

Great Esotericists

Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499)



Bust of Ficino by Andrea Ferrucci
in Florence Cathedral.¹

Marsilio Ficino was born in Florence and is best known as one of the most prominent Italian humanists and philosophers. Ficino led the Florentine Academy, translated many of Plato's writings from Greek into Latin, and promulgated Neoplatonism in the Christian world. In addition to his formal writings, he was a prolific letter writer, almost a kind of spiritual and emotional adviser to a host of important and influential men in his time, not the least of which was Cosimo di Giovanni de' Medici (1389-1464) and his grandson Lorenzo de' Medici (1449-1492), also known as *Lorenzo il Magnifico*. Within these letters, which Ficino allowed to be published in 1495; we find significant Renaissance themes, which reveal him as the having embodied the very essence and ideals of the Renaissance cultural movement. In particular, Vol. 6 of the modern publication of his letters² offers suitable evidence to justify Ficino as the principal reviver and reconciler of Platonic philosophy and Christian piety, as well as being a true Renaissance man.

Ficino's father was a practicing physician who was acquainted with Cosimo de' Medici, then

"ruler" of Florence. Young Ficino studied Latin and Aristotle, most likely in Florence, so he was steeped in the burgeoning Renaissance thought. While studying scholastic philosophy, theology and Latin, he was introduced to some of the Latinized works of Plato, what little were extant. Like most of his Renaissance compatriots, e.g. Boccaccio and Petrarch, Ficino loved the Classics, and he learned Greek in order to translate and interpret additional works. He gained the patronage of Cosimo de' Medici, who was himself interested in Neoplatonism, and in 1462 became head of the Florentine Academy, a group of 15th century scholars dedicated to the study of Plato texts and other classical literature. In 1473, Ficino was ordained as a priest and was later named a church official of Florence Cathedral. He spent the remainder of his life translating Plato and Plotinus, trying to infuse "hermetic" thought within Christian theology, and writing hundreds of letters to his eclectic acquaintances.³

Ficino can be thought of as the man most responsible for reviving Platonism, as well as its sister school Neoplatonism, and endeavoring to link it with Christian theology. This is largely due to his translation of Plato's *Symposium*. However, he also translated *The Enneads*, which are a collection of writings attributed to Plotinus, compiled by his student Porphyry, which Ficino dedicated to Lorenzo il Magnifico. Additionally, Cosimo de' Medici commissioned Ficino to translate a most interesting body of treatises called the *Corpus Hermeticum*, of which early printed editions of eight of the treatises appeared before 1500, the final twenty-two appearing by 1641. The *Corpus Hermeticum* was purported to have been written by Hermes Trismegistus, who was thought by some to be the Egyptian god Thoth, or the Greek god Hermes, or a syncretic combination of the two.⁴ This work included Latin translations of the *Asclepius* and *Poimandres*, fascinating and perplexing theological texts that

boggled and amazed the Renaissance humanists.

The idea that classical thought and literature could have any bearing on the new Christian world, as it had developed and become since Christ, was entirely a Renaissance phenomenon. Prior to the 14th century, Christian theology alone ruled the intellectual world, and the world proper, which had come under the control of the Church. However, all this eventually resulted in the Dark Ages, and certain groups of elite men, especially scholars, artists, and thinkers, hungered for something to remedy the prevailing situation. Classical antiquity, at one time condemned entirely for its paganism, began to appear fresh, mysterious, and valuable. But, at the same time, these men were deeply Christian, and they had no desire to break from their faith, nor to leave the Church (at least initially; later, Renaissance thought and the revival of the Classics may have contributed to the Protestant Reformation). Thus, these men, constantly embattled and having to justify themselves to Rome and Church officials, looked for ways in which these two streams—pagan philosophical thought and Christian piety—might be brought together, and Ficino (with his Florentine Academy) was on the frontline of this fight. One of the best examples of his work is found in his letters, particularly Vol. 6. Ficino also wrote two seminal works, *Platonic Theology* and *The Christian Religion*, both of which try to show that the Christian religion and Platonic philosophy come from the same source—i.e., God.

