

RALPH CUDWORTH, CAMBRIDGE PLATONIST

A STUDY OF RALPH CUDWORTH

CAMBRIDGE PLATONIST

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	CAMBRIDGE PLATONISM AND WESTERN TRADITION	1
II.	THE CAMBRIDGE PLATONISTS	18
III.	RALPH CUDWORTH: THE EARLY YEARS	40
IV.	RALPH CUDWORTH: THE LATER YEARS	55
V.	RALPH CUDWORTH: AN EVALUATION	87
VI.	CONCLUSION	111
	APPENDIX	117
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	122

## CAMBRIDGE PLATONISM AND WESTERN TRADITION

One of the best books to deal with the Cambridge Platonist movement was written, oddly enough, by a German; for a clear, concise, and, in the final analysis, fair discussion of the philosophical tenets which these writers held, one could do no better than to turn to Ernst Cassirer's book, The Platonic Renaissance in England. Yet despite both its fairness and its brilliance, one leaves the book with the distinct feeling that to its author the Platonists have little positive value as subjects of study. Indeed, the reader is asked to accept this view immediately; the first paragraph begins on this somewhat discouraging note:

The Cambridge School seems to play only a minor role in the history of modern philosophy. It seems to take no decisive part in any phase of the universal intellectual movement which begins with the Renaissance and gives rise in the course of its development to a new form of knowledge and a new outlook on life and on the world. One could discuss this movement in its origins, growth, main tendencies, and essential aims without giving a thought to the work of the Cambridge School. Neither in intellectual scope nor immediate influence is this school comparable to the great spiritual forces which formed the modern world picture.<sup>1</sup>

In the end, Cassirer sees the ideas of Cambridge Platonism,

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<sup>1</sup> E. Cassirer, The Platonic Renaissance in England, tr. by J. F. Pettegrove (Austin, 1953), p. 1.



all things considered, as nothing more than "a certain line of thought of independent force and significance, which is deliberately and violently opposed to the prevailing direction of English thought in the seventeenth century."<sup>2</sup>

It is difficult to disagree with Cassirer, for he presents a strong case. Still, a sympathetic reader of the treatises and sermons of the Cambridge group must feel that the judgment is harsh. On the other hand, statements by more amiable critics are as offensive in the rather unsupported praise they heap upon the Platonists. Statements such as the following by Rosalie Colie are frequently found, and are echoed by others, such as G. R. Cragg<sup>3</sup> and H. R. McAdoo:<sup>4</sup>

The general courtesy and politeness, the reasonableness and breadth of view the Cambridge Platonists manifested with a fair degree of consistency, have won for them in our time a regard only slightly less than that in which their contemporaries held them.<sup>5</sup>

This type of attitude, though appealing, is too overpowering, and leaves the reader with as many misgivings as did the comments of Cassirer.

Such prejudiced attitudes in the critics stem, I be-

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<sup>2</sup> Cassirer, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> G. R. Cragg, From Puritanism to the Age of Reason (Cambridge, 1950).

<sup>4</sup> H. R. McAdoo, The Spirit of Anglicanism (London, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> R. Colie, Light and Enlightenment (Cambridge, 1957), p. 1.

lieve, from two sources. The natures of the Platonists themselves, and the position Cambridge Platonism commands in the intellectual climate of seventeenth century England, tend to distract the student from any objective criticism. These men have inspired respect in their field of study from the time of their contemporaries to the present: it is simply difficult to dislike them. This stems, I believe, from their integrity and honesty. The most striking example of the nature of these men can be seen in the tone of the letters written by Benjamin Whichcote, commonly accepted as the "father" of the Cambridge movement, to Anthony Tuckney, his undergraduate tutor, close friend, and first critic. The conflict which gave rise to these letters (which we shall return to later) was deep and unbridgeable, yet even to the final letter Whichcote tries to maintain the separation of the argument and the adversary. The final sentences of the correspondence read as follows:

I think not the worse of You at all, for aught wherein wee differ; but conceeve, you see most cause to say and apprehend, as you do. ...Sir, wherein I fall short of your expectation, I fail for truth's sake; wherto alone I acknowledge my self addicted.<sup>6</sup>

These sentences convey the dominant qualities of Whichcote adequately: strength of belief, honesty with humility, forthrightness, and nobility. To varying degrees, these qualities

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<sup>6</sup> "Eight Letters between Dr. Whichcote and Dr. Tuckney", in Moral and Religious Aphorisms, ed. by S. Salter (London, 1753 [Xerox reprod., Univ. of Michigan, 1966]), pp. 133-4.

also apply to the other Platonists: John Smith, Henry More, and Ralph Cudworth. It is difficult to be harsh, and easy to be generous, with such men.

Cambridge Platonism is another matter. The ideas it embodies fall into a category somewhere between philosophy and religion. Cassirer criticizes it because it is philosophically weak, and this is fair. McAdoo or Cragg praise it as being theologically strong, and this is true. But Platonism should not, in my opinion, be seen merely as philosophy or as theology, for this clouds the position the Cambridge group holds in their century. Tulloch attempts to define the Platonists' sphere of influence with the double phrase, "rational theology and Christian philosophy."<sup>7</sup> If we remember that at base these men are theologians, that their ventures into philosophy were not about Christianity so much as within Christianity, and therefore do not expect the logical thoroughness which Cassirer feels is lacking; if we accept them within a tradition which, in the words of W. R. Inge, "comes down to us from the Renaissance, but... has a very much longer pedigree,"<sup>8</sup> and therefore attempt to understand their accomplishments within that tradition; we shall then perhaps better evaluate their work and their

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<sup>7</sup> J. Tulloch, Rational Theology and Christian Philosophy and Christian Philosophy in England in the Seventeenth Century (Edinburgh, 1872).

<sup>8</sup> W. R. Inge, The Platonic Tradition in English Religious Thought (New York, 1926), p. 7.



meaning, and not see them merely as aberrations from the prevailing tendencies of their age.

I have used the word "tradition" as a basis for my defense, just as Cassirer has used it in part as a basis for his criticism. Yet I see their writings as existing primarily outside the philosophic discipline. Even Cudworth, perhaps the most philosophic of all the Platonists, was still a theologian with a theologian's concerns. When Edward Chandler, Bishop of Durham, states in his preface to Cudworth's Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality that "had it come abroad as early as it was written, it had served for a proper Antidote to the poison of Mr. Hobbes's and other's writings,"<sup>9</sup> he was clearly seeing Hobbes' writings from a religious, rather than a philosophical or political point of view, as works which "serve the design of Atheism and undermine Christianity and all Religion."<sup>10</sup> Primarily, then, we must remain aware that these men are writing within a theological framework, a framework which colours all their writings.

Secondly, we must remember that the stimulus behind the Platonists grew to maturity during the Renaissance, and

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<sup>9</sup> A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality (London, 1731 [Xerox reprod., Harvard Univ., 1966]), p. ix.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. v.



that the Platonists used both Renaissance and Classical authors as authorities in their works. This has led some critics to see them as antiquarians,<sup>11</sup> while others maintain that "the Cambridge Platonists, the scientists and the Latitudinarians, spanning by their works the latter part of the century, were moving in the same direction, and while this was not a co-ordinated movement, it arose from a common situation."<sup>12</sup> In fact, both statements contain germs of truth.

As Bronowski and Mazlish say,

...[We can] make a separation: between the aristocratic Renaissance, with, for example, its reading of the Greeks and Romans in manuscript and its taste for a curious Platonic idealism, as discussed in the Platonic Academy at Florence; and another kind of Renaissance which followed or supplanted it - a popular, empirical, less traditional and hierarchical, and more scientific and forward-looking Renaissance.<sup>13</sup>

The thought of the Platonists, who were ultimately concerned with the spirit, and with using the ancients to help validate the spirit of Christianity, had no place in the mathematical world of Descartes or the physical world of Bacon, and it is in Bacon and Descartes that we find the tenor of the age expressed. Still, the Platonists were attempting to liberate the spirit of man, as the Cartesians and the Baconians were

11 e.g., see Cassirer, p. 132

12 McAdoo, p. 81. Italics mine.

13 J. Bronowski and B. Mazlish, The Western Intellectual Tradition: From Leonardo to Hegel (New York, 1960), p. 4.

trying to free man's awareness. In this way, the Platonists "were heading in the same direction." It was the heritage which is manifest in their study that explains much about the position they held.

