invention of the Platonic Academy of Florence,” *Rinascimento* n.s. 42 (2002): 1-39.

tiffs.”²⁵ In the preface to this work, Patrizi denounces contemporary philosophy, citing the common saying: “He’s a philosopher, he doesn’t believe in God.” “People see that in all the gymnasia of Europe, in all the monasteries, only Aristotelian philosophy is taught with great ambition and with great rewards.” Yet it was only his new, pious philosophy, based on Platonic wisdom, that could solve the problems of Christian philosophy, supply an adequate philosophical support for Christian theology, and provide the strongest weapons in the battle against heresy. But for Patrizi, the best remedy for heresy was to absorb its partial truths into a higher truth. By reforming Catholic theology along Platonic lines Patrizi hoped to tap into an ancient wisdom that would permit a higher theological synthesis – a synthesis that could in turn embrace, rather than suppress, theological traditions outside of the Roman Church, including Judaism, Islam, paganism, and the religious beliefs of pre-Columbian civilizations in the New World. The old marriage between Christian theology and Aristotelianism, Patrizi believed, was now dysfunctional, and could lead only to the forcing of consciences and the use of violence against those outside the Church. Patrizi urges the Pope to have his new universal Platonic philosophy be taught everywhere in Christendom so that Christian wisdom may be renewed.

This neo-Ficinian reform movement, however, began to run into strong opposition almost immediately after the publication of Patrizi’s treatise.²⁶ Only a year later, in 1594, a now-obscure philosopher named Giovanni Battista Crispo, from Gallipoli in the Salentino, published an attack on Christian Platonism of extraordinary virulence entitled *On the Need for Caution When Reading Pagan Philosophers*.²⁷ This work had the backing of major figures in Counter-Reformation Rome, including Cesare Baronio, Robert Bellarmine, Antonio Possevino, and Francisco Suárez. The political weather had clearly changed dramatically for the Platonic movement, as

²⁵ *Nova de universis philosophia libris quinquaginta comprehensa, in qua Aristotelica methodo non per motum sed per lucem & lumina ad primam causam ascenditur, deinde nova quadam ac peculiari methodo tota in contemplationem venit divinitas, postremo methodo Platonica rerum universitas à conditore Deo deducitur, auctore Francisco Patritio, philosopho eminentissimo et in celeberrimo Romano gymnasio summa cum laude eandem Philosophiam publice interpretante*, Venice: Meietus, 1593.

²⁶ For opposition to Plato in the early-modern period in general, see Monique Dixsaut, ed., *Contre Platon*, 2 vols., Paris: Vrin, 1993-95.

²⁷ *Io. Baptistae Crispi Gallipolitani De ethnicis philosophis caute legendis disputationum ex propriis cuiusque principiis quinarium primus*, Rome: Zannetti, 1594. On Crispo see the article by A. Romano in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 30 (1984): pp. 806-08, and the article of Rotondò cited in note 29 at pp. 45-50.

can be seen from the offer that same year of a chair in philosophy at the Sapienza to Crispo, and beginnings of Bellarmine's effort, eventually successful, to place Patrizi's *Nova de universis philosophia* on the Index. Crispo turned down the offer of a chair, but his place was taken by Paolo Beni, who in the same year, 1594, published his commentary on the *Timaeus* in which he pointedly took Ficino to task for finding Christian truths and Mosaic wisdom in the dialogue where there was in fact none. For Beni, Ficino was more of a Platonist than a Christian.

Beni, a former Jesuit, was associated with the same Platonizing circle around Cardinal Cinzio Passeri Aldobrandini that had encouraged Patrizi's theological reform project. Yet Beni in fact stood somewhere between Patrizi's intransigent opposition to Aristotle and Crispo's wholesale condemnation of Plato; he was critical of both Patrizi and Crispo without naming either one. He shares the Counter-reformation fear of infecting the purity of Christian thought with Platonic heresies, but also wishes to find a place for (properly corrected) Platonic wisdom in the culture of the Church. As Patrizi said, Beni wanted to reduce "tutta la filosofia di Platone al servizio di Santa Romana Chiesa."²⁸ His commentary on the *Timaeus*, the most ambitious work written on the dialogue during the Renaissance, aims to test the newly-popular Ficinian view that a concord can be constructed of Plato and Moses, and that Plato even drew some of his inspiration from Moses – in other words, that Plato (according to the famous dictum of Numenius) was *Moysis atticizans*, Moses speaking Attic Greek. This is a conclusion Beni firmly rejects after a detailed textual analysis of Genesis, the *Timaeus* and the large body of patristic literature discussing the relationship between the two accounts of creation. Beni argues that, at best, Plato had only an indirect knowledge of Moses, and that his real theological sources were Hermes Trismegistus and Zoroaster. He insists that Plato's wisdom is purely philosophical and did not have the status of an inspired work; it could not stand alongside Moses as a theological authority on matters of cosmology. The opposite view is a mistake traceable to the Platonizing Jewish theologian Philo.²⁹

²⁸ Cited by Rotondò (next note), p. 37.