In most of these letters, Ficino is responding to some respectable friend who asked him for

guidance, or else responding to a letter he has received attacking his work as a scholar and as a theologian. Correspondents include Frederico of Urbino, Lorenzo and Cosimo de' Medici, various Papal officials, cardinals, and bishops,

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poets like Giovanni Cavalcanti, Pietro Bembo, Antonio Zilioli, Pietro Molin, and others. What makes all these letters so decidedly Renaissance is their constant and relentless references to Classical Greek and Roman mythology. In Letters 11-16, Ficino, writing what he calls *fables*, but which are really just myths, describes didactic accounts of Roman mythological characters, in order to illustrate some practical or theological point to his recipients. These *fables* involve both Cosimo

and Lorenzo. This was a Renaissance method—that of utilizing classical components to fortify what, for these men, would have been their modern era.

For example, Letter 11 (pg. 18), entitled *A fable: A philosopher must avoid three things in particular: lust, greed, ambition*, tells of the goddess Minerva, known as Sophia to the Greeks (hence philo-Sophia or “love of wisdom”). Ficino describes how Minerva gave birth to a daughter, Philosophia, from her own head, as Jupiter had given birth to Minerva previously. Minerva tells her daughter to stay clear of not only Venus but also Hades and his attendants, lest Philosophia be deprived of ambrosia and nectar (food of the gods) and lose sight of the true nature of divinity. There are also Ficino fables involving Orpheus, Cupid, and the Pythian Oracle and priestess. Here we see how Ficino embodies the ideals of the

Classical World; how he utilizes its teachings for his own priestly duties of easing the soul-sicknesses of his flock, and demonstrates the complete harmony and accord of the two perspectives.

In another letter—Letter 21 (pg. 35), to Giovanni Niccolini, the Archbishop of Amalfi at Rome—Ficino both defends and makes a compelling case for the harmony and common source of Platonic philosophy and Christian thought: “Wishing the Platonic teaching to shine out ... since it is related to the divine law of both Moses and Christ as the moon is to the sun, I translated all the books of Plato from Greek into Latin. In addition ... I wrote a book by way of exposition.... Here the Platonic mysteries are set forth as clearly as possible, so that, removing the poetic veils, we may reveal the Platonic teaching, which is in complete accord with divine law. I believe, and with good reason, that this has been decreed by divine providence....”

Thus we see Ficino defending his translations of Plato, not merely for their idle curiosity, but because they harmonize with Christianity completely. Furthermore, he believes the revival of these translations, and of Neoplatonism in general, has been “decreed by divine providence”; that is to say, it is the will of God that Plato not only be translated and his teachings be disseminated and properly understood, but that they should be fused together with Christian theology, for the betterment of Christianity. Never before in the history of the West had a mixing of these two streams been attempted. It only occurred during the Renaissance cultural movement, and it could have only been led by men like Ficino.

One final example occurs in Letter 18 (pg. 32). In this letter, entitled *Philosophy and Religion are true sisters*, which is depicted in the image on the last page of this paper, Ficino states: “To sum it up, it seems that the ... golden teaching of the ancients should be called love of God rather than love of wisdom; and every utterance of these men is an oracle rather than

human speech.” Again, Ficino is attempting to show that philosophy in classical antiquity is synonymous with the present-day love of God in Christendom. Such an attempt echoes the Philosophy of Christ set forth by Erasmus. Furthermore, according to Ficino, ancient philosophers predicted and prophesied the coming of Christ Jesus, the Messiah, as did Moses and other prophets of the Old Testament. Thus, these ancient writings were not to be stamped out and eliminated, but instead should be studied and held in the highest regard, as are the books of the Bible, and hence also the Renaissance revival and reintegration of classical antiquity and Western thought.

The syncretism of Neoplatonism and Christianity is permanent, although hidden in plain sight, and we have the Renaissance cultural movement of the 14th and 15th centuries, as well as men like Ficino, to thank for it. To posit a few of the many examples of the Neoplatonic inheritance, one need only point to the Vatican Obelisk of Saint Peter’s Square or Michelangelo’s Greek-inspired art in the Sistine Chapel or consider the concept of Christ as the *Logos* or the later theological/academic groups like the Cambridge Platonists who were convinced of the compatibility of faith and reason. Due to the synthesizing efforts of Ficino and the other Renaissance humanists, Christian Neoplatonic beliefs exercised an immense influence on philosophy, theology and the arts in Europe and the Western world.