Paul O. Kristeller, in his essay "Renaissance Platonism", makes the following statement:

...[In] England, where the prevailing philosophical and scientific tradition seems to be represented by Bacon, Locke, and Hume, by Boyle and Newton, produced in the seventeenth century a group of interesting thinkers, the so-called Cambridge Platonists, who professed their allegiance to Platonism and actually constitute the most important phase of professed Platonism after the Florentine Academy.<sup>14</sup>

Yet we might accept the qualification made by Dean Inge, when he states that the Platonism of the Cambridge School "was Christianized long before the New Testament Canon was closed, and ever since the first century...has been an integral part of Christianity as an historical religion."<sup>15</sup> The Platonism of the Renaissance - the Platonism of our Platonists - was a curious mixture of Plato, Plotinus, and the Byzantine and Arabic scholars who kept the Platonic discipline alive in the post-Classical world. These various aspects of Platonism would not have been known to or distinguished by the Cambridge group, for "it is only during the last 150 years or so that

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<sup>14</sup> P. O. Kristeller, "Renaissance Platonism", in Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains (New York, 1961), p. 68.

<sup>15</sup> Inge, p. vi.

modern scholarship has attempted to cleanse the genuine thought of Plato from the mire of the Platonic tradition."<sup>16</sup> If, therefore, "it is not surprising...that Coleridge thought that Cudworth should be described as a Plotinist, rather than as a Platonist,"<sup>17</sup> then it should also not surprise us that their contemporaries should accept and see the Cambridge writers as being simply "Platonists", without thought of qualification. There are two points here: first, that the Platonism of the Cambridge School was not particularly that of Plato, and should not be judged according to such a standard; second, that the Platonism with which we are dealing has as many ties with early Christianity as with classical Greece.

Edwin Hatch, in his book, The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity, states:

The Christology of the Antiochene school was ...completely outvoted at the great ecclesiastical assemblies by the Christology of the Alexandrian school...<sup>18</sup>

Further, he accentuates the fact that "the dominant philosophy of Alexandria had been a fusion of Platonism with some elements of both Stoicism and revived Pythagoreanism."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Kristeller, Renaissance Thought, p. 49.

<sup>17</sup> J. Passmore, Ralph Cudworth: An Interpretation (Cambridge, 1951), p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity (New York, 1957), p. 82.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 81.



During the medieval centuries, this Alexandrian influence was to remain within the Church, and even with the "discovery" of the complete canon of Plato's writings by fourteenth century Italian scholars, which revived the vitality of medieval Platonism, the desire of the leading Platonists was to use this philosophy as a support for and further justification of the Christian faith. For example, Kristeller tells us of the Florentine Academy, that

...there was at the time a profound intellectual gap between dogmatic theology which had its basis in faith, and Aristotelian scholasticism which was then largely limited to logic and physics. ...Platonism did not oppose the Christian religion or the Aristotelian science of the time, and it did not attempt to replace them. It rather tended to supplement them in an area of thought that had been neglected up to that moment but now had become increasingly important for a large number of writers, scholars, and thinkers.<sup>20</sup>

It was this general area of thought which was of interest to our Platonists, and in particular Cudworth and More. To this end, they drew upon a Platonic tradition closely aligned with Ficino and the Medici Academy. It is this dual tie, first to Renaissance Platonism and its aims, and beyond this point historically, to the tradition of Christian Platonism, that gives justification to Inge's statement, when speaking of the Platonic tradition in the Anglican faith, that the Platonism of the Cambridge divines "comes down to us from the Renais-

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<sup>20</sup> P. O. Kristeller, "The Platonic Academy of Florence", in Renaissance Thought II: Papers on Humanism and the Arts (New York, 1965), pp. 90-1.

sance, but it has a very much longer pedigree."<sup>21</sup>

The Cambridge divines were, then, just that - students and scholars of divinity. They definitely used formal philosophy in both their sermons and their treatises; Cudworth is described as having "read over all the antient Philosophers and Moralists,"<sup>22</sup> and Whichcote himself acknowledged his debt to philosophy in the following words:

The time I have spent in Philosophers, I have no cause to repent-of; and the use I have made of them, I dare not disowne: I heartily thank God, for what I have found in them;... I find the Philosophers that I have read good; so farre as they go...<sup>23</sup>

Yet they remained Christian teachers, rather than philosophers; they followed the inclination of philosophy, but the faith of Christ. These two attitudes were welded together by a quality common to both - that of humanism. That the Platonists were humanists is stated by all critics of their writings; McAdoo sees their humanism as "an optimistic attitude to the human situation, a humanism having as its characteristic a spirit of enquiry rather than a note of finality;" Colie calls them the "humanist Platonists." It is Cassirer, however, who defines their humanism more closely with the following statement:

...in the midst of the serious religious and sectarian disputes of the seventeenth century,

<sup>21</sup> Inge, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Chandler, preface to Cudworth's E.I.N., p. v.

<sup>23</sup> Whichcote, "Eight Letters", p. 60.

of the political and spiritual crises of English puritanism, the old humanistic ideal of religion reappears in all its purity and power. The historical mission and achievement of the Cambridge Platonists consisted in their standing by this ideal unflinchingly.<sup>24</sup>

Although there is no indication given of the meaning of this "old humanist ideal of religion," we shall see the validity of the statement.

The term "humanism" is, as Kristeller points out in his essays, a modern creation. In its original context, humanism was the studia humanitatis, and was a two-fold discipline. Most obviously, humanism was based upon a study of Classical authors; the humanist saw the writings of the antiquarians as the final stylistic tribunal. But just as important, particularly if we are to fully understand the nature of our Platonists, is the fact that humanism was based on rhetoric. "The humanists were not classical scholars who for personal reasons had a craving for eloquence, but, vice versa, they were professional rhetoricians, heirs and successors of the medieval rhetoricians, who developed the belief, then new and modern, that the best way to achieve eloquence was to imitate classical models."<sup>25</sup>

This statement by itself could be applied to a number

<sup>24</sup> Cassirer, p. 34. Italics mine.

<sup>25</sup> Kristeller, "Humanism and Scholasticism", in Renaissance Thought, p. 98.



of "schools" of writers, and a number of periods in literary history. Yet if we remember that the Platonists were writing relatively shortly after the Reformation, and were writing and preaching to instill a new vitality into both their faith and their charges, Cassirer's statement becomes much more meaningful.

It was in post-Classical Greece that Christianity as we know it was born. Stripped of all but its past, Greece in the first and second centuries - when Christianity ceased to be a mere ethical doctrine and became a philosophical system - "tended to lay stress on that acquaintance with the literature of bygone generations, and that habit of cultivated speech, which has ever since been commonly spoken of as education."<sup>26</sup> The education system was based upon three disciplines - grammar, exegesis, and rhetoric - and could be termed in many ways an humanistic system. Indeed, Renaissance humanism - the humanism found in the Florentine Academy, for instance - incorporated the major doctrines of Greek education, for it dealt with grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. The Cambridge Platonists, professed heirs of Ficinian beliefs, gave ample evidence of their adherence to similar disciplines in their writings.

Further, we know that the time during which Chris-

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<sup>26</sup> Hatch, p. 27.

tianity was brought to Greece was, in that country, an age which

...was in reality an age of moral reformation. There was the growth of a higher religious morality, which believed that God was pleased by moral action rather than sacrifice. There was the growth of a belief that life requires amendment.<sup>27</sup>

It was an age much like that of the Cambridge Platonists<sup>1</sup>, in that the reformation was one of the spirit, as distinct from one purely of the form of faith. The new Christianity, brought into contact with a society both sophisticated and morally aware, was "tested" by Greek exegetical standards and examined and rewritten according to their models of Classical rhetoric, finally to become the basis upon which the new faith was to grow.