²⁹ Paul Duffley, *Paolo Beni: A Biographical and Critical Study*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, pp. 42-48, who discovered the unpublished portions of the commentary in the Archivio Segreto Vaticano. On the suppression of Platonism in general see Tullio Gregory, "L'Apologia e le *Declarationes* di Francesco Patrizi," in *Medioevo e Rinascimento: Studi in onore di Bruno Nardi*, 2 vols., Florence: Olschki, 1955, 1: 385-424; Antonio Rotondò, "Cultura umanistica e difficoltà di censori: Censura

What was at stake in the debate between Patrizi, Crispo and Beni was the issue of how to deal with what Momigliano called "alien wisdom", an acute problem in Counter-reformation Rome, with its vast missionary projects. Christian missionaries to the East had found that a Roman Catholic orthodoxy based strictly on endogenous sources was unfruitful when dealing with the more sophisticated religious cultures of East and South Asia, whereas they had more success when Catholic theology was presented as a fuller revelation of a universal ancient theology.³⁰ Exogenous sources such as Plato provided a bridge to other religions. But in the end, the bureaucratic mentality of the Inquisition and Index, which saw little merit in non-Christian thought and found complex philosophical systems difficult to police, won the day. Militancy triumphed over ecumenism. It was the Crispis, not the Patrizis, who turned out to be the future of Catholic theology.³¹

To return to Crispo, although the plan of his work called for him to correct and expurgate a whole battalion of ancient philosophers, in fact the first volume of the project – the only volume that ever saw the light – was entirely devoted to attacking Plato's psychology. It contained "23 books of disputations on Plato in which the triple status of the rational soul is corrected from Plato's own principles and expurgated by the sanctions of the Catholic Church." Crispo was clearly determined to nail this Platonic jelly to the wall and dismantle Patrizi's exaggerated claims for Platonism. In his preface "to the Christian Philosopher" Crispo states that as many men have deserted Christian orthodoxy thanks to Plato as have been attracted to Christianity through him, and that Plato is cited freely by Luther, Calvin, Melancthon, and six hundred more modern heretics. Citing the Greek church fathers, he labels Platonism the seedbed of heresies, Plato the patriarch of heretics, the source of Origenism, Arianism, and the prophet Mohammed's noxious belief in reincarnation. He condemns the Platonists' technique of appealing to allegory in order to save Plato's reputation for holiness. Crispo's procedure is to dredge his way, doctrine by doctrine,

ecclesiastica e discussioni cinquecentesche sul Platonismo," in *Le pouvoir et la plume: Incitation, contrôle et répression dans l'Italie du XVIe siècle, Actes du colloque internationale .. Marseilles, 14-16 mai 1981*, Paris: Sorbonne nouvelle, 1982, pp. 15-50 (pp. 35-45 on Beni's *Timaeus* commentary); Maria Muccillo, "Il platonismo all'Università di Roma: Francesco Patrizi," in *Roma e lo Studium Urbis ... Atti del convegno, Roma, 7-10 giugno 1989*, Paolo Cherubini, ed., Roma: Quasar, 1989, pp. 200-247.

³⁰ D. P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology: Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1972.

³¹ Rotondò, "Cultura umanistica", is especially illuminating on this point.

through the *Timaeus* and other dialogues where psychological issues are treated. He first tries to establish precisely what Plato's views are by collection and collation of parallel passages from the dialogues. He then establishes the correct Christian position on the issue by collating the opinions of Church Fathers, popes, councils and theologians, especially St. Thomas Aquinas. Finally he delivers his *cautiones*, which are in effect declarations of Platonic heterodoxy. This goes on for some 650 folio pages, until the *Timaeus*, the *Phaedo*, and the *Phaedrus* and large parts of the *Republic* are converted into positive minefields of heresy. Literally hundreds of Platonic passages are identified as erroneous and heretical.

