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Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486)

THE EVOLUTION OF TRADITIONAL
RELIGIOUS AND PHILOSOPHICAL SYSTEMS

With Text, Translation,
and Commentary

by

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**CONCLVSIONES non disputabūtur nisi post Epiphaniam.
Interim publicabuntur in omnibus Italiæ Gymnasiis. Et si quis
Philosophus aut Theologus etiam ab extrema Italia arguendi
gratia Romam uenire uoluerit pollicetur ipse. D. disputaturus
se uiatici expensas illi soluturum de suo :.**

THE CONCLUSIONS will not be disputed until after the Epiphany [January 6]. In the meantime they will be published in all Italian universities. And if any philosopher or theologian, even from the ends of Italy, wishes to come to Rome for the sake of debating, his lord the disputer promises to pay the travel expenses from his own funds.

Announcement at the end of the 1486 edition of Pico's theses

By permission of the British Library, IB 18857, fol. 35v.

Preface

Primum igitur, quod est omnium maximum, sicut ostendimus, quae sunt in omnibus mundis contineri in singulis.

The first [principle], which is the greatest of all, as I have shown, is that whatever exists in all worlds is contained in each one. Pico, *Heptaplus*¹

This study developed in conjunction with a cross-cultural model of the evolution of premodern religious and philosophical systems; a fuller account of that model, which involves a number of fields outside history, will appear in a separate volume. Important parts of that model examine the systematic changes introduced in thought by repeated attempts to reconcile traditions, by “syncretism” in a broad sense of the term.² Pico was the obvious candidate for a study

¹ *Opera* (1557/72: 8); hereafter cited as *Opera*; Garin, ed., *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno, e scritti vari* (Florence, 1942: 194); hereafter cited as *Scritti vari*. References to all Pico’s texts besides the nine hundred theses and *Commento* will be given by book and chapter number when these exist and to the standard 1557 and 1572 Basel editions of Pico’s *Opera*; except for an occasional line, pagination is identical in the two Basel editions. I have also normally provided cross-references to Garin’s partial edition of Pico’s works and exclusive references to his version of the *Commento*, which was based on manuscript evidence not available to the Basel editors.

² I adopt here the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition of syncretism as the “attempted union or reconciliation of diverse or opposite tenets or practices, especially in philosophy or religion.” The term is applied in this study not only to reconciliations of different writers or traditions but to attempts as well to harmonize highly stratified compilations (like the Aristotelian corpus, Torah or “Book of Moses,” or various Confucian texts) traditionally ascribed to a single authority. Since religious and philosophical commentators worldwide tended to apply similar reconciliative techniques to each stratum of authoritative traditions, over centuries the religious and philosophical systems that grew out of those traditions not surprisingly developed strong family resemblances East and West. Indeed, it can be shown that the evolution of the correlative (or “fractal”) structures commonly associated with scholastic systems in their mature forms can be simulated by the same kinds of iterative computer models used to simulate the growth of complex systems in other fields. For

of syncretic processes in the European Renaissance, which in a sense summed up over two thousand years of earlier Western traditions. Pico's nine hundred theses³ provide a unique window not only onto Renaissance thought but onto the growth and decline of premodern traditions as a whole.

Pico published his theses in December 1486 as part of a grand plan to debate "all teachings" and "all sects" at Rome. Pico's dispute, which was quickly banned by Pope Innocent VIII, was to be held the next year "in the apostolic senate"—before the college of cardinals—with the pope himself envisioned as supreme judge. The enormous scope of Pico's project reflected over three centuries of Western textual revivals amplified by the early printing revolution; whatever its omissions, Pico's text covers a wider range of traditions than any other known fifteenth-century work. The nine hundred theses throw light on hundreds of philosophical and theological conflicts tied to the "warring schools" of Greek, Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin scholasticism; on Renaissance Neo-Platonism and classicism (or so-called humanism) in general, in both of which Pico played a major part; on natural magic, numerology, astrology, Kabbalah, and related esoteric traditions, in which Pico's Renaissance influences were large; and on scores of other topics tied to the complex traditions of the period. If any one text provides a handbook of late fifteenth-century thought, it is this one; indeed, Pico promises a discussion "of everything knowable" (*de omni re scibili*) at more than one point in his work. It was no accident that Pico's text was the first printed book banned universally by the church.⁴

