

room where the pope kept his books was to be a *summa* of everything Italian Renaissance Christians believed about God's plan for human beings in time and eternity.

The composition of the two main murals, the *School of Athens* and the *Disputa*, suggests that Raphael and those who advised him wanted this "divine plan" to be perceived as unfolding inside a church. The deep-vaulted hall out of which the philosophers appear to move (on one wall), and the railed-off area of the pavement (on the facing wall) with an altar in a semicircular space, would have put Renaissance viewers in mind of the nave and apse of a church, as Luisa Becherucci noted.<sup>7</sup> The architecture of the *School of Athens* in fact evokes Bramante's project for the new Basilica of Saint Peter, begun a few years earlier, and this whole "progress of human knowledge toward God" may have been conceived in relation to the teaching authority of Saint Peter's successors, the popes. In any case, the movement of human intellectual and spiritual history that Raphael illustrated for Pope Julius would have been seen as occurring "in the Church"; that is, within the historical institution of which the pope is visible head as Vicar of Christ.

This "ecclesiology" – this range of ideas about the Church as institution – did not originate in the early sixteenth century. The same basic themes are in fact implicit in the program of the fourteenth-century Spanish Chapel, mentioned earlier, where one wall shows an assembly of thinkers and the facing wall has a symbolic, multi-level description of religious life on earth and Christ and the saints in heaven. What is new in the Stanza della Segnatura is Raphael's depiction of pagan thinkers "in the Church." Few Renaissance images suggest a comparably syncretistic vision of intellectual history; perhaps the sole significant parallel is Giovanni di Stefano's monumental pavement square inside the main door of Siena Cathedral, where the secret learning of the pagans, transmitted by Hermes Trismegistus (identified in an accompanying inscription as "the contemporary of Moses"), introduces believers to the cathedral.<sup>8</sup> But no fifteenth- or sixteenth-century artist ever attempted what Raphael was asked – or at least permitted – to show in the Stanza della Segnatura: the great figures of Greco-Roman and ancient Near Eastern thought, who, as they converse and exchange ideas, themselves seem to move toward Christ, in whom ultimately "all the

jewels of wisdom and knowledge are hidden," according to the New Testament (Col. 2:3).

The convictions underlying this highly original reading go far back in Christian history. Among the first defenders of the "Christianity" of the pagan philosophers was Saint Augustine, himself schooled in ancient thought and, before his conversion, a sometime adherent of Neoplatonic mysticism. In a beautiful passage in his treatise "On True Religion," Augustine argued that "if Plato were alive today, and willing to answer our questions . . . he would teach that truth is not seen with bodily sight, but by the mind alone, and that every soul which cleaves to truth becomes perfectly happy." Carnal pleasure (to which Augustine had been no stranger in his youth) impedes the soul from attaining this beatific state, he argues, since matter and sense generate a confusing diversity of "opinions" in place of truth, which by contrast is clear and simple. Only when healed by God's grace is the soul able to "intuit the immutable Form of things: that ever equal beauty, always like itself, unextended in space, unchanged in time, the beauty that preserves itself in all things single and identical – that beauty which men do not believe in, yet which really exists, and indeed exists in the highest measure of being."<sup>9</sup>

The way Saint Augustine juxtaposed these standard Platonic categories has structural similarities with Raphael's visual contrasts in the *Disputa* and the *School of Athens*: on the one hand, "ultimate truth," a higher reality invisible to bodily sight, unextended in space, unchanged in time, single and identical, versus the multiplicity of material things. In the *Disputa* we are shown the "beauty which men do not believe in, yet which exists in the highest measure of being." God, who is "unextended in space" (depicted in fact against an archaic, gold-leaf background). By contrast, in the *School of Athens* Plato points heavenward to a "higher truth" that is still invisible: the space defined by the architecture overhead remains unoccupied. Turning, then, from this "profound" but "empty" space of pagan speculation back to the populous spacelessness of the upper portion of the *Disputa*, it is clear that Raphael intended the facing areas of wall to be complementary: the great arches of the *School of Athens* mirror the semicircle of Christ's cherub aureole, giving "material" depth to what in itself is immaterial and "unextended."