We can see, then, the deep roots that supported the Cambridge Platonists' humanism. The reverence for the authors of the past, the use of antique doctrines and documents both as support for current theological disputes and for final proof of the validity and the universality of the "spirit" of Christianity; these things were not new with the Platonists. They were drawn from the Renaissance, but, like the Platonism which gives this group its name, they had roots reaching to the foundations of the Christian church in the west. When Cassirer speaks of the "old humanistic ideal of

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<sup>27</sup> Hatch, p. 140.

religion," it is to this tradition he is alluding.

By the time of the ecclesiastical councils of the fifth century, Christian theology had as a basis the post-Classical neo-Platonism of the Alexandrian school. This system was continued; "in medieval Europe, Platonism as modified by Augustine was the prevailing trend in philosophy and theology up to the twelfth century, and remained an important secondary current long thereafter. Aristotelianism on the other hand became predominant in the thirteenth century, and retained much of its hold up to the sixteenth century and even afterwards."<sup>28</sup> It was with the influx of the writings of Aristotle that theology began to be systematized, despite the protests of many of the clergy; yet still the study of theology was kept separate from the study of logic and physics. And if it was Platonism that filled the void between theology and logic that had arisen by the fifteenth century, it was the humanistic attitude that provided the vehicle for such an achievement.

The humanistic spirit reached its ultimate expression in Erasmus. His love of learning and his great work as a translator - not only of secular, but also of sacred and biblical writings - combined with his hatred for the Church hierarchy - as seen in his The Praise of Folly - had rather

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<sup>28</sup> Kristeller, "The Place of Man in the Universe", in Renaissance Thought II, p. 105.



larger effects than he might have wished. Sir Thomas More and John Colet (later Dean of St. Paul's, and founder of St. Paul's school), Erasmus' friends in England, had great influence upon the history of intellectual freedom in England. More's martyrdom at the hands of Henry VIII is well-known; Colet, not yet thirty and recently returned from Florence, lectured on the Pauline Epistles at Oxford in 1496, using the text not as a vehicle for scholastic study, but as an aid to spiritual reformation. But it was in Luther, who admired Erasmus and The Praise of Folly, that the seeds of humanism and religious discontent were finally sown together. It was this union that finally re-united the ideals of humanism and spiritual vitality. This new humanistic spirit ultimately turned inward upon itself. The universality which was Luther's aim was, through economic and political involvements, quickly turned into an authoritarian national faith.<sup>29</sup> The other great Reformation faith, Calvinism, offered a strict theocracy, but ended by giving succor to such sects as the free-thinking English Puritans. The attacks of Erasmus on the hierarchy of the faith, and of Luther on the selling of indulgences, were prostituted to such an extent that the new religious freedom the Reformation offered was quickly stifled and, in many cases destroyed. It was the Arminians in Holland, and the Cambridge Platonists in England, who re-affirmed

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<sup>29</sup> see Bronowski and Mazlish, pp. 79-91.

the tradition and fundamental principles of humanism in Northern Europe. In the case of the Platonists, this re-affirmation led to the birth of religious freedom in England.

It is quite obvious, then, that the Platonists are firmly within a substantial tradition. They are at base theologians: nominally they are perhaps Anglican, but in fact we shall see that they can only be classified - indeed, they wished only to be classified - as Christians. As theologians, they have drawn upon the European, or as Inge prefers to call it, the Christian Platonic tradition. Finally, they continue the European Christian humanist tradition. The exact nature of their position within these various traditions must still be shown; we can, nevertheless, accept the fact that these relations exist.

We can now better see the reasons for the divergent views critics have of the Cambridge group. On the one hand, we have those who see the Platonists as philosophers, and criticize them by philosophic standards. But although the Platonists drew upon the antique philosophers in their defenses, treatises, and sermons, they should not for this reason be accounted philosophers. They were theologians using philosophy to justify their beliefs; or, perhaps more exactly, they were religious humanists citing their authorities. To overlook this fact in any criticism, or to underestimate its importance, is to seriously limit the validity of that

criticism.

The other school of critics, who I call the pro-Platonist writers, are normally attempting to show how the Platonists added to the Anglican heritage, or continued the "mystical" tradition in theology, or deepened the meaning of the Protestant ethic. These studies undoubtedly have validity on theological grounds. Yet to my mind, much of the importance of the Platonists' writings is lost if we remain within these boundaries. It is their ability to work within the restrictions both of the philosophical and humanist traditions and of the theological background, and exactly what resulted both because of and in spite of these restrictions, that holds the key to the meaning of the Platonists. They were, very likely, the final major representatives of a school of thought which had tremendous effect upon the intellectual heritage of England. Only by defining this tradition and accepting the Platonists' position within it can we hope to understand the position they held in seventeenth century England.



## THE CAMBRIDGE PLATONISTS

Frederick J. Powicke presents all the details pertaining to the founding of Emmanuel College Cambridge, in the prologue to his study of the Platonists.<sup>1</sup> Granted a Royal Charter by Elizabeth in January of 1584, Emmanuel was from its inception an academic stronghold for Puritanism and Calvinism, though more for the latter than the former. Yet within fifty years this Calvinist fortress was thoroughly breached. The question Powicke raises is why, in so short a time, Emmanuel became "the cradle of a movement animated by the spirit of Plato and devoted to the golden mean in every sphere of thought and life."<sup>2</sup>

Two very good reasons are presented for this reversal; or, more exactly, within two spheres - religion and learning - certain occurrences hastened this change. Within the former, the wave of anti-Calvinism at court level, exemplified by Laud's appointments of pro-Royalists to the Masterships of several Cambridge Colleges (earlier attempts by

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<sup>1</sup> F. J. Powicke, The Cambridge Platonists: A Study (Toronto, 1926), pp. 1-13. I have drawn heavily from this chapter in my first three paragraphs.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

Whitgift to break the Reformists' hold on Cambridge had failed, though he had some success at Oxford), must have had certain positive effects in weakening the strength of doctrinal Calvinism. Indeed, W. Haller tells us that the strict Calvinism apparent during Elizabeth's reign was emasculated by the mere passage of time:

...the Puritan reformers gained time and opportunity to develop their characteristic thought, their propaganda, their code and not least important their full complement of differences, inconsistencies, compromises and extravagances such as revolutionary movements seem always the more likely to incur the longer their consummation is delayed.<sup>3</sup>

Further, the students at Cambridge, and at Emmanuel College in particular, took both their studies and their religion seriously; they "took their creed as seriously as they took their studies, held it as a conviction rather than a creed, and tried to live by it. For then the application of their mind to it was inevitable; and some of the men, at least, would discover that just because they were Calvinists, they must not fear becoming sceptics."<sup>4</sup> They thought about the meaning of the doctrines, as well as the application of them; this would have astounding repercussions upon their religious thinking.

Academically, the rise in the popularity of the ser-

<sup>3</sup> William Haller, The Rise of Puritanism (New York, 1957), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Powicke, p. 6.

mon was undoubtedly a factor in creating a new intellectual atmosphere. This popularity began, in all likelihood, with John Colet at Oxford in 1496, and was brought to Cambridge in the early decades of the sixteenth century by John Fisher, Chancellor of St. John's College and Bishop of Rochester. Sermons drew large crowds at the universities, and must have been a strong factor in creating a new and intense intellectual atmosphere. Finally, we must accept and understand the rise of a new, less formal language in university discussion - again traceable in part to the sermon, and the rhetorical and oratorical style and training it involved. Scholasticism, though still strong (as we know from Milton's reaction to the teaching at Christ's College during his years there), was definitely on the wane. The dominion of Aristotle was breaking down. The works of Descartes and Bacon in the sciences, the former introduced by John Smith, one of the Cambridge group, and the writings and commentaries of the Platonists and the humanists in the arts, were taking his place.

