

A consideration of two attempts to reform astrology: Marsilio Ficino and Alan Leo

by Keisha Knight

This paper takes a historiographical look at two attempts to reform astrology. The paper explores the contexts and competing priorities for late 15th century reformer Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) and turn of the 20th century reformer Alan Leo (1860-1917). The paper situates both men in time, describing the complexity of the forces that shaped each of them, and shows how both Ficino and Leo grappled and integrated competing forces and philosophies into their works. By examining the historical milieus surrounding each figure, the competing theoretical frameworks that informed their writing, and the resonance both Ficino and Leo have on contemporary culture, this paper demonstrates the adaptability and continuity of astrological thought; while also highlighting fundamental differences between the early-modern and the turn of the 20th century worldviews.

Introduction

Jim Tester has called Marsilio Ficino the first early-modern Platonist.¹¹⁹ During the latter half of the 15th century Ficino wrote extensively on astrology as part of his endeavour to reconcile Platonism and Christianity.¹²⁰ In a later attempt at astrological reform at the turn of the 20th century, Alan Leo popularized esoteric sun sign astrology as a means to prepare the world for a new age.¹²¹ This paper will examine Marsilio Ficino's and Alan Leo's attempts to reform astrology and the competing priorities involved in each. As Richard Evans states, 'Most historical narratives consist of a mixture of revealed, reworked, constructed, and deconstructed narratives from the historical past

¹¹⁹ Jim Tester, *A History of Western Astrology* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 1990) p. 205.

¹²⁰ Mark Jurdjevic, 'Prophets and Politicians: Marsilio Ficino, Savonarola and the Valori Family', *Past & Present*, No. 183 (May, 2004), p 42.

¹²¹ Nicholas Campion, *Astrology and Popular Religion in the Modern West: Prophecy Cosmology and the New Age Movement* (London: Routledge, 2012) p.71.

and from the historian's own mind.'¹²² In other words, historical narratives are inevitably written from the present.¹²³ It is important to remember this when engaging in a comparative consideration of the past so the myriad voices are free to speak as clearly as possible.

Contexts and cultures

In 1439, just 14 years before the fall of Constantinople, Georgius Gemisthus, commonly known as Pletho (a well known classical scholar of the Byzantine empire), accompanied the emperor John VII Palaeologus on a visit to Florence.¹²⁴ Cosimo de Medici, who 'presided over Florentine political life for three decades' was inspired by Pletho's classical knowledge.¹²⁵ Nicholas Campion writes that, 'the notion of a universal harmony in which matter and reason were ultimately united in the Mind of the Creator matched the aspirations of a man such as Cosimo, a patron of learning and the arts.'¹²⁶ Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) met Cosimo de Medici in 1452 and over time a collaborative relationship, with Cosimo (and later his grandson Lorenzo) as patron/dreamer and Marsilio as philosopher monk/ reformer, was born.¹²⁷ In fact, it was Cosimo de Medici who, in 1463, presented Ficino with a manuscript, the Corpus Hermeticum of Hermes Trismegistus, 'and requested its immediate translation into Latin.'¹²⁸ Keith Thomas notes that Ficino's Latin translation of the Corpus Hermeticum 'helped to create an intellectual environment sympathetic to every kind of mystical and magical activity.'¹²⁹ The intellectual legacy of this 'mystical and magical' environment that Ficino helped to create inspired men and women centuries removed.

¹²² Richard Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 2000) p.126.

¹²³ Evans, *In Defense of History*, p.26.

¹²⁴ Nicholas Campion, *History of Western Astrology Volume 2* (London: Continuum, 2006) p.87.

¹²⁵ Campion, *History of Western Astrology Volume 2*, p. 87

¹²⁶ Campion, *History of Western Astrology Volume 2*, p. 87

¹²⁷ Campion, *History of Western Astrology Volume 2*, p. 88-89

¹²⁸ Angela Voss, 'The Astrology of Marsilio Ficino: Divination or Science', *Culture and Cosmos*, 4 (2000) p. 34.

¹²⁹ Thomas, Keth, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) p.235.

