

Selections from S.A. [Stephen A.; 'Steve' in other publications]
Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486): The
Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems*
(Tempe, Arizona: MRTS, 1998), 598 pages.

This selection deals with the goals of Pico's famous debate,
which he at least hinted would prepare the way for the end of the
world.

For other selections from the book, see:

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6. *Cosmological and historical conversions.* One final parallel involves the underlying religious goals of Pico's project. In the final stage of his cosmology, it will be recalled, Pico envisioned a return of emanated beings to God, a mystical conversion of multiplicity to unity. It should be evident by this point that Pico hoped to trigger a parallel historical conversion in his Vatican debate, returning thought from its current warring state to the unity it enjoyed in the days of the ancient wisemen.

It is interesting to look at this idea in relation to Pico's mysticism, which is analyzed more fully in chapter 3. Pico's mysticism, despite numerous claims to the contrary, reflected standard medieval compromises balancing human responsibility against the need for divine grace.¹⁰⁸ In the technical scholastic formula that Pico adopted in the *Oration*—dropped abruptly in a sea of metaphor—grace follows “if we ourselves have first done what is in us” [*si quid in nobis ipsi prius egerimus*]. To do “what is in us,” as Moses tells us, means that we must “prepare our path through philosophy to celestial glory while we can,” ascending the four steps in the ladder of knowledge—moral philosophy, dialectics, natural philosophy, and theology—that make up the main topics of Pico's debate. Once we have climbed those steps, returning into the divine unity reflected in our souls, we will have “done what is in us,” and God will reward us with the peace and mystical union that comes from a final quietistic infusion of grace.¹⁰⁹

These ideas were much on Pico's mind when he composed the nine hundred

¹⁰⁸ It is common in Renaissance studies to find Pico portrayed as a voluntarist, Pelagian, or semi-Pelagian, etc., based mainly on misreadings of the opening pages of the *Oration*. See below, pp. 105ff.

¹⁰⁹ *Opera*, 319 and passim; Garin, *Scritti vari*, 122 and passim. Discussions of the doctrine of the *facere quod in se est*, which was attacked by Protestant reformers in the sixteenth century, can be found in Oberman (1962; 1963: 129–45 and passim; 1966: 123–41). See also Ozment (1974). Some version of this doctrine was accepted in most scholastic circles, and it was by no means limited as sometimes claimed to the so-called nominalist tradition. Cf. on this point the quotation from Thomas Aquinas below, p. 110.

theses and *Oration* in the fall of 1486. Some of the circumstances surrounding their composition are explained in an important letter, already quoted in part, that Pico sent to Girolamo Benivieni less than a month before the nine hundred theses went to press. Benivieni had recently been at Pico's retreat at Fratta, outside Perugia:

Before you left, the doctrines to be disputed publicly by me had stopped at seven hundred. After you left, they grew to nine hundred—and unless I had drawn back, would have reached a thousand. But it was proper to halt at this number, since it is mystical. For if my doctrine of numbers is correct, this is the symbol of the excited soul turning back into itself through the frenzy of the muses [i.e., through philosophical studies]. This which I am sending you has likewise been added to the *Oration*. For since I have determined that no day should pass without my reading something of the Evangelical teachings, the day after you left these words of Christ fell into my hands: "I give you my peace, I give you my peace, I leave you peace" [cf. John 14:27]. Immediately, with a certain sudden excitation of the soul, I dictated certain things on peace in praise of philosophy (*de pace quaedam ad philosophiae laudes*) with such great speed that I often ran ahead of and upset the hand of my secretary.¹¹⁰

The section that Pico added to the *Oration* in that inspired frenzy pertains to the peace of the soul and not, strictly speaking, to the peace that he planned to bring to the warring schools. But the analogical leaps that he makes elsewhere between mystical and historical frames of reference should make us sensitive to similar movements here as well:

Truly, Fathers, there is manifold discord in us. We have grave and internal and worse than civil wars at home. If we do not want them, if we desire that peace that so raises us to the summit that we are set among the elevated of the Lord, moral philosophy alone will utterly check and calm them. . . . Dialectic will calm the tumults of reason tossed anxiously between the inconsistencies of rhetorical language and the deceits of the syllogism. Natural philosophy will calm the quarrels and disagreements of opinion that agitate, pull apart, and lacerate the restless soul. But it will calm it in such a way as to order us to remember that nature, according to Heraclitus, is born from war—the reason that it is called "contention"

by Homer—and because of this in natural philosophy true quiet and solid peace cannot present itself to us. This is the task and privilege of her mistress, holiest theology. To that peace theology will both point out the way and as guide lead us, who from far off seeing us hastening will cry, "Come to me you who labor, come and I will restore you, come to me and I will give you the peace which the world and nature cannot give you." Called so sweetly, invited so kindly, with winged feet like terrestrial Mercuries, flying into the embrace of the most blessed mother, let us enjoy that hoped for peace, the holiest peace, the undivided bond, the friendship of one soul through which all souls not only concord in one mind that is over every mind, but in a certain ineffable mode become fully one. This is that friendship that the Pythagoreans say is the end of all philosophy. This is that peace that God makes in his heights, which the angels descending to the earth announce to men of good will, so that through it men themselves ascending into heaven may become angels. Let us wish this peace for our friends. Let us wish it for our age. Let us wish it for every house we enter. Let us wish it for our soul, so that through it she may become the house of the Lord—so that after she has cast off her uncleanness with morals and dialectics, has adorned herself in manifold philosophy as in royal splendor, and has crowned the pinnacles of the gates with theological garlands, the king of Glory [i.e., Christ] might descend, and coming with the Father, make his stay with her. If she shows herself worthy of so great a guest—such is his immense mercy—in garments of gold like a wedding gown, wrapped in a manifold variety of sciences, she will receive her beautiful guest no longer as a guest but as a spouse.¹¹¹

The "manifold discord" and "civil wars" in this passage refer on a primary level to conflicts in the soul but analogically point just as well to the intellectual wars that Pico planned to resolve at Rome or indeed to the military conflicts that he was then witnessing in Perugia—lamented in still another hymn to peace, this time a poem, written in this same period.¹¹² Similarly, the mystical "concord in

¹¹⁰ Dorez (1895: 358).

¹¹¹ *Opera*, 318; Garin, *Scritti vari*, 116–20.

¹¹² See Pico's letter to Baldo Perugino in Dorez (1895: 357). The "pro pace extemporaneum carmen" [extemporaneous poem on peace] mentioned in that letter has occasionally been identified with the section on peace just quoted from the *Oration*, e.g., by Garin (1961: 231). More likely, however, the reference in the letter is to Pico's poem entitled *Ad*

one mind" to which Pico refers here can hardly be divorced from the historical concord of philosophies that he sought throughout his career: Free movement between all such levels was at the heart of Pico's correlative methods, and his use of the same words to describe them can never be taken to be totally accidental. The discovery of such correspondences was, in fact, what Pico refers to in the nine hundred theses as the "method of secret analogizing" (*via secretae analogiae*).¹¹³

If on the mystical plane Pico's revival of ancient wisdom was meant to prepare the soul for its individual reunion with Christ, it is reasonable to ask whether on the historical plane—and indeed, on a cosmic scale—that revival was meant to prepare mankind as a whole for its final "marriage" to Christ in the Second Coming. Remarkably, a number of hints in Pico's letters and in the nine hundred theses suggest that he had something precisely like this in mind.