All these factors had some influence upon the change in intellectual attitude evidenced at Emmanuel between 1584, when Sir Walter Mildmay founded the college, and 1636, when Benjamin Whichcote became a Fellow. To my mind, the most telling of these influences were two: first and most obviously, the effect of the availability of the Platonic writings in



England, along with the humanism which had of necessity to accompany them; and second, the fact that the students of Emmanuel College - supposedly because of their intellectual vigour - became influential in the upper echelons of Cambridge, and further, that these same men took their creed as seriously as they took their studies.

Powicke's conclusions concerning the second of these points raise certain questions worth investigating. First, he accepts the fact that it was primarily their intellectual ability which caused the rise of the Platonists to positions of power in Cambridge; second, he indicates that their intellectual and religious dedication was the force which moved the Cambridge Platonists to defect from the Puritan camp. Yet in my opinion, the stress upon the Platonists' anti-Calvinist attitudes has been over-emphasized, and too readily expanded to include an attitude of anti-Puritanism. If the subjects treated by the Cambridge group in their sermons, or the attitudes displayed in those treatments, offended the "doctrinal" Calvinist elements in England, this does not mean that the Platonists were pro-Royalist. In any but the most theoretical discussion, the idea of a "doctrinal" Calvinist loses all value in the complexity of seventeenth century English religious politics. Further, at a time when politics and academics were so closely aligned with religion, it is difficult to accept that during the years of Reformist

ascendency men in violent opposition to Calvinist doctrine would be given positions of eminence and power. We know that both Cudworth and Whichcote were so honoured; the former was appointed Master of Clare Hall in 1645 and of Christ's College in 1654, and the latter became vice-Chancellor of the university in 1650. We know that Peter Sterry, included among the Cambridge group by at least one critic, was personal chaplain to Oliver Cromwell. We know that Cudworth was asked to recommend men for official appointments both within the University and with the Commonwealth government, and that he counted both the Protector and his son among his acquaintances. These facts are difficult to explain if we see the Platonists merely as anti-Calvinists, without also accepting the fact that they were not anti-Puritan.

There is definitely a note of anti-Calvinism in each of the Platonist's writings. Much has been made, for instance, of the dispute embodied in the letters between Whichcote and Tuckney mentioned earlier. Tuckney has been called a "doctrinal Calvinist"; Whichcote, we have noted, is commonly called the "father" of Cambridge Platonism. Yet the dispute cannot be properly called a confrontation of creeds. It arose from a personal conflict; Whichcote's Commencement Address, delivered in the Autumn of 1651, flatly contradicted statements made by Tuckney in a similar address only a year earlier. Hence Tuckney, a friend of 25 years, felt compelled, because

of his "position" and his "duty", to return his former pupil to the fold.

There are indications that Tuckney represents a group of divines when he writes, but there are no indications that his complaints are held in common with others'. In the first letter, for instance, Tuckney opens his case in the following manner:

I have seldom hear'd you preach; but that something hath bin delivered by you, and that so authoritatively, and with the big words, sometimes of 'divinest reason,' and sometimes of 'more than mathematical demonstration;' that hath very much grieved me; and, I beleive, others with me: and yesterday, as much as any time.'

The idea that Tuckney is a spokesman for Calvinism may indeed stem from Tulloch's work on the Platonists, for that critic gives indication that Tuckney is a representative for himself and the masters of St. John's and Trinity Colleges, Dr. Arrowsmith and Dr. Hill. But this simply is not definitely the case. Tuckney explicitly states, in his second letter of the series, that he can speak with authority only of his own concern. "What expressions of strangeness you have of late observed in Them [Arrowsmith and Hill], I must leave to You and Them."<sup>6</sup> Undoubtedly there were others who were unhappy with the tenor of Whichcote's sermons and addresses,

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<sup>5</sup> Tuckney, "Eight Letters", p. 2. Italics mine.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 17.



and undoubtedly Tuckney knew these people, but one feels that the "others" were drawn in not only to link their complaints with his, but also to lend authority to his own points of disagreement.

The value of these letters is two-fold. In the first instance, they are the most precise and succinct statement of Whichcote's beliefs. Secondly, since Cambridge Platonism was not attempting to become a sect, and does not therefore have a manifesto such as Calvin's Institutes as a theoretical base, and because Whichcote was such a powerful preacher and influential tutor, we can accept these letters as a summation of the beliefs and attitudes which were currently gaining strength at Emmanuel College. Speaking both for himself and for the "others", Tuckney states:

I think for Them, I am sure for My-self, that the onely cordolium is and hath bin; that we fear, the truth of Christ, much dearer than dearest friendes, hath bin and may be prejudiced; and so young ones in the universitie tainted, and others greeved, by a veine of doctrine; which runnes up and down in manie of Your discourses, and [In those (inserted by Salter)] of some others of verie great worth; whom We verie much honour, and whom You head, as some think...<sup>7</sup>

It is interesting to see, however, that Tuckney appends to that statement his considered opinion that "for this last particular, I verily think otherwise." In fact, Whichcote was not trying to found a new religious creed of any sort; he

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<sup>7</sup> Tuckney, "Eight Letters", p. 18.

was merely attempting to validate the basic tenets of the Protestant faith. His attitude towards Christianity definitely affected his pupils, but it cannot be said that his beliefs were taken over, so much as his justification for those beliefs.

At the end of his second letter to Whichcote, Tuckney lists those things in Whichcote's speeches and sermons which to him seem "dangerous". The list seems ponderous, but is worth presenting in full:

The power of Nature, in Morals, too much advanced - Reason hath too much given to itt, in the mysteries of Faith. - A recta ratio much talkt-of; which I cannot tell, where to finde. - Mind and Understanding is all; Heart and Will little spoken of. - The decrees of God quæstion'd and quarrel'd; because, according to our reason, wee cannot comprehend; how they may stande with His goodness: which, according to your phrase, Hee is under the power of. - Those our Philosophers, and other Heathens, made fairer candidates for Heaven; than the scriptures seeme to allowe of: and They, in their virtues, preferred before Christians, overtaken with weakenesses. - A kinde of Moral Divinitie minted; onlie with a little tincture of Christ added: nay, a Platonique faith unites to God. - Inherent righteousness so preached, as if not with the prejudice of imputed righteousness, which hath somtimes very unseemlie language given it; yett much said of the one, and very little or nothing of the other. This was not PAUL'S manner of preaching. - [That] This inherent righteousness may bee perfect in this life. - An Estate of Love, in this life; above a life of Faith. - And some broad expressions, as though in this life wee may be above Ordinances: - with divers other principles of religion, by some very doubtfullie spoken of.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Tuckney, "Eight Letters", p. 38.



One can see, then, the number of points of difference between the doctrines of the two divines; and these, it must be remembered, are drawn for the most part from that single address out of which the controversy arose. After Whichcote's third letter, which contains a spirited reply to this upbraiding, Tuckney realizes, as Whichcote had by now also done, that this was more than a dispute over single points of expression. It was in fact a dispute about fundamental attitudes towards faith. In his third letter, therefore, Tuckney generalizes his complaints, saying:

...if withall you and others wou'd please so farre to denie your selves; as to forbear the insisting-on these arguments, of the power of nature and reason, in your discourses; which in scripture are rather abased, than exalted: it wou'd prevente heats and oppositions, which att all times are uncomfortable; and especially, in these crasie times, may prove of verie ill consequence to the Universitie.<sup>9</sup>

Add to this the fear expressed earlier of Whichcote's use of "Philosophie and Metaphysicks: which, some think, you were then so immersed in;...[and which] was begot in the depth of anti-christian darkness; and, very both good and learned men judge, will vanish in darkness; at the light of brighter day,"<sup>10</sup> and we have a summary of the attitudes which Whichcote has been expressing through his sermons, discourses, and his position as tutor. It is the use made of these three

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<sup>9</sup> Tuckney, "Eight Letters", p. 75.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 36.



ideas - nature, reason, and the ancient philosophers - that marks the Platonists as a school.

Whichcote, of course, did not see himself as founder of a new school of religious thought. He was merely expressing his own, what he considered very proper, attitudes towards religion.