In his *Apology* for his aborted debate, Pico suggested that an *occulta concatenatio* or "hidden connection" linked theses widely scattered in his text; reconstruction of those links is anything but trivial, since Pico's text is loaded on nearly every page with traps for unwary debating opponents. Analysis has been made more difficult by massive corruption in all accessible versions of Pico's text, which in the past has made meaningful study of the theses next to impossible. The edition

discussion, accompanied by protocols for computational models, see Farmer and Henderson (1997); cf. also below, pp. 91–96. On parallel developments in Western and Eastern scholastic traditions, see further Cabezón, ed. (1998).

³ The *editio princeps* of Pico's work carried no title, presumably because the theses were intended to be debated and not simply read. Given the fact that none of the titles given by tradition to the work can claim strong textual support, I have followed Pico's practice by referring indifferently to his "theses" or "conclusions," etc., without assigning a formal title to the text.

⁴ On this point, see Hirsch (1967: 89).

supplied with this study as evidence attempts to provide the first reliable version of Pico's text since the exceedingly rare *editio princeps*, whose erratic punctuation raises its own barriers to his thought. My translation is the first based on trustworthy Latin sources;⁵ hopefully, that translation will promote wider study of Pico's text, which to date has only been studied in a misleadingly piecemeal fashion.

§

Chapter 1 surveys the nine hundred theses, analyzes Pico's debating plans, and investigates the hidden mystical and eschatological goals of his Vatican project. Chapter 2 looks at the historical origins and systematic effects of Pico's syncretic methods; this chapter discusses ways in which "correlative systems" in general (to adopt the sinologists' terms)—including those hierarchical variations best known in the West—were shaped by the kinds of syncretic processes that operated at an accelerated rate in Pico's work; along the way this chapter discusses syncretic mechanisms that originally helped generate the monotheistic gods and abstract cosmological principles underlying those systems, which began to emerge in all advanced Eurasian societies in the middle of the first millennium BCE.

Chapter 3 analyzes some unique features of Pico's system, including those pertinent to his mystical and magical thought and to his lost *Concord of Plato and Aristotle*, which was closely tied to his aborted Vatican debate; this chapter looks more closely at the specific kinds of structures imposed on traditional thought by syncretic processes.

Chapter 4 discusses Pico's later development, which has long been the subject of heated debate. Study of Pico's later works, reinterpreted in the light of his theses, turns up unexpected signs of massive literary fraud: Extensive evidence shows that after his death Pico's later texts were heavily doctored by his nephew-editor Gianfrancesco Pico and other key figures in the conservative Savonarolan movement; indeed, strong evidence assigns a guiding role here to Savonarola himself, who—for reasons that remain obscure—obtained control of Pico's papers after the latter's sudden death in 1494.

The story of tampering and forgery in Pico's works provides a powerful

⁵ Albano Biondi's Italian translation of the theses (1995), the first in any language, appeared after the present study was already in press. Biondi's edition and translation are based on corrupt sources and are unfortunately filled with errors, further obscuring Pico's goals in his debate. For analysis, see below, pp. 186–88.

example of a perennial premodern theme: Extreme anti-syncretic no less than extreme syncretic tendencies tended to emerge in all traditional societies suddenly inundated by newly rediscovered or foreign texts. The exaggerated growth of these tendencies in the early printing age can be linked to the final collapse of syncretic traditions that took place in the two centuries after Pico's death. Reconstruction of this part of Pico's story provides a forum for discussing what Stephen Jay Gould has labeled "the greatest intellectual transformation in modern Western thinking"⁶—the final demise, after two thousand years of continuous development, of the extreme kinds of correlative thought summed up so magnificently in Pico's work.