It might be thought that Crispo, being a minor figure and a *homo unius libri*, could not have had much impact, but this is not the case. Apart from the constant echoes of him in later Platonic writers like Mazzoni and Livio Galanti, Crispo's work attacking Christian Platonism was effectively canonized by Antonio Possevino in his *Bibliotheca selecta* of 1603. This was a work intended as a kind of commentary on the Jesuit *Ratio studiorum*, an annotated bibliography describing what works should be read by young Catholics, and how they should be read. It has been called "the encyclopedia of the Counter-Reformation", and copies of it stood next to the *Ratio studiorum* in every Jesuit school and college in Europe. In the *Bibliotheca*, after discussing the dangers of overpraising pagan philosophers, particularly Plato, whose hidden poison the Church Fathers had discovered only after long study, Possevino devotes an entire chapter to hailing Crispo's anti-Platonic diatribe as the perfect antidote to pagan poisons. His work was "of great service to the Christian republic and should be used in all academies."³²

Crispo and his Counter-reformation backers did not entirely succeed in silencing the new Christian Platonism, but it clearly became dangerous to espouse a Christian Platonist position in Catholic countries after the 1590s. Crispo's work was answered, implicitly and with great circumspection, by Jacopo Mazzoni, the teacher of Galileo and the second holder of the Pisa Platonic chair, in his *Comparatio Platonis et Aristotelis* of 1597.³³ This work,

³² See Krayer, "Ficino in the Firing Line," pp. 396-397. Possevino's *Bibliotheca selecta de ratione studiorum*, 2nd ed., 2 vols., Venice, 1603, repeatedly uses and recommends Crispo to the Jesuit reader, e.g. at 2: 18, 34, 38; on p. 31 he says of Crispus' disputations, "eorum usus magno reipublicae Christianae bono, in omnibus Academiis esset usurpandus." Rotondò, "Cultura umanistica," pp. 49-50, discusses how the *Bibliotheca selecta* changed between the first (1593) and second editions to take account of Crispo's findings.

³³ Cited in note 1, above.

despite its title, is essentially a work on philosophical pedagogy which restates the Ficinian case for the continued value of Plato in the education of Christian youth. Yet the vast majority of its hundreds of folio pages is encumbered with the task of answering Crispo's charges of heterodoxy. A positive vision of Christian Platonism that could appeal to the imagination – a vision such as Ficino's *Platonic Theology* and Patrizi's *New Philosophy* both succeed in presenting – never appears in Mazzoni's jumble of learned notes. One can well imagine that the difficulties besetting Patrizi and Giordano Bruno at that moment must have been intimidating, making it difficult to issue any powerful and coherent statement of Christian Platonism.

Some of Mazzoni's failure may of course be explained by his personal limitations, and it is certainly the case that there ultimately appeared a much more effective answer to Crispo's diatribe. This was produced by a theology professor teaching in Imola called Livio Galanti, whose *Christianae Theologiae cum Platonica comparatio* in twenty books has not, to my knowledge, been studied in modern times.³⁴ Galanti (c. 1560-1630) was a Franciscan Observant and had been a student of Patrizi and Francesco Piccolomini. He seems to have been a bit bloody-minded and given to issuing poetical attacks on the great figures of his day, including Pope Clement VIII, whom he described as a "bigoted animal," enriching his own family by despoiling the Church. Galanti was tried by the Inquisition in 1612 but was absolved thanks to the intervention of his patron, Cardinal Giovan Garzia Millini. His *Comparison of Platonic with Christian Theology* was the work of many years and was dedicated to Millini's nephew Ferdinando. With the younger Millini's help he was able to steer the work through various theological tribunals and to have it printed *superiorum permisso* in 1627, three years after its completion.³⁵

Galanti has a good claim to be considered the last Christian Platonist of the Italian Renaissance, but one would hardly know this from the title page

³⁴ *Christianae theologiae cum Platonica comparatio, quin imo tota veteri sapientia ethnicorum, Chaldaeorum nempe, Aegyptiorum et Graecorum, in qua primo secretiora dogmata de Deo, de angelis, de mundi et hominis creatione, de anima, de daemonibus et de beatitudine conspiciuntur ... ac demum cautiones adhibentur quibus haereses et cognoscere et evitare, et praeterea theologiam ethnicam inoffenso decurrere pede Catholicus Christicola poterit, auctore admodum rev. patri Fr. Livio Galante, sancti seraphici ordinis Observ. theologo, et apud suos Forocornelienses publico utriusque philosophiae professore, Bologna: Ferronius, 1627.*

³⁵ On Galanti see the article in the *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, 51: 343-44.