If you let go Scripture in the sense to which the context leads, and if you let go the true and impartial proposals and dictates of sober reason, then do we open the door to all manner of delusion and imposture, and shall be carried we know not whither. Let us stand by these two; for these are the two certain principles. If we lay these aside, we do not know where we shall be carried...<sup>11</sup>

With the stress upon scripture found in this statement, we find much of the spirit of the Reformation. Calvin, for instance, in his defence of the Genevan theocracy written to Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto in 1539, offers a similar statement regarding the use of text:

...seeing how dangerous it would be to boast of the Spirit without the Word, He declared that the Church is indeed governed by the Holy Spirit, but in order that the government might not be vague and unstable, He annexed it to the Word. ...Well, then, does Chrysostom admonish us to reject all who, under the pretence of the Spirit, lead us away from the simple doctrine of the gospel.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> quoted in Powicke, p. 78.

<sup>12</sup> J. Calvin and J. Sadoletto, A Reformation Debate: Sadoletto's Letter to the Genevans and Calvin's Reply, edited by J. C. Olin (New York, 1966), pp. 60-1.

It is in the different attitude to reason that the differences between the two men's beliefs become apparent.

Calvinism, to be sure, accepted the idea of reason in a very limited sense. But Calvinism accepted the word of God on faith:

When we embrace Christ by faith, and come, as it were, into communion with Him, this we term, after the manner of Scripture, the righteousness of faith. ... [Paul] demonstrates [in 2 Cor., 13] that it is by faith only we become partakers of that blessing, when he says that the ministry of reconciliation is contained in the gospel.<sup>13</sup>

A Calvinist might reason about the application of the Word, but never about the word itself:

...you will please to observe, what is there said; 'they searched the scriptures, whether those things were so' [Acts, XVII, 11]: by which it appears, that the scriptures were the rule, by which they judged of the doctrine delivered to them: so that what the scripture or divine testimonie of God held-out, they withoute dispute beleaved: and judged, not itt; but man's doctrine, by itt.<sup>14</sup>

This division of rational and spiritual was foreign to Whichcote:

Sir, I oppose not rational to spiritual; for spiritual is most rational:...I allways thought; that that doth most affect and command the hearte; which doth most fullie satisfie and convince the minde: and what reacheth the minde, but reason; the reason of the thing?<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, A Reformation Debate, p. 67.

<sup>14</sup> Whichcote, "Eight Letters", p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 108-9.

Do I dishonour my faith, or do anie wrong to itt; to tell the worlde, that my minde and understanding are satisfied in itt? I have noe reason against itt; yea, the highest and purest reason is for itt! (What doth God speak to, but my reason?...) <sup>16</sup>

The separation of faith and reason, of the things of this world from the things of the next, was one of the prevailing tendencies in seventeenth century thought, both in science and theology. But Whichcote could neither understand nor accept such a bifurcation.

Nor was he alone in his feelings; each of the Platonists could be cited expressing this same attitude. Behind the belief in the essential unity of the spiritual and the rational lies the Platonists' acceptance of two basic concepts. The ideas of Eros (the doctrine of Love) and plasticity (the idea of movement) are axiomatic to their belief. All the various sources from which the Platonists could have drawn this belief need not be mentioned here. Cassirer makes a case for derivation from Ficino.<sup>17</sup> But because he cites Ficino's Theologia Platonica, the doctrines could also have come from Plato's Symposium.<sup>18</sup> Finally, startling similarities between the Cambridge group's ideas and those of Philo

<sup>16</sup> Whichcote, "Eight Letters", p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> see Cassirer, Platonic Renaissance, pp 86ff.

<sup>18</sup> see the discussion between Socrates and Diotima, Symposium, in The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including Letters, edited by E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (New York, 1964), pp. 544ff.



the Jew, the Alexandrian Platonist, are apparent.<sup>19</sup> The importance to our study is that by accepting these two things, the Platonists circumvented and undercut a dogma fundamental to both the Catholic and the Calvinist faiths, "the doctrine of the incurable corruption of the will, which by the fall has been diverted and cut off from its source for all time."<sup>20</sup>

The new relationship between man and God, rising out of a belief in these two tenets (which indicates, by the way, the reason why Tuckney did not like the use of the Classical philosophers: he could not dispute their ideas or their statements, but could only exclude them as heathens, or, to use his word, "dunghills"), gave the Platonists a freedom perhaps unparalleled in their time. The tradition of toleration in English theology, though not accepted or practiced by or for all, combined with their willingness to acquiesce in certain matters theological and their unwillingness to establish a formal dogma, allowed them nearly as full a range as they individually wished to accept. Whichcote, for instance, would, in theory at least, accept religious truth in any form from any man: he would also not be confined by sectarianism:

I am above all Sects whatsoever as Sects: For  
I am a true and free Christian. ...For it is  
not in thy Power to cast me so low as any Sect

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<sup>19</sup> see Hatch, pp. 171-208.

<sup>20</sup> Cassirer, p. 103.

whatsoever: God hath placed me in a Dispensation above them.<sup>21</sup>

[Do wee not agree with Papistes, in what they hold that is true?...]...Truth is Truth; whosoever hath spoken itt, or howsoever itt hath bin abused: butt if this libertie may not bee allowed to the universitie, wherfore do wee study?<sup>22</sup>

Nor is this, as I have tried to indicate, merely a trait of Whichcote. Cudworth, in the preface to his Sermon before the "House", states:

The Scope of this Sermon, which not long since exercised your Patience (Worthy Senatours) was not to contend for this or that Opinion; but onely to perswade men to the Life of Christ, as the Pith and Kernel of all Religion.<sup>23</sup>

More, we are told, was more outspoken, and perhaps more honest in his attitude towards religious toleration; he wished for Protestant truth alone. G. P. H. Pawson tells us:

In More's case tolerance did not reach to Papists. The Pope is described in the 'Divine Dialogues' as Antichrist, or 'the Man of Sin,' Rome as 'the Whore of Babylon.'<sup>24</sup>

Nor must we think that this irenicism extended infinitely or indiscriminately. The Platonists were, after all, theologians; they never forgot what they felt was God's charge.

<sup>21</sup> Whichcote, quoted in Cassirer, p. 67.

<sup>22</sup> Whichcote, "Eight Letters", pp. 56-7. Entry in square brackets indicates marginalia inserted by Salter.

<sup>23</sup> R. Cudworth, Preface to A Sermon: Preached Before the House of Commons March 31, 1647 (Cambridge, 1647 [Facsimile reprod., New York, 1930]), ¶3 [A1<sup>1</sup>]. Italics reversed.

<sup>24</sup> G. P. H. Pawson, The Cambridge Platonists and Their Place in Religious Thought (London, 1930), p. 12.

If they generally believed that all religions have a kernel of Divine truth in them, and that all good men were candidates for heaven, they also believed, through their conception of the plastic unity of all nature, that any belief which deliberately splintered the body and the soul, or the natural world from its Creator, was at heart dangerous and atheistical. Hence, we understand more fully what Whichcote meant by his statement:

...I contradistinguish rational to conceited, impotent, affected CANTING; (as I may call it; when the Ear receeves wordes, which offer no matter to the Understanding; make no impression on the inward sense.)<sup>25</sup>

It also explains how Cudworth's Treatise was seen as a cure for the "atheism" of Hobbes. Yet even beyond the religious tolerance, it also offered a degree of personal interpretive freedom. With their new attitude, and the application of the principles they had drawn from the Classical and Platonic writers, they found in Christianity a benevolence which the Reformation churches for the most part lacked.

The key, of course, is found in the emphasis upon the "inward sense". It was the inward qualities of man which controlled his relationship to God. To fully understand, it is necessary to realize that Eros, according to Plato, performed a function similar to that of Christ in Christianity. It acted as a mediator between God and man. Diotima tells

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<sup>25</sup> Whichcote, "Eight Letters", p. 108.