Another structural contrast between Raphael's two scenes de-

pends on the second Platonic distinction evoked by Saint Augustine: that between the “multiplicity” and “diversity” of sense experience, on the one hand, and spiritual beauty, which is “single and identical,” on the other. The central compositional unit of the *School of Athens* is “multiple” and “diverse”: the binary group of Plato and Aristotle, implying the pluralism of ancient classical thought. On the opposite wall, in the *Disputa*, the central unit of composition is “singular” and “identical”: the vertical core of forms lifting our eye from the Eucharist to the Spirit, Christ, and the Father – “one God in three Persons.” This central “oneness” in the *Disputa* is further emphasized by the gazes and gestures that many of the lower-level figures direct toward the altar, very different from the breakup into self-absorbed, psychologically unconnected groups in the *School of Athens*. Again, it is a calibrated complementarity and seems to allude to the most difficult conundrum of ancient thought: the contradictory claims on consciousness of the One and the Many – the urge toward synthesis and belief in an underlying unity in nature and experience, apparently at odds with the infinite multiplicity that sensory data reveals.

The *School of Athens* and the *Disputa* are not mere negative foils, however. The two frescoes illustrate a positive progression: the philosophers “move toward Christ,” the pagans are “in the church.” This notion was in fact deeply rooted in the Italian humanism of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Giovanni Boccaccio, for example, applying the question of the One and the Many to the basic religious issue of monotheism versus polytheism, insisted that the ancients had used polytheistic language for literary reasons, not because they really accepted a multiplicity of gods. “Who is witless enough to suppose that a man deeply versed in philosophy hadn’t more sense than to accept polytheism?”, he asked. Those ancient sages were “most devoted investigators of truth and went as far as the human mind can penetrate. Thus they knew beyond any shadow of doubt that there is but one God . . . The multitude of other ‘gods’ they looked upon not as gods but as members or functions of Divinity; such was Plato’s opinion, and we call him a theologian.”<sup>10</sup>

Building on these ideas, another early humanist, Coluccio Salutati, claimed that, although the full mystery of God – the mystery of the Holy Trinity, that is – remained hidden from pagan

writers, “nevertheless, much that they said about their own gods, while they struggled to lift them to the majesty of deity . . . was in conformity with the true God.” That is, Salutati saw polytheism as an effort to penetrate “the mystery . . . and profundity of the Trinity” – ultimate source of both “oneness” and “manyness” in all that exists: the Trinity, a single deity (Salutati calls God “the supreme simplicity”) in whom, however, are three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (699–703).

Perhaps the clearest exposition of these ideas is Giovanni Caldera’s “Concord of the Poets, Philosophers and Theologians,” written in the mid-fifteenth century. Insisting that the ancient pagans really (if obscurely) understood God, Caldera distinguished three levels of apprehension of the mystery: philosophical, poetic, and theological. He also used literary images strikingly similar to the visual ones Raphael later introduced in the Stanza della Segnatura. Caldera said that “philosophers . . . observing the first causes of things” (as in the *School of Athens*, above which is written “causarum cognitio”), situated the generative force of all life in the elements. Some “thought it fire, still others water or earth . . . wherefore the poets assigned the principle of divinity to the prime elements,” he concluded (704–7). Caldera considered these ancient poetic paraphrases of philosophical intuitions “higher,” nearer ultimate truth – much as, in the Stanza della Segnatura, the assembly of poets on Parnassus occupies higher ground than that of the philosophers in the *School of Athens* and is nearer the level of God in the *Disputa*.

Turning to Sacred Scripture, Caldera argued that “besides this natural kind of knowledge” furnished by philosophy and poetry, “there is another mode in which the divine light is infused into our minds”: revelation, the heaven-sent information about supernatural realities – what the inscription above the *Disputa* calls *divinam remm notitia*. Caldera cites Jewish and Christian authors who “transmitted these predictions to us in writing after the Son of God had assumed human flesh and protected a secret divinity beneath the veil of humanity in order to fully complete the mystery of the Passion and redeem lost humankind.” And in the *Disputa*, Raphael in fact illustrates these “writings,” the four Gospels displayed by *putti* directly below Christ “veiled” with humanity and showing the wounds of his Passion. Finally, to explain what “redemption”

consists of, Caldiera turned to the Trinity (the centermost subject of Raphael's *Disputa*), averring that "we have received from Christ's teaching the complete explanation of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (704-7).