of the work, which promises to “supply *cautiones* by which the Catholic Christian may recognize and avoid heresies and traverse pagan theology with unoffended foot.” The preface similarly presents Galanti’s book as the work of idle hours torn from his teaching duties. Only gradually does it begin to dawn on one that Galanti is in fact a passionate advocate of Ficino’s Platonic reformation. Plato, says Galanti, should be admired for having understood a *particula* of our theology. If his works became an occasion of heresy, that was not his fault, but the fault of the devil; a heretic can after all find fuel for his beliefs even in the Bible. The preface is then followed by a long list of *conformitates*, parallel passages, between the Bible and the works of Plato. One of them even states that a passage Plato’s *Alcibiades secundus* is a recognition (*sed perobscure*) of the coming of the Messiah.³⁶ Another says the Plato’s much-condemned doctrine of wife-sharing in the *Republic* is in fact a sign of Christian charity (just the sort of thing a celibate would say).³⁷ But these *conformitates* are followed by another list of passages containing patristic denunciations of Platonic doctrines. Hyper-Aristotelian critics, says Galanti, might rise up and claim he is not being even-handed in presenting only *conformitates*, so to be fair, he will list all the passages in the Greek and Latin Fathers where Plato’s doctrines are condemned.

This pose of even-handedness is maintained throughout the *Comparatio*. Like Crispo, Galanti follows a tripartite structure. Galanti first establishes what “our theologians” teach on a given issue, then gives the views of the Plato and the ancient theologians, then finally issues his *comparatio*, a statement of the degree to which Platonism and Christianity agree. It is only when one reads closely that one sees that Galanti is in fact defending the central vision of Christian Neoplatonism tooth and nail, and answering Crispo point for point, even if occasionally he has to throw overboard now and then a doctrine of the odd minor Platonist. In Books XI, XII and XIII for example, which deal with the soul, Galanti maintains that Plato can be read to say that God created individual immortal souls in time at the moment of birth, that there is no pre-existence or reincarnation of souls, that the body is created by God and not by junior gods, that there is a particular judgement, that the soul will eventually inhabit a glorified body, etc. Galanti admits only that Plato’s belief in the animation of the heavens diverges from Christian truth. The seventeen *cautiones* about Plato’s psychology listed in Book XIII turn out to be mostly minor errors attributable

³⁶ Galanti, *Comparatio*, p. 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*; compare also pp. 26-28, where the *communio mulierum* becomes an allegory of the Golden Rule.

to minor Platonists or, alternatively, possible misreadings of Plato's work. A subtext throughout is that Plato was much closer to Christianity than Aristotle – the latter, on the question of immortality, for instance, was either irresolute or Averroist. Yet even here Galanti is careful to describe Aristotle as the “first light of all the sciences.”³⁸ The net effect of the whole work, it might be said, was to Christianize Plato without in the smallest degree Platonizing Christianity.

Galanti is interesting because he illustrates the kind of disguises which a seventeenth-century Christian Platonist was obliged to don in the face of the Catholic Church's new-found hostility to Christian Platonism. It helps explain why Cambridge, not Rome or Florence, became the headquarters of seventeenth-century Platonism. But the experience of Christian Platonism in Italy during its second revival, from roughly the 1570s to the 1620s, may also reveal something about the changing ways ancient philosophy was being used after 1600. It has become almost a commonplace in recent years that ancient philosophy had a far greater profile in the works of early modern philosophers than was previously realized, and that historians should recognize, alongside the undeniable originality of seventeenth-century philosophy, the continued fertility of ancient philosophical writings in that period. If one turns one's attention from the new cosmology and mechanics and focuses, for example, on the human sciences, the period looks much more like a continuation of the Renaissance than a sharp break with it.

This revisionist line, I believe, is largely correct, but it might be refined further by analyzing and comparing the ways in which ancient philosophy was used after 1600. The present writer's knowledge of seventeenth-century philosophy is sadly limited and I can only venture the hypothesis that philosophers in that century, with some exceptions, were much less likely to see themselves as working in a tradition of ancient philosophy and much more likely to make eclectic use of particular ancient doctrines. If this hypothesis seems correct, one might venture to explain the phenomenon by appealing to the much greater clarity and precision with which doctrines both Christian and pagan were being defined in this age of confessional conflict. Working within a tradition was a much more confining experience once that tradition was reduced to handbook form. Whatever their stated prejudices against novelty and their respect for authority, even premodern philosophers liked to have fresh things to say, which was perhaps only possible for them so long as their traditions were flexible and non-dogmatic

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 353 (Book XIII).

enough to accommodate new ideas. So perhaps it is the inquisitors and the writers of philosophical handbooks we should ultimately praise – or blame – for the invention of modern philosophy. To pin down exactly what the ancients did think on issues relevant to Christian theology, excluding allegory as a valid hermenetical tool, can only have had the unintended effect of making them impossible for Christians to follow systematically. With the backward path blocked, the philosophers of the seventeenth century had no choice but to become their own *maîtres à penser*.