Writing about the Victorian occult revival in the 19th century Alison Butler notes, 'The cabalistic magic and the brilliant synthesis of existent philosophies and religious systems of the Renaissance that were carried out by Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola had not disappeared. Many such philosophical tenets were preserved and assimilated into Rosicrucianism in the seventeenth century.'¹³⁰ Having consistently inspired esoteric practices and occult societies throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, Ficino's intellectual legacy was re-ignited with fervour toward the end of the 19th century in the person of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, a founding member of the Theosophical society. Campion writes, 'Blavatsky's historical purpose was in the tradition of Marsilio Ficino, and so many thinkers since – to demonstrate that all religions had a single origin and contained the same core of truth.'¹³¹ Blavatsky drew on Eastern, largely Hindu, concepts such as reincarnation and karma to develop a 'New Age astrology.'¹³² Campion writes, 'The chief engineer of Blavatsky's new astrology was the English Eastern Theosophist Alan Leo (1860-1917).'133 Leo mass produced individual horoscopes in order to broaden the network of individuals preparing for the Age of Aquarius and share New Age astrology with as many people as possible.¹³⁴ Campion also notes that 'Alan Leo's solar astrology, the foundation of all modern sun-sign psychology, was derived directly from Blavatsky's reformulation of Hermetic cosmology.'¹³⁵ Similar to role that Cosimo de Medici played for Ficino, Helena Blavatsky was a crucial mentor for Leo and through his work her ideas were shared as well.

Despite the shared intellectual legacies between Ficino and Leo the late fifteenth century and the turn of the twentieth century were, according to Roy Willis and Patrick Curry, drastically different places with regards to rationalism

¹³⁰ Butler, Alison, 'Magical Beginnings: The Intellectual Origins of the Victorian Occult Revival', *Limina*, (9) 2003, p 83.

¹³¹ Campion, *History of Western Astrology Volume 2*, p. 229

¹³² Campion, *History of Western Astrology Volume 2*, p. 230-231

¹³³ Nicholas Campion, *Astrology and Cosmology in the World's Religions* (New York: NewYork

University Press, 2012), p 197.

¹³⁴ Campion, *History of Western Astrology Volume 2*, p. 232

¹³⁵ Nicholas Campion, *Astrology and Popular Religion in the Modern West: Prophecy Cosmology and the New Age Movement* (London: Routledge, 2012) p. 74

and enchantment.¹³⁶ Tester writes that in the fifteenth century ‘magic and astrology and religion and various occult sciences were inextricably mixed in the minds and practices of men.’¹³⁷ The early modern period was a time when disenchantment may have been happening slowly but nothing like the disenchantment that takes place as a result of capitalism in the 20th century.¹³⁸ According to this logic, Ficino’s astrological reform was born in a more enchanted world than Leo’s. Curry writes that popular sun-sign astrology ‘arose chiefly in response to a widespread public desire for re-enchantment: an attempt, however inchoate and crude, to re-enchant the world.’¹³⁹ Looking at the energy that both Ficino and Leo put into reforming the astrology around them it seems living in an ‘enchanted’ or ‘disenchanted’ world doesn’t significantly effect the effort a reformer puts into promoting reform.

Competing systems

In Ficino’s *Three Books on Life* he repeatedly makes statements reaffirming the authority of the Church. He writes ‘In all things which I discuss here or elsewhere, I intend to assert only so much as is approved by the Church.’¹⁴⁰ Ficino implores his reader:

Let us by no means ever attempt anything forbidden by holy religion. Moreover, in performing any work let us hope for and seek the fruit of the work principally from Him who made both the celestials and those things which are contained in the heavens, who gave them their power, and who always moves and preserves them.¹⁴¹

Ficino is careful to continually define the parameters of his thought so that the Church is never threatened. In Chapter XII of *De Sole*, the *Book of the Sun*,

¹³⁶ Roy Willis and Patrick Curry, *Astrology Science and Culture: Pulling Down the Moon* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), pp. 77-92.

¹³⁷ Jim Tester, *A History of Western Astrology* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 1990) p 214.

¹³⁸ Roy Willis and Patrick Curry, *Astrology Science and Culture*, pp. 78-79.

¹³⁹ Roy Willis and Patrick Curry, *Astrology Science and Culture*, p. 88.

¹⁴⁰ Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, ed. Kaske, Carole C. and Clark, John R., *Ficino, Three Books on Life*, Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, Binghamton: State University of New York at Binghamton, 1989.

<http://people.bu.edu/dklepper/RN242/marsilio.html> [Accessed August 1, 2016] (a)

¹⁴¹ Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life* <http://people.bu.edu/dklepper/RN242/marsilio.html> [Accessed August 1, 2016] (f)

Ficino begins his comparison of the Sun and planets to the muses and spirits with the words, 'There is nothing in the world more like the divine Trinity than the Sun.'¹⁴² Similarly he entitles Chapter XIII of *De Sole*, 'That the Sun is not to be worshipped as the Author of all Things,' and goes on to explain why. However, he concludes the chapter by stating,

Moreover although the Sun is exceedingly far removed from the Creator of the world, nevertheless all celestial things appear by divine law to lead back to the one Sun, the Lord and regulator of the heavens. And we are made fully aware from this that things which are in heaven, and under heaven, and above heaven, are similarly referred back to the one beginning of all things. And finally considering that, let us worship this one first principle with that same ritual observance that all celestial things give to the Sun.¹⁴³