Socrates that Eros is

...a very powerful spirit,...and spirits...  
are half-way between god and man. ...They are  
the envoys and interpreters that ply between  
heaven and earth, flying upward with our wor-  
ship and our prayers, and descending with the  
heavenly answers and commandments...<sup>26</sup>

Add to this the idea that "Love never longs for either the half or the whole of anything but the good,"<sup>27</sup> and we have the basis for the writings of Plotinus, Ficino and the Florentine Academy, and ultimately the Cambridge group. Plotinus, ante-dating Augustine and his doctrine of a fixed and corrupted will, fixes God as the being of perfect Goodness, and Eros as the innate impulse in the soul of man, that which wishes to partake of perfect goodness. And, as Cassirer tells us:

The total accomplishment of the Florentine Academy, comprehensive as it is, can be condensed to this. The Platonic doctrine of Eros and the Platonic doctrine of beauty stand as the nucleus of the philosophy of the Florentine Circle. The epistemology and metaphysics, the ethics and theology, of the Florentine School are all simply variations on this one great theme.<sup>28</sup>

We can see, therefore, the position that the "inward sense" holds in the thought of the Cambridge Platonists. The necessity of separation between the natural and the spiritual world is to them no longer valid. Both become but part of

<sup>26</sup> Plato, "Symposium", Collected Dialogues, p. 555.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 558.

<sup>28</sup> Cassirer, p. 102.

the Divine plan. But further, man need not fear his reasoning abilities in matters of religion. Thus the original aims of Protestantism, to return to the faith of the early Christian Fathers,<sup>29</sup> and to allow men freedom of judgment in matters of faith, find their expression with the Platonists at Cambridge. It was not until religious thinkers ventured beyond the realm of Augustinian dogma that this could happen; it was, finally, the humanistic spirit which offered the necessary attitude for such a venture.

The effect of this belief is found not only in the irenicism that the Platonists display, but most importantly in their discussions of their faith. In the sermons and discourses of all the Platonists there are many statements about the sympathetic relationship between man and God. The whole of the first section of John Smith's True Way reflects this assumption; a single quotation will give sufficient indication:

It profits little to know Christ Himself after the flesh; but He gives His Spirit to good men, that searcheth the deep things of God. There is an inward beauty, life, and loveliness in divine truth, which cannot be known but then when it is digested into life and practice. ... Divine truth is better understood, as it unfolds itself in the purity of men's hearts and lives, than in all those subtile niceties into which curious wits may lay it forth.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> see Calvin's Letter, pp 60ff.

<sup>30</sup> J. Smith, "The True Way or Method of Attaining Divine Knowledge", Select Discourses (London, 1859), pp. 8-9. Italics mine.

Cudworth, in his Sermon before the "House", states:

The secret mysteries of a Divine Life, of a New Nature, of Christ formed in our hearts; they cannot be written, or spoken, language and expressions cannot reach them; neither can they ever be truly understood, except the soul itself be kindled from within, and awakened into the life of them.<sup>31</sup>

More, too, presents the belief in a similar ideal. In his poem "Concerning Faith", he writes:

Wherefore the soul cut off from lowly sense,  
By harmlesse fate, farre greater liberty  
Must gain: for when it hath departed hence  
(As all things else) should it not backward hie  
From whence it came? but such divinity  
Is in our souls that nothing lesse than God  
Could send them forth...<sup>32</sup>

It is in Whichcote's writings, however, that we find the most famous of the Cambridge School's uses of this doctrine, in a phrase that "runnes up and down" the whole length of his sermons - "The Candle of the Lord." Drawn from the Bible (Proverbs XX, 27), this was one of the statements that Tuckney took exception to. The exact theological argument presented on both Tuckney's and Whichcote's behalf is unnecessary here; in the full statement of the proverb (The spirit of man is the candle of the LORD, searching all the inward parts of the belly), we can see the stress upon both the inward and the physical self, and also the bond between God and man. The fusion of two great bodies of

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<sup>31</sup> Cudworth, Sermon, p. 5. Italics mine.

<sup>32</sup> quoted in Cassirer, p. 125. Italics mine.



thought is here seen in its fullest sense. Whichcote uses the Platonic concept not only in the humanist sense, whereby the ancient authors are cited as authorities for or proof of his point; he also shows that good men have a knowledge of God, even without the visitation of Christ.

The religious ramifications of this doctrine are obvious. "As against a religion of fear is now taught a religion of freedom, as against a religion of self-abasement, a religion of unqualified trust - of a trust not signifying mere reliance on the help of a higher power, but embodying an inner assurance of the powers of the human spirit and of the human will."<sup>33</sup> From the basic assumption of Eros indwelling in man and God, and of the benevolence existing between man and God, comes the idea of freedom of the will as an active participant in the moral life of man, and the use of reason in understanding man's role in relation to God. Further, the accepted belief that Eros pervaded all creation gives the Platonists the foundation for their philosophy of nature. More will obviously be said on this aspect of the Cambridge group's thought when we look at Cudworth's work. But for now, we can say it is again as a direct result of their belief in Platonic doctrines that the Platonists held the view of nature they did. Eros, that spirit or principle which pervaded all sentient beings and was a manifestation

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<sup>33</sup> Cassirer, p. 124.

of the divine goodness on earth, led them to two separate ideas of nature.

The first deals with the nature of man, and the influence of infinite goodness upon those things which affect him. Because God is the author of all things, and because he is and cannot vary from infinite goodness, all things have within them the capacity to be good. Again, this is but an extension of the "inward sense" of man discussed above. Man's link with his world is more than physical, for his reason - that aspect of the spirit of man which attempts understanding of the nature of his existence - will find upon examination this same principle of all-pervading unity, combining all nature as an aspect of God's goodness.

This was expanded, of course, to deal with that other study of nature, natural philosophy. Against Bacon and Hobbes, who separated matter and faith, and against Descartes, who doubted all sense and relegated all matter to control by mathematical laws, the Platonists felt they must either do battle or succumb. Against the Empiricists, who dissected in order to study, the Platonists put forward a study attempting to understand the one principle underlying all creation. Against Cartesianism, with its mechanism and the separation it presents between man and God, they offered the indwelling presence of God in all things. They attempted, in other words, to counter the study of nature as an object with the

meaning of nature to the subject. In the eyes of the Platonists, "if the soul is prevented from affecting the corporeal world, then it has lost both substance and sense."<sup>34</sup> There could be no value to the study of nature unless it was the study of the nature of God.

These, then, were the tenets of faith which characterize the Christianity of the Platonists. Nature, reason, and humanism: the third spawning the attitudes of the first two. In the field of religion it branded them as Arminians and "Latitude-men" and, in the eyes of some, at least, as heretics. In the eyes of seventeenth century science, they were confined by their own standards to a hindward-looking attitude that would find them wanting in the new studies in natural philosophy. Yet we can draw upon the words of Bronowski and Mazlish again:

...[We can] make a separation: between the aristocratic Renaissance, with, for example, its reading of the Greeks and Romans in manuscript and its taste for a curious Platonic idealism, as discussed in the Platonic Academy at Florence; and another kind of Renaissance which followed or supplanted it - a popular, empirical, less traditional and hierarchical, and more scientific and forward-looking Renaissance.<sup>35</sup>

The Platonists were heirs to the former of these two movements, and the natural philosophers were to the latter. Yet

<sup>34</sup> Cassirer, p. 144.

<sup>35</sup> Bronowski and Mazlish, p. 4.



if the Platonists were outdistanced in matters scientific, they remained true to their own premises and, in the final analysis, to the classical dictum that man is indeed the measure of all things.

## RALPH CUDWORTH: THE EARLY YEARS

Although little is known about Cudworth's life, we can assume that religion, from the time of his birth, played a dominant role in his education, life, and the creation of his temperament. His father, also named Ralph Cudworth, was a divine of some merit, for during his early ministry he was chaplain to James I.<sup>1</sup> Somewhat later, the father was given the living at Aller in Somersetshire, where the younger Ralph was born in 1617. Upon the father's death in 1624, the boy's education was undertaken by his step-father, yet another divine by the name of Stoughton. This education, though conducted at home and privately, was substantial, for Cudworth entered Emmanuel College when he was thirteen, and took the degree of Master of Arts nine years later, in 1639.