Contributed by Aaron J. French

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- ¹ Image in the Public Domain.
 - ² Marsilio Ficino, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino: Volume 6* (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1999).
 - ³ “Marsilio Ficino” *Encyclopaedia Britannica. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online Academic Edition*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2014. (accessed April, 30, 2014).
 - ⁴⁴ See the image by Charles Hardaker on final page of this paper.

Book Review

Sensa: The Lost Language of the Ancient Mysteries, by Dorje Jinpa. Ashland, OR: Pen-tabarba Publications, 2012. Hardcover, 204 pages. List price US\$35.

According to Helena Blavatsky, the world's most ancient scriptures were derived from "a very old book" written in the language of *Sensa* (*Sensar* or *Senzar*). The Stanzas of Dzyan, which underlay much of *The Secret Doctrine*, were also written in *Sensa*—or what she termed "ancient Sanskrit." Blavatsky identified it as

the secret sacerdotal tongue, from the words of the Divine Beings, who dictated it to the sons of Light, in Central Asia, at the very beginning of the 5th (our) race; for there was a time when its language . . . was known to the Initiates of every nation, when the forefathers of the Toltec understood it as easily as the inhabitants of the lost Atlantis, who inherited it, in their turn, from the sages of the 3rd Race, the Manushis, who learnt it direct from the Devas of the 2nd and 1st Races.¹

Alice Bailey, writing for the Tibetan Master Djwhal Khul, explained *Sensa* as the "name for the secret sacerdotal language, or the "mystery speech" of the initiated adepts all over the world. It is a universal language, and largely a hieroglyphic cypher."² It is an "ideographic language."³ The Great Invocation, we understand, originally consisted of seven "very ancient word-forms,"⁴ presumably *Sensa* ideograms. Unfortunately, there is no historical record of *Sensa*'s alphabet, grammar or pronunciation, and academic philologists do not acknowledge its existence.

Dorje Jinpa's *Sensa: The Lost Language of the Ancient Mysteries* takes up the story from there. The book does not provide a tabulation of the *Sensa* alphabet; nor does it include a *Sensa*-English dictionary. Indeed, any attempt to do so would automatically undermine its

credibility. *Sensa* is known only to high initiates and is carefully protected from broader dissemination. Rather, this is a book *about* *Sensa*.

Jinpa is not content to treat *Sensa* simply as an archaic, "lost," language—and in that sense the title fails to do the book justice. He takes a much larger view. The book summarizes what is known about *Sensa* from the literature but then goes on to offer profound insights into the role of language and symbolism, not only as media of communication, but also as instruments of divine will.

Sensa: The Lost Language of the Ancient Mysteries draws upon a vast esoteric literature, and the author moves easily from the trans-Himalayan teachings and the works of Rudolf Steiner and Manly Palmer Hall to Vedic, Hindu and Buddhist texts; Greek philosophers from Pythagoras to Proclus; the Hermetic literature; and the lore of the Druids. Jinpa has done his homework; the book provides evidence of years of research.

Chapter 1: "Archetypal Symbolism," and Chapter 2: "The Lost Language of the Sun," provide a general introduction to the topic. The latter suggests that *Sensa* may have been the universal language of infant humanity—or at least of the priesthood. Evidently, it had great power and, in ancient Atlantis, it was abused. The forces of darkness used *Sensa* to control the devas of the physical, emotional, and lower mental planes for selfish purposes. Citing the *Zohar*, the primary text of the Kabbalah, Jinpa argues that the biblical story of the Tower of Babel describes the Planetary Hierarchy's response to those abuses. To prevent further damage, the "tower"—the polluted Atlantean civilization—was destroyed, the people scattered, and their languages confused (pp. 40-41).⁵

Chapter 3: "The WORD," is pivotal to the author's entire thesis. Jinpa explains:

The WORD basically has two levels of meaning. To the public the WORD represents the Word of Power that God used to create the world, “And God spoke the WORD and the worlds came into being.” To initiates it expresses the archetypal keynote, the divine impulse behind the spiritual evolution of the world. It is this creative Vibration . . . imprinted upon the Soul of the World that is the seed of its ultimate perfection. (p. 77)