The biblical passage that inspired the "Ode to Peace" in the *Oration* is filled with eschatological sentiments, recalling Christ's words to his disciples before the Passion: "I give you peace, I leave you peace. Set your troubled hearts at rest, and banish your fears; you have heard me say, 'I am going away, and coming back to you'" (John 14:27–28). The mystical frenzy that overcame Pico when he read those lines visited him more than once in the hectic months before the theses went to press. In a letter written to Marsilio Ficino in September 1486, Pico announced his discovery of certain Chaldean and Arabic writings, filled with mysteries, that fell into his hands "clearly not by accident or fortuitously, but for the good of my studies by the plan of God and my guiding spirit." Those "treasure chests" (*thesauri*) contained proof that Zoroaster had predicted Christ's coming, one of many such discoveries that Pico planned to announce at Rome. It was discoveries like this that compelled him "by force" to take up study of Chaldean and Arabic as well as Hebrew—a burdensome task, but one promising "the true image of the future glory that will be revealed in us."¹¹⁴

Pico was referring here to his struggles with those languages, the key to that treasure chest of holy secrets. But his words came, again unacknowledged, from another biblical passage filled with eschatological sentiments: "I judge that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing to the future glory that will be revealed in us. . . . We know that the whole of creation has been groaning in travail

deum deprecatio (which deals with political peace in Italy), discovered and published by Kristeller (1965: 99).

¹¹³ See thesis 10>7.

¹¹⁴ *Opera*, 367–68. Cf. the version edited from a Vatican manuscript by Kristeller (1937: 2:272–73).

together until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:18–23).

Pico's plans for his debate uniformly suggest eschatological hopes and apocalyptic urgency: his choice of the Vatican as its site; his inclusion of theses from what he viewed as all *gentes* and their *heresiarchae*—terms rich with religious overtones; the location "in the apostolic senate" of this "council," with the pope himself as supreme judge; the inclusion in the historical theses of conclusions from six "nations" grouped in twenty-eight sections—both "perfect numbers" symbolizing perfection and completion; and so on. The concluding section of Pico's theses contains his grand plan for the final conversion of the Jews, last item on the medieval agenda before the coming of the millennium—that future Sabbath when all conflicts between all "nations" will be finally resolved. Significantly, that method was based on Pico's rediscovery of "the true exposition of the Law" revealed by God to Moses on the mountain—binding the end with the beginning, closing the circle of time.¹¹⁵

Finally, there is the clue that Pico left in the date of his debate, which was to be postponed until after the Feast of the Epiphany. As noted earlier, the Epiphany celebrated in part the submission to Christ of the *gentes* in the persons of the *Magi*—the ideal symbol for the submission of Pico's "nations" to a restored Christian philosophy and theology in his debate.¹¹⁶ These symbolic associations were

¹¹⁵ Cf. *Apology*, in *Opera*, 178. Pico underscores the religious connotations of the term *concilium* by using it to refer to the sacred Council of Elders that was supposedly held when the "true explanation of the Law" (i.e., the Cabala) was committed to writing: "Habetur autem de isto Concilio, in quo fuerunt scripti isti libri, mentio lata et diffusa apud Hebraeos in libro qui dicitur *Sederolam*, id est, *Liber saeculorum*, ubi habetur qui sederunt in Concilio, et denique totius Concilii gesta et ordo. Ex quibus omnibus satis patere potest, non esse confictum a me quod praeter Legam scriptam, Moyses veram quoque Legis expositionem a Deo acceperit, et quod illa deinceps per successionem a Moyse 70 senioribus, et ab illis aliis suis successoribus fuerit revelata" [Moreover, wide and diffuse mention of that Council in which those books were written is found among the Jews in the book called *Sederolam*, that is, the *Book of Ages*, where you can find who sat in the Council and what the order and activities of the whole Council were. From all these it is sufficiently clear that I did not invent the idea that besides the written Law, Moses also received from God the true exposition of the Law, and that this was then revealed through succession from Moses to the 70 Elders, and from them to their successors].

¹¹⁶ On celebrations of the Epiphany in Florence by the Confraternity of *Magi*, sponsored by the Medici, see the texts printed in Hatfield (1970). Given Pico's close

clearly carefully chosen. The most famous line from the Office of the Epiphany at dawn supplied, in fact, the inspiration for Pico's final triumphal words on the soul's marriage to Christ, quoted earlier, in the "Ode to Peace" found in the *Oration*. That line, from the antiphon, reads: "On this day the church is joined to her celestial spouse" [*Hodie caelesti sponso juncta est ecclesia*].