Part 2 of this study, as my principal evidence, contains my Latin edition of the nine hundred theses, accompanied by my English translation and commentary.

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I want to thank the friends and colleagues who have helped me to complete this study. Thanks goes first to my good friend and recent collaborator, the sinologist John B. Henderson, for his contributions to the comparative dimensions of this work. Readers interested in the parallel development of Eastern and Western traditions should consult Henderson's *The Development and Decline of Chinese Cosmology* (1984), his *Scripture, Canon, and Commentary: A Comparison of Confucian and Western Exegesis* (1991), and his most recent study, *The Construction of Orthodoxy and Heresy: Neo-Confucian, Islamic, Jewish, and Early Christian Patterns* (1998). In a rapidly globalizing society, Renaissance scholars have much to gain and nothing to lose from expanding in comparative directions, returning to paths pioneered by Sarton many decades ago. As the studies of Henderson (1984) and Elman (1984) have suggested, even the so-called humanist movement finds powerful parallels in the work of late Ming and early Ch'ing Dynasty philologists. Those parallels are not coincidental but reflect recurrent patterns of decay and revival in all premodern literate cultures. Viewed from a cross-cultural perspective, Renaissance intellectual traditions, whose complexities remain unrivaled in premodern societies, throw light not only on the evolution of traditional Western thought but on parallel developments as well outside the West.

Research for this study began under fellowships in the early 1980's from the National Endowment for the Humanities and from the Harvard University Center

⁶ *New York Review of Books* 38, no. 11 (13 June 1991): 11.

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for Italian Renaissance Studies at the Villa I Tatti in Florence, Italy. At I Tatti I drew support from the lively mixture of fellows, research associates, official and unofficial visitors, and staff members that has long made I Tatti such a productive institution. Scholars in Florence or elsewhere, some now deceased, whose conversations were suggestive or who answered my oral or written inquiries while I conducted my research include Charles Schmitt, William Bouwsma, Eve Barsook, Gene Brucker, Salvatore Camporeale, Maury Feld, Eric Gombrich, Bill Kent, Paul Oskar Kristeller, Donald Weinstein, Charles Hope, Paola Zambelli, Daniela Mugnai, Dale Kent, Arthur Field, John Monfasani, François Secret, Alan Perreiah, and Michael Allen. I also want to thank my friends John Minton, Dan Tozzer Kemp, Kavous Behzadi, Marc Leski, and Peter Robinson for our many discussions concerning this work.

Anna Terni, formerly Chief Librarian at the Biblioteca Berenson at I Tatti, helped me locate materials critical to my early research; it was in Berenson's old library, filled with neglected Eastern curiosities as well as familiar Western texts, that the comparative dimensions of this study first took shape. Thanks goes also to the staffs of the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, the Universitätsbibliothek in Erlangen, the Vatican Library, the British Library, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the Folger Library, the Library of Congress, and the Stanford University libraries for providing key materials used in completing this study.

A special thanks goes to Karen Lemiski and the staff of MRTS for the long hours they devoted to editing and producing this book.

Thanks goes finally to those who helped me find financial support for my research in its various stages. Craig Smyth, past Director of the Villa I Tatti, found the funds to allow me to continue my work in Florence after my official tenure at that institution had ended. Without his support and encouragement, and the constant help of Nelda Ferace, Assistant Director for Administration at I Tatti, I would have found neither the means nor the courage to continue my work. I also want to thank the Child Estate Fund in Florence, to which Professor Smyth kindly directed me, for additional assistance in this period. Lewis Spitz, Lawrence Ryan, Noel Brann, and Marvin Becker helped me find financial support in earlier stages of my research. I would like finally to recall the generous support that the late Professor Jane DeGrummund gave this study at a critical juncture.