Jinpa cites a work on Vedic symbolism⁶ to present a descriptive schema in which the power or keynote is expressed on four levels. Their Sanskrit names and meanings are as follows (*vac* simply means “word”):

1. Para-*vac*—The supreme WORD, the Sound, the Silence, and the Sound of Silence.
2. Pasyanti-*vac*—The WORD manifesting as archetypal Images.
3. Madhyama-*vac*—The WORD manifesting in thought-forms.
4. Vaikhari-*vac*—The WORD manifesting as the physical universe, but particularly as audible speech and physical gestures. (p. 81, capitalization in original)

A rough equivalency may exist between the *Para-*vac** level and the Logoic or monadic plane. The *Pasyanti-*vac** level would seem to correspond to the atmic and/or buddhic plane, and the *Madhyama-*vac** level to the mental plane. The *Vaikhari-*vac** level evidently corresponds to the physical planes, perhaps with astral associations.

Through this discussion of the WORD, Jinpa introduces us to a “vertical” dimension of *Sensa*, in which the Logos communicates—if that term can still be used—with its forms. The Logos uses *Sensa* as the medium to create, sustain and destroy forms on the planes of reality within its domain—and presumably to urge forward the indwelling lives on their evolutionary paths. Importantly, at the lowest level, the WORD manifests “*as* the physical universe” (*italics added*).

The WORD originates at a transcendent level, utterly beyond our comprehension. It enters our realm of potential understanding first as archetypes and then as thoughtforms. When it finally reaches the physical level, it manifests as speech and gestures. We see the familiar process of multiplication as the Formless descends into forms. A divine idea may begin in the simplicity of silence, but it manifests in increasing numbers of archetypes, thoughtforms, linguistic characters, symbols and gestures as it descends through the planes. Obviously, no conventional type of alphabet could capture the richness of *Sensa*.

Contrasting with the vertical, Logoic use of *Sensa*, the horizontal use presumably takes place at the *Pasyanti-*vac** and *Madhyama-*vac** levels, with occasional use of the speech and gestures of the *Vaikhari-*vac** level, depending on the initiates’ status within the Hierarchy. This horizontal dimension of *Sensa*, equivalent to our own person-to-person communications, places *Sensa* within the familiar category of language. Yet the overshadowing “supreme WORD” ensures that the inter-initiate communication remains within the framework of divine intent.

The reference to gestures at the *Vaikhari-*vac** level is important; *Sensa* is not only language, in the ordinarily sense of the term, it is also *ritual*. Jinpa mentions traditional Indian *mudras* and also the ritual said to be enacted each year at the Wesak Festival, when the Buddha visits his assembled disciples. We can equally see how *Sensa* may manifest through other kinds of religious ceremony—and even secular rituals. At each level the use of *Sensa* by the Logos, and perhaps also by initiates, no doubt involves the Deva Evolution, whose members are known to respond to sound and ritual.

From our limited perspective, we can do little more than glimpse the enormous scope and power of *Sensa*. Perhaps we can gain a general understanding of what sounds, words, and symbols—static and dynamic—might capture or express that power. Much of the book is directed to helping us gain that understanding.

Chapter 4: “Mind and the Geometry of Sound,” explores the esoteric significance of spatial patterns, ranging from the shape of Buddhist *stupas*, to the organic structures of Buckminster Fuller, to the ice crystals studied by the late Japanese scientist Masaru Emoto. The alphabets of sacred languages have important esoteric properties. Jinpa cites Blavatsky and traditional Indian sources to speak of Sanskrit—which could be expected to lie particularly close to its *Sensa* ancestor:

[E]ach letter of the Sanskrit alphabet has an individual and fundamental esoteric meaning. It also has a secret geometrical form. In India these visual forms are called *Yantras*, which are vibrational signatures of great spiritual beings. . . . *Yantra*, like the *Sensa* alphabet to which it is related, is a science depicting through simplified diagrams the higher pictorial archetypes of those seed-vibrations (*bijas*) that are expressed by a *mantra*. (p. 141, italics in original)

In Chapter 5: “*Sensa* Script,” Jinpa draws upon eastern and western wisdom to explore the significance and meaning of symbols, including letters and numbers. Among much else he reminds us of Pythagoras’ *quadrivium*, the four classical disciplines of mathematics:

1. Arithmetic—numbers at rest in space.
2. Geometry—the relationship between numbers at rest in space.
3. Music (harmony)—the harmonious relationships of numbers in motion through time.
4. Spherics (celestial harmonics)—the harmonious relationship of numbers through time and space (p. 169).