Did Pico believe that his Vatican debate would end with the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse crashing through the Roman skies, now that mankind—dressed "in garments of gold like a wedding gown, wrapped in a manifold variety of sciences" (cf. Revelation 19:8–9, Isaiah 61:10, etc.)—was prepared at last for its final marriage to Christ? It is impossible to know for sure. In the eschatological thought of the Renaissance it is often difficult to distinguish hard convictions, half-hopes, and heavy metaphorical play—although it was rarely ever *simply* play. In one hesitant Cabalistic calculation of the date of the end of the world, in any case, Pico's theses carry us to the year 2000.¹¹⁷

As Pico recalled Scripture elsewhere, however, no one knows for certain the date of the end of the world, and we must hold ourselves in constant readiness.¹¹⁸ Pico's ability to weave a complex web of eschatological symbols around his Vatican project would have been applauded by his sympathizers for its own sake—it was a mode of expression in which Renaissance thinkers were surpassed by none—and could be taken as well as a reminder that all of us, as Moses warns us, must "prepare our path through philosophy to celestial glory while we can."

It is impossible, however, not to suspect something more here than a simple warning. No serious student of history could be much surprised by a Renaissance intellectual's belief in the impending end of the world or even by his assigning to

himself a central part in the cosmic drama of history. Any medieval or Renaissance assembly—let alone one of Pico's unprecedented scale—was apt, in any case, to awaken in its participants images of the Final Assembly at the end of the world in which Christ would resolve all conflicts between all "nations."¹¹⁹ Throughout the last half of the fifteenth century, as the ominous date of 1500 approached, eschatological speculation increased sharply, as suggested above all in the works of Savonarola and his followers. Even Marsilio Ficino—whose ultimate hostility towards Savonarola is well known—was hardly a stranger to eschatological thinking, and like Pico saw the divine hand guiding his own attempts to revive ancient wisdom. In one famous passage, in fact, Ficino attributed to Pico himself—animated by the ghost of Cosimo de' Medici—a guiding role in his own holy mission.¹²⁰ A saintly, prophetic, or even semi-messianic role was similarly assigned to the young count of Concord by other of his contemporaries, in a way that only the most radically modernizing historian could dismiss as sheer hyperbole.¹²¹ Finally, as we shall see in chapter 3, in his magical theses Pico created a

¹¹⁹ Thus speaking of disputations in his *Rhetorica novissima*, read to the University of Bologna in 1235, the rhetorician Buoncompagni da Signa concludes: "Wherefore, after treating of assemblies, I put an end to my labor, awaiting without horrible fear the Last Assembly in which the third Angel will sound the trumpet at whose blast heaven and earth will be moved. . . . Afterwards, indeed, the Son of God himself will appear. . . . And then all conflict of opposing counsel will cease and all contentions of controversy be solved" (Thorndike 1944: 46).

¹²⁰ Ficino *Opera* (1576: 2:1537ff.). Ficino makes much of the fact that Pico was born in the same year (1463) that Ficino began studying Plato in Greek under Cosimo de' Medici's patronage. Twenty-one years later, on the same day and indeed at almost the same hour that Ficino's translation of Plato was published [*quo die et ferme qua hora Platonem edidi*], Pico was moved by Cosimo's departed soul to travel to Florence to inspire Ficino to take up Plotinus. Considering the strained relations between Pico and Ficino over interpreting Plotinus, discussed earlier, this passage has some peculiar overtones.