There is a great deal of confusion and disagreement concerning Cudworth's movements from this time until 1654.<sup>2</sup> Certain facts, however, are definite. He became a Fellow of Emmanuel upon graduation, and served with great distinction

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that the father too was a product of Emmanuel College, becoming its first Fellow. The fact that he was later chaplain to James indicates that the Puritanism and Calvinism of the College was not as rigid as most critics would lead us to believe.

<sup>2</sup> see Appendix.

in that capacity. In early 1645 he became Master of Clare Hall, and later in that same year, Regius Professor of Hebrew. He was to hold this last position for 43 years. The years from 1650 to 1654 are vague, but we know that he became Doctor of Divinity in 1651, and that in 1654 he was awarded the Mastership of Christ's College. There he remained until his death in 1688.

Outwardly, then, his life was uneventful: over fifty-five of his seventy-one years were spent in association with Cambridge. Yet from this single location he conducted not a little correspondence, and these letters show him to be a man of great awareness, having the acquaintance of a number of distinguished men. He knew both Cromwells, the Secretary of State for the Commonwealth, leading members of the Remonstrant party in Holland, and John Locke. Further, he was a member of the Royal Society. These facts indicate that he was aware of the world beyond Cambridge, not only in the sphere of religion, but also in science, philosophy, and politics.

Cudworth's life can be divided, for our purposes, into two distinct sections, pivoting on the year he became Master of Christ's College, 1654. Until that time - certainly until 1645, and from all indications after that year - Cudworth was very much under the influence of Benjamin Whichcote, who was tutor at Emmanuel during Cudworth's



undergraduate days, then Sunday Lecturer at Trinity Church, and from 1644, Provost of King's College. Powicke tells us of Cudworth that he had been raised a Calvinist, but that upon his arrival at Cambridge he conducted "a study (in which he delighted) of the ancient Philosophers, not only the Peripatetic sort, but also the Platonic."<sup>3</sup> This study bears remarkable similarities to that advocated by Whichcote in his capacity as tutor at Emmanuel: Bishop Burnet says that "he set young students much on reading the ancient Philosophers, chiefly Plato, Tully, and Plotin."<sup>4</sup> It would not be unfair to Cudworth to state that these early years were years of apprenticeship under a great teacher. His writings during this time, though they show the product of independent thought, also show a marked underlying dependence upon the religion that Whichcote expounded.

This is not meant to suggest that Cudworth had nothing to offer to the Cambridge movement; even his early writings show individual thought. Nor must we think he worked without having some effect on those around him, or without drawing notice to himself. The fact that he preached to the Commons indicates that he was held in some esteem. There are indications too that he had some influence on John Smith,

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<sup>3</sup> Powicke, p. 111.

<sup>4</sup> Gilbert Burnet, History of his Own Time (London, 1724), I, 187.

a fellow Platonist, and author of Select Discourses, who was an undergraduate at Emmanuel during Cudworth's time as Fellow, and upon Sir William Temple, the Restoration statesman. But any mention of influence must be qualified by two considerations. First, Whichcote was still a very powerful force on the student body of Cambridge - was, in fact, the most popular personality at the university. There is also every indication that, in Smith's case, Whichcote was the tutor. Secondly, Cudworth as tutor would have been little different from Whichcote; he had little to add during these years to the essential character of Cambridge Platonism as presented by Whichcote. He remained a disciple; he never took over the position Whichcote then held and still holds in the movement - that of "ministerial" mentor.

The so-called "great" sermon, preached to the House of Commons in March of 1647 and printed by that body's command later in that same year, is the best example of the work of Cudworth's early years. Powicke's description of this event is exhilarating, if somewhat overdone:

...just then, when 'the tension of Party-spirit was at its height, and every question, theological and national, which divided the factions, assumed an exaggerated bulk in the imaginations of men and intensified their antipathies'; just then, with Cromwell present, and an audience of Presbyterian M.P.s resentful of the Independent ascendancy which he stood for, Cudworth lifted up his voice like a trumpet; called them off from their party differences as from mere trifles; and called them to the life of Christ as the pith

and kernel of all religion. He evinced the fearless courage of a prophet...<sup>5</sup>

The sermon is in many ways Cudworth's writing at its best; it is certainly his most enjoyable work, and the easiest to read. Further, although it shows the degree of indebtedness its author owed both to Whichcote and to the ideals of religious Platonism, it also shows that Cudworth could and did make these ideals his own.

The sermon itself is based upon I John, ii, 3-4: "And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his Commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his Commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him." The aim of the sermon was to present to Cudworth's listeners the "pith and kernel" of religion; the technique was to compare the inward meaning of religion with its outward or formal expression:

I wish whilest we talk of light, and dispute about truth, we could walk more as children of light. ...And that I fear...many of us (notwithstanding all this light which we boast of round about us) to have nothing but Egyptian darknesse within upon our hearts.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout, he stresses the following points: that Christianity must be within as well as without, in the spirit as well as the word;<sup>7</sup> and that external understanding of faith has

<sup>5</sup> Fowicke, p. 112.

<sup>6</sup> Cudworth, Sermon, pp. 2-3

<sup>7</sup> see Ibid., p. 5.



no meaning without internal integrity towards faith.<sup>8</sup>

Cudworth expresses the first point in the following manner:

Let us not (I beseech you) judge of our knowing Christ, by our ungrounded Perswasions that Christ from all Eternity hath loved us, and given himself particularly for Us, without the Conformity of our lives to Christs Commandments, without the reall partaking of the Image of Christ in our hearts. The great Myserie of the Gospel, it doth not lie onely in Christ without us, (though we must know also what he hath done for us) but the very Hith and Kernel of it, consists in Christ inwardly formed in our hearts. Nothing is truly Ours, but what lives in our Spirits.<sup>9</sup>

If we recall once more the dispute between Tuckney and Whichcote, we can see the similarity of the two Platonists' arguments. Whichcote, in dealing with the same topic, writes to Tuckney:

...the scripture holdes-forth Christ to us, under a double notion; 1. to be felt in us, as the new man; in contradiction to the old man: as a divine nature; in contradistinction to the degenerate and apostate nature: and as a principle of heavenly life; contrary to the life of sin, and spirit of the world: 2. to be beleevd-on by us, as a sacrifice for the expiation and atonement of sin; as an advocate and meanes of reconciliation between God and man.<sup>10</sup>

To both men, there must be some amount of God's light - the candle of the Lord - in men, before they can truly say they

<sup>8</sup> see Cudworth, Sermon, p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>10</sup> Whichcote, "Eight Letters", p. 13.

are of Christ's church. Similarly, neither man can conceive of any validity in scriptural study or interpretation unless the inner man is awakened to the sense of the gospel. One can compare, for example, the following passages, the first by Cudworth in his sermon, the second drawn from whichcote's third letter:

There be many that understand, the Greek and Hebrew of the Scripture, the Originall Languages in which the Text was written, that never understood the Language of the Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

...I think, where the demonstration of the spirit is, there is the highest purest reason; so as to satisfie, convince, command, the minde: things are most thorowlie seen-into, most cleerlie understood; the minde not so much amused with forms of Wordes, as made acquainted with the Inwards of things.<sup>12</sup>

The works of Cudworth and Whichcote are full of this type of parallelism.

The criticisms which Tuckney voiced could have been as easily directed against Cudworth's sermon in 1647 as towards Whichcote's Commencement Address in 1651. Of the three general points Tuckney objected most strongly to (the use of reason, nature, and philosophy in religion), two are used extensively in the sermon. Above, we have seen the emphasis upon reason in religion - that special reason which the Cambridge group held to. It was an internal, intuitive

<sup>11</sup> Cudworth, Sermon, p. 40.

<sup>12</sup> Whichcote, "Eight Letters", p. 108. Italics mine.

reason, based upon a belief in God's goodness and an awareness of Christ's spirit. Obviously, it was in direct opposition to the Calvinist doctrine of the totally depraved man, but more, in Cudworth's hands (as can be seen in the sermon) it became a weapon with which to attack the Calvinist doctrine of election through Divine Grace alone.