For Caldiera, men and women are saved by understanding and accepting the Trinity, the mystery of love among Persons of the Godhead that is the inner life of God himself. The ancient pagans, he says, intuited this, but dimly: they "saw the splendor entirely through a cloud." The Jews saw the splendor of divinity beyond the cloud but could not distinguish the three Persons. Christians inhabit the cloud and therefore distinguish divinity and Trinity. "But certain men who are closer to divinity dissolve the cloud as though they were living in heaven, and see divinity and the entire mystery of the Trinity clearly, and everything that we hold by faith, they know by certain knowledge" (704-7). These ideas seem to be echoed in the *Disputa*, where "certain men" are closer to divinity, "living in heaven": the saints on the "dissolved cloud" of the upper level, including Mary and John the Baptist, all able to see God in Christ, who "assumed human flesh." Raphael in fact emphasizes the "fleshiness," showing Jesus' upper body nude, with the wounds visible. This intellectually "revelatory" function of the incarnate Christ is stressed by other fifteenth-century thinkers: some years after Caldiera, Marsilio Ficino asks, "What else was Christ but a certain living book of moral and divine philosophy, sent from heaven and manifesting the divine idea of the virtues to human eyes?" (741). Here in the pope's library, Raphael shows us that "living book of moral and divine philosophy," Christ in the center of the *Disputa*, as the "higher truth" about which the discussants in the *School of Athens* obscurely reason, not yet able to penetrate the veil beyond which only faith in the Incarnation and the Passion lead.

There is a still more extraordinary aspect to these interconnections, however. Educated people in the Renaissance believed that if the pagan philosophers could reason about the mystery of God it was not by their own powers, not the result of merely human dialectical skills. As Ficino insisted, if the Greek philosophers "have any outstanding dogmas and mysteries, they usurped them from the Jews . . . Plato imitated the Jews . . . was nothing but Moses speaking in the Attic tongue . . . and the Platonists used the divine light

of the Christians to interpret the divine Plato. This is what Basil the Great and Augustine proved: the Platonists usurped the mysteries of the Evangelist John for themselves" (741-2). That is, the obscure intuitions of a spiritual truth akin to Judeo-Christian belief that we find in ancient philosophy and poetry can be explained by the early influence of Jewish prophecy and the Mosaic Law on Greek thought. Ficino says that the Greeks did not clearly understand what they had "usurped" but nourished the hope of one day attaining to full enlightenment. "Plato predicted in his letters that these mysteries could at length become manifest to men after many centuries," Ficino says, adding that "this indeed happened . . . immediately after the preaching and writing of the Apostles and apostolic disciples. For the Platonists used the divine light of Christians to interpret the divine Plato" (742).

What these humanists were expressing, and what Raphael illustrated in the grand facing frescoes of the Stanza, is a millennial Christian belief that every human quest for wisdom is inspired by God, the universal Father, who – through his Spirit of truth, and often across centuries of slow cultural evolution – brings men and women to Christ, "the power and wisdom of God" personified (1 Cor. 1:25). A first-century Christian text describes the privilege of believers who, after countless centuries of human striving, understand what earlier seekers never grasped: the Letter to the Ephesians states that God "has let us know the mystery of his purpose, the hidden plan he so kindly made in Christ from the beginning, to act upon when the times had run their course to the end" (Eph. 1:8-9). In their search for wisdom, Raphael's pagan thinkers are part of God's "hidden plan . . . made in Christ from the beginning." They have embarked upon a search that will end only when the void above Plato is filled and men at last lift their eyes from the multiplicity and diversity of speculative reason to that "living book of moral and divine philosophy sent from heaven" who is Christ. And when they do, the lesson this "living book" will impart is precisely that of unity in diversity: the solution to the ancient problem of the One and the Many. The "hidden plan" that God "so kindly made in Christ from the beginning," the Letter to the Ephesians continues, was that "he would bring everything together under Christ, as head: everything in the heavens and everything on earth" (Eph. 1:9-10). In Christian belief, in fact, Christ is the source of all unity

and multiplicity: he is a visible “image of the unseen God” (Col. 1:15) and thus “supreme simplicity” (in Salutati’s phrase). At the same time he is God’s “Word” through whom all the world’s diversity was defined: “In him were created all things in heaven and on earth” (Col. 1:16). Throughout time, moreover, “he holds all things in unity” (Col. 1:17), reconciling the inherent contradiction between manyness and oneness: resolving the problem when he reveals that the Divinity itself is simultaneously multiple and single, three Persons in one God.