Ficino seems to assert that though the Sun is not the author of all things we may worship it as a type of metaphor for the author of all things. At the very least, we may use the relationships between heavenly bodies as guides for how to worship God. Ficino's attempt to harmonize his magically inclined paganism with Christian orthodoxy leads to what some scholars see as 'inconsistencies' in his work.¹⁴⁴ Other scholars, like Melissa Meriam Bullard highlight Ficino's consistent themes. Bullard writes:

Throughout his work, Ficino maintains a belief in the fundamental unity of the cosmos, which is composed of distinct hierarchically arranged realms ascending from body toward soul and intellect. In Ficino's cosmos, both human volition and astral influences can coexist because the planets, which belong to the material world affect bodies but not intellects, which belong to a separate higher realm.¹⁴⁵

Bullard goes on to note that Ficino's aim was not to deny the influence of the planets but to defend free will against the determinism put forth by

¹⁴² Marsilio Ficino, *De Sole* trans. trans. Cornelius Geoffrey, Darby Costello, Graeme Tobyn, Angela Voss & Vernon Wells, *Sphinx: A Journal for Archetypal Psychology and the Arts*, Vol. 6, 1994, pp. 123-148 <http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~alfar2/ficino.htm> [Accessed August 1, 2016] Chapter XII.

¹⁴³ Marsilio Ficino, *De Sole* <http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~alfar2/ficino.htm> [Accessed August 1, 2016] Chapter XIII.

¹⁴⁴ Melissa Meriam Bullard, 'The Inward Zodiac: A Development in Ficino's Thought on Astrology' *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Winter, 1990), p. 699.

¹⁴⁵ Bullard, 'The Inward Zodiac' p.688

professional astrologers who believed that the planets caused actions and the heavens could reveal the future.

Leo was similarly caught between two systems: esoteric and exoteric astrology. According to Champion, Leo's main concern was to prepare people for the new age by 'encouraging people to reflect on their inner character rather than measure the extent to which they conformed to a set of externally imposed criteria.'¹⁴⁶ Leo explains this in his book *Esoteric Astrology* he describes esoteric Astrology as 'the philosophy and inner or more subtle point of view.'¹⁴⁷ He goes on to describe esoteric astrology as 'that side of the subject which views all stellar phenomena from the standpoint of unity.' Leo calls exoteric astrology 'the concrete or outer expression, preferring the more tangible and evident to the speculative and theoretical.'¹⁴⁸ Leo argues that exoteric astrology 'begins its study from the side of diversity and separateness' rather than unity.¹⁴⁹ Leo states at the beginning of his introductions that both esoteric and exoteric astrology are of 'equal value.'¹⁵⁰ However, he goes on to begin his conclusion with the statement that 'the curse of Astrology has been its separateness.'¹⁵¹ In other words, exoteric astrology is a curse and Leo, like Ficino, could perhaps be accused of inconsistency. As Ficino pulls on Platonic teachings, Leo pulls from the Hindu teachings to support his New Age astrology. He refers to ancient Hindu astrologers, throughout *Esoteric Astrology* and uses Hindu concepts and texts as foundations for his discussion.¹⁵²

Leo's attempt to recreate astrology for a new age, an esoteric astrology, can be seen most clearly in his description of the different signs. Champion argues that the most dramatic aspect of Leo's reformed astrology, in terms of the interpretation of Zodiac signs was 'his discarding of the almost entire list of zodiacal attributed which have been accumulated from the first to the 17th century.'¹⁵³ Comparing Leo's description of the sign Taurus with the famous 19th century astrologer Zadekial's description of the sign Taurus demonstrates

¹⁴⁶ Champion, *Astrology and Popular Religion in the Modern West*, p. 71

¹⁴⁷ Alan Leo, *Esoteric Astrology* (Rochester, Vermont :Destiny Books ,1989) p. xiii

¹⁴⁸ Alan Leo, *Esoteric Astrology* , p. xiv

¹⁴⁹ Alan Leo, *Esoteric Astrology* , p. xiv

¹⁵⁰ Alan Leo, *Esoteric Astrology* , p. xiv

¹⁵¹ Alan Leo, *Esoteric Astrology* , p. 289

¹⁵² Alan Leo, *Esoteric Astrology* , p. xvi - xvii

¹⁵³ Champion, *Astrology and Popular Religion in the Modern West*, p. 71.

the difference in approach. Steeped in a 19th century tradition that was essentially concerned with practice rather than theoretical speculation,¹⁵⁴ Zadkiel's description of Taurus in his book *The Grammar of Astrology* is about six lines long and focuses on the external qualities of the Taurean with only a few words about the internal states. Zadkiel gives his description of the signs the heading *General Rule for Judging the Effect of Each Sign*.¹⁵⁵ He writes:

Taurus – A short, full, well-set person; full face and eyes, thick neck and lips, wide nose and mouth, swarthy shining face; a short, thick, broad hand; large shoulders; dark, harsh, and generally curling hair. Given to eating, unfeeling, melancholy, and slow to anger, but when enraged furious as the Bull.¹⁵⁶

In contrast Leo's description of Taurus in his work *Astrology for All* is significantly longer and focuses more on the quality of thought and energetic health of the sign, rather than the literal physical characteristics. In fact Leo titles his chapter on Taurus, Chapter V *The Individual and Personal Character of the Sign*. Leo writes:

When they concentrate their thoughts they have immense power, and will then has the ascendancy over desire; but when the latter is most in evidence they become very worldly and incline to take pleasure in the good things of this life, being fond of feasting and comfort. The Taureans make the best psychic mediums, and they may be contrasted with the Aries types by the fact that they are more inclined to live in their feelings than in their minds.¹⁵⁷

Leo makes a brief mention of the throat as an organ of concern for the Taurean person and that the Taurean generally has a 'splendid physique' but the majority of the description is focused on internal states and personality. Campion writes that 'Leo's formulation of the Zodiac signs' characters were to become the basis of most subsequent 'sun-sign' descriptions and, arguably, with every description in the English speaking world after 1945, with the exception of those associated with the 'traditional revival' of the 1980s

¹⁵⁴ Campion, *History of Western Astrology Volume 2*, p. 216.

¹⁵⁵ Zadekial, *The Grammar of Astrology* (London: Sherwood, Gilbert and Piper, 1840), p.4

¹⁵⁶ Zadekial, *The Grammar of Astrology* p.4

¹⁵⁷ *Astrology for All* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2006) p.16

onwards.’¹⁵⁸ Similar to Ficino, Leo’s influence on astrology and esotericism in culture lasted well beyond his lifetime.

Contemporary mass culture

Both Ficino and Leo have a profound effect on the elements of mass culture that we experience today. Though Ficino was supported by the wealthiest man in Florence and his approach has been described by Mark Jurdjevic as advocating ‘an elitist, gradual, top-down approach to spiritual reform, guided by the study of Plato,’¹⁵⁹ his Platonic ideals spread outside of his small circle, particularly in the world of art. Campion writes, ‘One immediate consequence of Ficino’s work, which was of massive significance for Renaissance art, was a revival of respect for pagan learning.’¹⁶⁰ Examples of Ficino’s influence on art can be seen in Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* still on display at the Uffizi gallery in Florence.¹⁶¹ The museum lists the *Birth of Venus* as a ‘must see.’¹⁶² These works of art can also be seen on any number of consumer items such as aprons, cups, plates, and mousepads. Similarly, opening up any women’s magazine, or doing a google search for ‘sun-signs’ will bring up pages upon pages of horoscopes in the tradition of Alan Leo.¹⁶³ Clearly strong ideas presented to the world by inspired reformers have reverberations beyond what the individual reformers may have intended.

Conclusion

This paper has examined Marsilio Ficino’s and Alan Leo’s attempts to reform astrology and the competing priorities involved in each. A consideration of these attempts to reform astrology to suit both personal missions and cultural realities demonstrates the adaptability and continuity of astrological thought; while also highlighting fundamental differences between the early-modern and the turn of the 20th century worldview. Despite

¹⁵⁸ Campion, *Astrology and Popular Religion in the Modern West*, p. 72

¹⁵⁹ Mark Jurdjevic, ‘Prophets and Politicians’, p 42.

¹⁶⁰ Campion, *History of Western Astrology Volume 2*, p. 95.

¹⁶¹ Sandro Boticelli *Birth of Venus*

<http://www.uffizi.org/artworks/the-birth-of-venus-by-sandro-botticelli/>
[Accessed August 1, 2016]

¹⁶² <http://www.uffizi.org/artworks/> [Accessed August 1, 2016]

¹⁶³ <https://www.google.com/#q=sun-sign> [Accessed August 1, 2016]

emerging from distinctly different cultural milieus, there are certain similarities in the path of each reformer. Both Ficino and Leo had the help of strong visionaries at the beginnings of their careers to help inspire and guide them. For Ficino this was the patronage of Cosimo de Medici and for Leo this was the spiritual guidance of Madame Blavatsky. In addition, Ficino and Leo were both drawing on sources external to their contemporary cultures to support their visions of reform. Ficino was attempting to integrate Platonism into spirituality in a way that was acceptable to the Catholic church while Leo was attempting to shift popular astrology from an exoteric to an esoteric orientation that he believed would help the people usher in a New Age. Ficino and Leo both created visions that inspired future generations and profoundly influenced Western culture.

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