The final, short Chapter 6: “Signatures of Living Organisms,” reminds us that the divine language manifests through living as well as inert forms. Jinpa comments:

It seems that every living organism has its own signature, which manifests as a set of symbols that accurately define it and in a pictorial sense represents its true nature. For those initiates who can read and understand the intricate language of symbols this

name reveals the organism’s fundamental characteristics, its rank on the evolutionary ladder of life, its primary and secondary purposes, and the keynote of its essential nature. (p. 189)

Chapter 6 concludes with prophecies of a new science which will make possible the diagnosis of “physical, psychological, and spiritual difficulties” and determination of “one’s station on the Path, and even provide a visual representation of the student’s archetypal potential.” The author adds, optimistically: “Due to the great hastening of evolution that is now taking place new applications of psychic energy for the common good become a real possibility.” (p. 193)

An excerpt from H. A. Curtiss’ *The Voice of Isis*⁷ is included as an appendix. Providing a fascinating discussion of sound, number, color and form, it is worthy of study in its own right.

Sensa: The Lost Language of the Ancient Mysteries is a must-read for all serious esoteric students interested in language, symbolism, or Hierarchical communication—even the mechanism of Hierarchical Purpose. It explores aspects of “language” far beyond what we ordinarily associate with the term. We may come away with no greater knowledge of *Sensa*, as it is actually “spoken” by the Logos and high initiates, but we gain tremendous insight into its essence, the role it plays in the divine economy, and the myriad of ways in which *Sensa* manifests at our level of being.

The book is well-written, and the topic material suitably arranged and explained, but the book’s production leaves something to be desired. References are often incomplete, hindering access to original sources. Most serious, the illustrations are woefully small—in many cases impossible to read and comprehend. The author would do us a great service if enlargeable copies of the graphics were provided in an accompanying online medium.

Readers may be interested in an article Dorje Jinpa published in *The Esoteric Quarterly*, Winter 2011: “*Sensa*: Part One, Archetypal Symbolism.” The author prefaced the article thus: “The following two-part series of articles is adapted from my forthcoming book *Sensa*:

The Lost Language of the Sun, to be published by Pentarba Publications 2011. Part Two of the article, promised for the Spring 2011 issue, never appeared. Part One's title gave its name to Chapter 1 of the present book, and the "forthcoming" book's title to Chapter 2. But considerable editing and rearrangement of topics has taken place between the published article and *Sensa: The Lost Language of the Ancient Mysteries*. The article contained no graphics, which might have alleviated the problem of the book's tiny illustrations, but it does contain a useful bibliography.

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- ¹ Helena P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* I (Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1888), xliii. Parenthesis in original. See also *Isis Unveiled* I (Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1877), 1, 440.
- ² Alice A. Bailey, *Initiation, Human and Solar* (New York: Lucis Trust, 1922), 224.
- ³ Alice A. Bailey, *A Treatise on White Magic* (New York: Lucis Trust, 1934), 379.

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- ⁴ Alice A. Bailey, *Discipleship in the New Age* II (New York: Lucis Trust, 1955), 149.
- ⁵ The *Zohar* does not mention Atlantis or the Planetary Hierarchy, but Chapters 77-78 describe in remarkable detail the power of the primeval language, its abuse, the need to destroy the Tower of Babel, and the subsequent restriction of the language to a chosen few, like Noah and Moses. See for example: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/zdm/index.htm>. (Last accessed Jan. 23, 2015). Readers should heed the warning on the website that the translation—used by the author and accessed by this reviewer—is the only complete one currently available in the public sector, but “This is not a critical edition; written by a pseudonymous Theosophist, probably British.”
- ⁶ James Powell, *Mandalas: The Dynamics of Vedic Symbolism*, (location unknown): Wisdom Garden Books, 1980.
- ⁷ H. A. Curtiss' *The Voice of Isis* (San Francisco: Curtiss Philosophic Book Co., 1920).