¹²¹ Gianfrancesco's biography of his uncle and Thomas More's free English adaption of that text follow patterns drawn from the *Lives of the Saints*, including stories of Pico's miraculous birth and youthful feats. For similar views, see the testimonials of Pico's contemporaries in *Opera*, 407ff., and the interesting letter of Baptista Spagnuoli of Mantua to Pico's nephew included in *Opera*, 387–88, which describes Pico's prophetic appearance to Baptista in a dream. Pico appears in a prophetic role in still another dream—there are a surprising number of such cases—in Giovanni Nesi's eschatological *Oraculum de novo saeculo* (1497). In his *De honesta disciplina* 3.2 (quoted here from Garin, *Scritti vari*, 81), Pietro Crinito informs us that Girolamo Savonarola compared Pico's wisdom alone in their period to that of the greatest of all the church fathers: "Et unus tu—inquit—es, Pici, aetate

friendship with Lorenzo de' Medici, it is reasonable to assume that the Medici family's special links with the Feast of the Epiphany may have figured in Pico's choice of opening dates for his dispute.

¹¹⁷ See thesis 11>9.

¹¹⁸ Like most medieval and Renaissance writers, Pico was normally circumspect in his attempts to calculate the exact date of the end of the world. On this see, e.g., *Heptaplus* 7.4 (*Opera*, 53; Garin, *Scritti vari*, 352), which refers again to the end as a Sabbath. Pico wrote a book entitled *De vera temporum supputatione* (On the True Calculation of the Ages) that dealt in part with this topic; the text is referred to repeatedly in the *Disputationes* (e.g., *Opera*, 435, 554, 564; *Disputationes*, ed. Garin [1946–52: 1:122, 536, 582–84]) and again in Pico's biography by his nephew-editor Gianfrancesco Pico (*Opera*, fol. 4v). But as in so many other cases, Gianfrancesco chose not to publish the text, possibly because it contradicted the eschatological predictions of his mentor Savonarola. See further below, chap. 4.

CHAPTER ONE

portrait of *homo magus* as a kind of worldly redeemer—possessing the power to “marry the world” and to raise all nature from its fallen state.

No matter how we interpret this evidence, it can hardly be doubted that Pico pictured his Vatican council as something more than simply the largest scholastic debate in history. In the early draft of the *Oration*, Pico wrote that “there is no one who has ever existed, or who after us will exist, to whom truth has given itself to be comprehended in its entirety. Its immensity is too great for human capacity to be equal to it.” These are among the most powerful lines in the *Oration*, and P. O. Kristeller has rightly called attention to their beauty.¹²² But the most interesting fact about those lines has surprisingly never been emphasized: despite their power, Pico *dropped* them from his final draft.¹²³ There are reasons to believe that he did so for the obvious reasons. The last months before his debate were rich in major discoveries; in its final form, the nine hundred theses point more than one way to the understanding of “everything knowable.” As Pico’s vision of his Vatican project grew, we may well imagine that he simply viewed his words as no longer appropriate: The ancient concords had been rediscovered, and the old harmonies of things were about to be restored at Rome.

End of selection

v. *Collating the Theses: Pico’s Debating Strategies*

We can now look at how Pico meant to debate his theses. We must first further dispose of the old view that he planned to reconcile all the theses in his

nostra, qui omnium veterum philosophiam ac religionis christianae praecepta et leges percalleas, ut haec tua quidem rerum pene omnium cognitio antiquioribus illis, Hieronymo, Augustino, Basiliis, Gregoriisque ac Dionysiis, merito conferri possit” [And you alone, Pico, he said, exist in our age who fully understands the philosophy of all the ancients and the precepts and laws of the Christian religion, so that your understanding of almost all things is able to be rightly compared to that of the ancients Jerome, Augustine, Basil, Gregory, and Dionysius]. Comments like these help explain why Savonarola and his followers tried to enlist Pico’s posthumous aid in bolstering their movement—in part by doctoring his published works. See below, pp. 151–79.

¹²² Kristeller (1965: 84); Garin (repr. 1961: 239): “Nemo aut fuit olim aut post nos erit cui se totam dederit veritas comprehendendam. Maior illius immensitas quam ut par sit ei humana capacitas.”

¹²³ It is also conceivable that these lines were struck out for religious reasons by Pico’s nephew, who apparently tampered with other lines in the *Oration* after Pico’s death; see below, p. 171 n. 108. Whether Gianfrancesco believed that religious prophets like his mentor Savonarola were capable of comprehending truth “in its entirety” is an open question.