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No study of a work as obscure as the nine hundred theses can possibly hope

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to be without error; given the complexity of Pico's text, any analysis should ideally take place collaboratively, drawing on the expertise of specialists in the dozens of traditions covered in Pico's work. Readers who wish to add their comments to Pico's text are invited to contact me at www.safarmer.com/pico/, where corrections and updates to this study will be posted as the need arises. Readers interested in the theoretical issues discussed in this work are also invited to contact me at that address.

This study frequently deviates from traditional paths in Renaissance studies, a result that I suspect might follow inevitably from any extended analysis of Pico's text. Some of these deviations are tied to the cross-cultural interests that originally drew me to the theses: Pico's text provides an ideal laboratory to study the connections between textual exegesis and the growth of correlative systems—connections that are not unique to Renaissance or premodern Western thought. (A number of extreme syncretic texts outside the West might serve as almost equally good laboratories.) Hopefully, Renaissance specialists will take anything they find useful in this book (ignoring if they wish my cross-cultural and theoretical comments, which lie at the center of the book's sequel) but will not mistake the book for what it is not—a traditional attempt to discuss Pico's thought in terms of each of the ancient, medieval, and Renaissance sources drawn on in his work. Any traditional source hunt would, in any event, soon be superseded on points of detail: No one can claim mastery over more than a small part of the traditions covered in Pico's text, which largely explains why previous studies have focused exclusively on isolated sections of the work. But as Pico himself suggested, to make real sense of his theses it is necessary to attempt a reading of the whole. Past studies that have discussed isolated sections of Pico's text—especially those sections involving magic and Kabbalah—have typically resulted in a wholesale confusion of Pico's ideas with the traditions he planned to synthesize in his debate. In the case of the Kabbalah, extraordinary efforts have been made by Pico scholars since the sixteenth century to unravel the meaning in medieval traditions of the obscure symbols of the kabbalistic *sefirot* (or emanated states of God's nature), overlooking the obvious correlations that Pico planned to make between those symbols and the equally obscure symbols of the Neo-Platonic *henads*—pagan religious constructs that (unnoted in the literature) take up almost an equal amount of space in Pico's text. Remarkably, other key sections of the theses, including the one that contains Pico's promised “new philosophy” (*philosophia nova*)—capable of resolving “every proposed question on natural and divine things”—have not been mentioned even in passing in five hundred years of Pico

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scholarship, despite the obvious importance of those sections for anyone hoping to decode Pico's text.

Whatever value this book has for traditional Renaissance scholars will not depend on its identification of Pico's sources (all of which he radically distorted) but on its demonstration of the systematic way in which he planned to collate those sources in his debate—the key to any comprehensive reading of Pico's thought, which must be a collective achievement. The need for collaborative work is underlined by the evidence discussed at the end of my study of massive adulterations in Pico's literary corpus, since that evidence suggests that major portions of Pico's lost texts—including his monumental *Concord of Plato and Aristotle*—can be reconstructed from the large number of plagiarized fragments preserved in the works of Pico's nephew and his Savonarolan colleagues. Philological reconstruction of this magnitude, however, must be undertaken by a number of researchers working together.

The old saying that books are not finished but abandoned is probably truer of this book than of most. This study was completed in the late 1980s; a series of mishaps delayed publication for nearly a decade. New studies published in that period have steadily improved our knowledge of Pico and similar writers outside the West; incorporation of recent findings in my notes has undoubtedly improved this book. But as five centuries of Pico scholarship attests, real dangers await those who dwell too long in Pico's distorting hall of mirrors; the work of any one scholar, no matter how incomplete, must in any event stop somewhere. It is with great pleasure and considerable relief, after a long and fascinating journey, that I see Pico off to press.

I dedicate this book with love to Linh, Brenton, and Erin.

Florence, Italy—Palo Alto, California