

NEOPLATONISM

A revival and recasting of Platonism—mingling with it Pythagorean, Aristotelean, Stoic, and mystic ideas—Neoplatonism supplanted Stoicism as the dominant philosophy of the classical world from the mid-third century to the closing

of the pagan schools at Athens and elsewhere by Justinian in 529. Philosophers from Antiochus (d. ca. 68 B.C.) to Plotinus (205–269/70), who opposed all sex, including homosexuality of every type, evolved this new synthesis. In Rome when he was forty, Plotinus founded a circle of leading politicians and scholars, including his most important disciple, Porphyry (232/3–ca. 305), who arranged for the publication of Plotinus' *Enneads* almost on the eve of the official recognition of Christianity in 313. In the fourth century, from its chief centers in Syria and then Pergamon, its star proponent being Iamblichus, Neoplatonism became the creed of the pagan antagonists of Christianity, which had been made the state religion by Theodosius ca. 390.

Neoplatonism even influenced Christianity through St. Gregory of Nyssa and other theologians of the **Byzantine Empire**, and through St. **Augustine**. Neoplatonism survived at Athens and Alexandria into the sixth century. It appeared in the writings of the pseudo-Areopagite (about 500) and John Scotus Eriugena in the ninth century, as well as in the work of the middle Byzantine polymath Michael Psellus. One of the principal features of Neoplatonism was its spectrum of gradations between "the One" and "matter": the world-mind, the world-soul, and nature—each stage being characterized by diminishing unity. Mystical as well as rational, Neoplatonism encouraged Christian belief in intermediate powers such as angels and demons. One of Porphyry's works in five books, *Against the Christians*, of which fragments survive, though the source was condemned to the flames by the Christians in 448, used historical criticism to prove the lateness of composition of the Book of Daniel, as elsewhere he proved the "Book of Zoroaster" a forgery. His work on logic became the standard Byzantine text and his critique of Homer a philological landmark.

Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), the Florentine philosopher and humanist who was also homophile, was the chief expo-

nent of **Renaissance Neoplatonism**. Exposed to Greek thought by the arrival in Italy of learned Byzantines fleeing Constantinople after its fall to the Turks in 1453, the young Ficino discovered Plato and his later followers, learning Greek in order to study the original texts. (Plato had been known in medieval Europe only through often faulty Latin versions, some of them secondary translations from the Arabic.) An eclectic, Ficino sought to reconcile Platonism and Neoplatonism with Christianity, using another body of Greek texts, the Hermetic Corpus compiled in late antiquity.

Of special significance is his resurrection of the Platonic ideal of love, as it is known from the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*. In the sixteenth century Ficino's version was repackaged in countless treatises on love, becoming the prototype of a new concept of "courtly love" that was very different from the medieval variety. Ficino advocated a profound but highly spiritual love between two men, ideally united by their common quest for knowledge. This love is caused, following Plato's conception, by the vision of beauty conveyed by the soul of the other individual—a beauty that reflects the celestial perfection of God. Through the physical beauty of a young man—women were in Ficino's view unsuitable as catalysts of this sublimity—the conscience of the enlightened man ascends to the Beauty which is the archetypal Idea (in Plato's sense) on which the beauty that he responds to depends—to God himself. With Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici's patronage, he founded—in imitation of Plato's Academy in Athens—the Platonic Academy in Florence, which was to be a major center of Italian Renaissance thought.

In the course of the sixteenth century those who followed Ficino became increasingly uncomfortable with the homoerotic aspects of his philosophy of love. Deploying an intellectual sleight of hand, they heterosexualized the ideal—so that today "Platonic love" usually means

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the love of man and woman that includes
no physical expression.

William A. Percy