The pagan thinkers have a place “in the Church” because God’s hidden plan always included them, even before they realized it. In their obscure but God-given insight that ultimate wisdom is higher than material existence and in their yearning to solve the riddle of the One and the Many, they furnished an intellectual framework upon which later ages would build: helped move history toward Christ, “the living book . . . sent from heaven.” They have always been in the Church, and – in the physical and moral space of the Stanza – they “stand behind” the Renaissance Christian who, entering, found himself “in front of” them: more advanced, better able to behold a plenitude to which the pagans never raised their eyes. The plenitude is Christ, in the *Disputa* on the opposite wall: a spiritual God revealed in bodily form as true man, who overcomes the tragic division in human nature and society, giving his life on the Cross. Standing in this “church” that spans the ages, with the pagans behind him in the “nave,” a Renaissance humanist might have remembered another passage from the Letter to the Ephesians:

There was a time when you who were pagans . . . were immersed in this world, without hope and without God. But now in Christ Jesus, you that used to be so far apart from us have been brought very close, by the blood of Christ . . . Through him, both of us have in the one Spirit our way to come to the Father. So you are no longer aliens or foreign visitors: you are citizens like all the saints, and part of God’s household. You are part of a building that has the Apostles and Prophets for its foundations, and Christ Jesus for its main cornerstone. As every structure is aligned on him, all grow into one holy temple in the Lord; and

you too, in him, are being built into a house where God lives, in the Spirit. (Eph. 2:11–22)

Only a few hundred feet from where Bramante’s new basilica was being built, and even nearer the chapel in which Michelangelo paired pagan Sibyls with the Prophets of Israel, Raphael opened the “house where God lives, in the Spirit” to admit the ancient philosophers, poets, and lawgivers. His is indeed a “catholic” – that is, universal – image of the Church, and the glory that opens up before Plato and Aristotle in the *Disputa* on the facing wall is a glory meant for all.

#### NOTES

1. Vasari-Milanesi, Vita di Raffaello, in Vasari-Milanesi, 1568, 4:315–86, esp. 330–6.
2. Vasari-Milanesi, 1568, 4:331, n. 1, says, “che guazzabughol!”
3. Timothy Verdon, “Christianity, the Renaissance and the Study of History: Environments of Experience and Imagination,” in Timothy Verdon and John Henderson, eds., *Christianity and Renaissance: Image and Religious Imagination in the Quattrocento* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 1–37; Verdon and Henderson, “L’uso iconografico della Bibbia,” in Rinaldo Fabris, ed., *La Bibbia nell’epoca moderna e contemporanea* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1992), 83–99.
4. Verdon, “L’uso iconografico della Bibbia” (as in n. 3 of this chapter).
5. S. Borsetti, ed., *Gli abitanti immobili di San Vivaldo, il Monte Sacro della Toscana* (Florence: Giunta Regionale Toscana, 1987); Peter Meredith and John E. Talbot, eds., *The Staging of Religious Drama in Europe in the Later Middle Ages: Texts and Documents in English Translation*, Early Drama, Art and Music Monograph Series, no. 4 (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, Western Michigan University, 1983); Timothy Verdon, “Effetti speciali nello spettacolo e nell’arte quattrocentesca,” *Biblioteca teatrale*, n.s. 19–20 (1990), 7–20.
6. Shearman, 1972, 3–58 (see esp. 13–17, with Shearman’s conclusions regarding the “traffic flow” through the rooms as originally used).
7. Becherucci, 1969, 9–198 (esp. 97–9). See also, for the iconography of the *Disputa* but with developed reference to the *School of Athens*, Pfeiffer (Rome: 1975).
8. Friederich Ohly, *La cattedrale come spazio dei tempi: Il Duomo di Siena*, trans. Maria Augusta Coppola, *Monografie d’Arte Senese*, no. 8 (Siena: Accademia Senese degli Intronati, 1979), 36–7.

9. Saint Augustine, *De vera religione*, 3, 3, quoted in Maria Bettetini, ed. and trans., *Aurelio Augustino: Ordine, Musica, Bellezza* (Milan: Rusconi, 1992), 287–8. My translation.
10. The citations and paraphrases from humanist writings are taken from Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 2:696. Cited hereafter by page number in the text.