Cudworth deals with this point in the strongest manner, pointing out that without the inward sense, religion comes, as it were, to a standstill:

What low, sordid, and unworthy Principles do we act by, that thus hinder our growth, and make us stand at a stay, and keep us alwayes in the very Porch and Entrance, where we first began? Is it a sleepy, sluggish Conceit, That it is enough for us, if we be but once in a State of Grace, if we have but once stepped over the threshold, we need not take so great paines to travel any further? Or is it another damping, choaking, stifling Opinion, That Christ hath done all for us already without us, and nothing need more be done within us?<sup>13</sup>

This too echoes the ideas expressed by Whichcote, of reconciliation working in man rather than in God, but more, it shows the glimmerings of Cudworth's later discussions concerning the relation of freedom to morality. Man is not free if he need not actively strive for salvation; if grace is given only by the pre-determined Grace of God, then man's actions - his attempts to live a good life - lose all validity, as does his choice between acting or not. Cudworth presents

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<sup>13</sup> Cudworth, Sermon, p. 58.



this idea in the following manner:

I do not therefore mean, by Holinesse, the mere performance of outward Duties of Religion, coldly acted over as a task, ...but I mean an inward Soul and Principle of Divine Life, that spiriteth all these; that enliveneth and quickeneth, the dead carkasse, of all our outward Performances whatsoever.<sup>14</sup>

As long as the spirit of religion is only without, the meaning of religion is dead and incomprehensible; not until the mind or reason is actively involved in attaining to the goodness of God within is there any validity to a profession of faith.

It is with the idea of activity within that Cudworth strikes a note which is to become characteristic of his later writings. There is little more than a glimmering of one of the major contributions of the True Intellectual System, yet when Cudworth describes the inward sense as an "inward S/e/lf-moving Principle"<sup>15</sup> he offers an indication not only of the "self-activity" or "Plastick nature" which will be discussed in his later works, but also of the debt that his thinking owes to both the neo-Platonic and the humanist tradition.

The self-moving principle is, in the sermon, the principle of Love or Eros. Briefly, the argument is as

<sup>14</sup> Cudworth, Sermon, p. 73.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

follows: holiness (and by this, Cudworth means the inner spirit of man in accord with God) follows the "Law of the Spirit of Life", which is an "inward self-moving principle", which is in turn called by Cudworth the "Law of Love, which is the most powerfull Law in the World."<sup>16</sup> This law offers us freedom in the sense that it frees us from all external law, but it confines us in that it becomes an internal, all-controlling law: "it maketh us become a Law unto our selves."<sup>17</sup> The freedom engendered by acceptance of this law causes man to desire unity with God.

The final link in this chain, i.e., the desire of man for unity with God, is the most obviously Platonic of the stages. The doctrine of Eros can be seen throughout, but with the assertion that the soul desires unity with the ultimate good that is God, we have the quintessence of Renaissance Platonism, the doctrine of Platonic Love popularized in Ficino's writings, which had been drawn from Plotinus and Plato.

Again, we are drawn back to comments made by Tuckney. In his full list of complaints, he states:

This was not PAUL'S manner of preaching. -  
 [That] This inherent righteousness may bee perfect in this life. - An Estate of Love, in this life; above a life of Faith. - And some

<sup>16</sup> Cudworth, Sermon, p. 75.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

broad expressions, as though in this life wee may be above Ordinances.<sup>18</sup>

Cudworth's attitude to the value of Love in the worship of God could stand in the place of Whichcote's answer to Tuckney. Whichcote's reply is as follows:

'An estate of Love, above a life of Faith.' I wish, I had it! O that my heart were enamoured, inflamed with love to God! O that I were united to Him; as by faith, so by love!<sup>19</sup>

Cudworth, in an equally enraptured passage, exclaims:

O Divine Love! the sweet Harmony of souls! the Musick of Angels! The Joy of Gods own Heart, the very Darling of his Bosome!<sup>20</sup>

It is particularly worth noting the use of the work "to" in the quotation from Whichcote. It is not the love of God, but love to God, love directed towards God, that he stresses. Similarly, Cudworth quotes Christ's Commandments to his disciples, that "...Love is of God, and whosoever loveth is born of God and knoweth God."<sup>21</sup> Cudworth, then, believes that since love is of God, then to love is to be of God, and united to God. It is not love of God through faith in his justice and obedience to his decrees, but rather Love in the spirit of God, the unity of God and man through the spirit of Christ within.

<sup>18</sup> Tuckney, "Eight Letters", p. 39.

<sup>19</sup> Whichcote, "Eight Letters", p. 64. Italics mine.

<sup>20</sup> Cudworth, Sermon, p. 60.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 60.



The way in which Cudworth expresses this spiritual union with God indicates yet another Renaissance influence upon his thought and writing. Throughout the first chapter of her book on Renaissance symbolism, Désirée Hirst attempts to present certain tendencies of Renaissance scholarship. An indication of these tendencies which is of particular interest to our study is seen in the following description:

...in the presentation of the Corpus Hermeticum in Marsilio Ficino's translation of 1463, ...Ficino traces the doctrines of Hermes Trismegistus through Orpheus, Aglaophamus, Pythagoras and Philolaus down to Plato himself.<sup>22</sup>

The inclusion of historical and semi-mythical writers of pre-Socratic antiquity in this manner is an accepted humanist facet of the scholarship of the Florentine Platonists. Cudworth, a student of Ficino, would have had some familiarity with the aim and end of such a tendency, even without knowing the work itself.

This same idea is used by Cudworth in his sermon. This is particularly noticeable if the passage from that work which was quoted above is presented in full:

O Divine Love! the sweet Harmony of souls! the Musick of Angels! The Joy of Gods own Heart, the very Darling of his Bosome! the Source of true Happinesse! the pure Quintessence of Heaven! That which reconciles the jarring Principles of the World, and makes them all chime together! ...Let us expresse this sweet

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<sup>22</sup> Désirée Hirst, Hidden Riches: Traditional Symbolism from the Renaissance to Blake (London, 1904), p. 20.

harmonious Affection, in these jarring times:  
that so if it be possible, we may tune the  
World at last, into better Musick.<sup>23</sup>

In this instance, of course, the aim is not to show the genealogy of a certain school of thought; and in fact, Cudworth may have been unconscious of the union he presents. Pythagorean celestial harmonics are wedded to Christian tenets; the effect is to indicate that all knowledge has been but man's search for the one truth that is God. The two systems are joined by the doctrine of Platonic Love; the result is that we have not only a parallel between man's inner union with God and the order of nature, but also between the Classical and Christian beliefs in order. It is characteristic both of Cudworth and the Platonists to draw upon the syncretic attitudes of Renaissance thinkers in this way. It was this syncretism that sponsored the irenicism which was the aim of the Sermon before the "House", and was so typical of the Cambridge group in general.

It is apparent, then, that in the arguments presented in the Sermon Cudworth has not altered the essential beliefs of Platonism as established by Whichcote, but has only enlarged them and re-emphasized them according to his own interests. True, Cudworth's sermon differs in style from those of Whichcote, but this can be imputed to the different temperaments both of the men themselves and of the audiences to

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<sup>23</sup> Cudworth, Sermon, pp. 60-1.

whom the sermons were delivered. The ideas found in Cudworth's work may also be excused as being presented in a special sermon delivered to a special body on a specific occasion, where Whichcote's were for more general consumption. Still, we find in Cudworth a more intellectual man, one trying to give some traditional validity to his statements. He attempted this through two avenues. First, he drew upon the words of the gospel; he followed, in other words, the Protestant humanist ideal. Secondly, he drew upon a dual tradition, that of Christian Platonism and that of Renaissance humanism in an attempt to validate that Protestant ideal. Whichcote, however much he studied the ancients (and this was one of Tuckney's charges), remains in his writings within only the former of Cudworth's spheres. He had read and seriously studied Plato and certain of his followers (though probably not Ficino),<sup>24</sup> and he would not refrain from using their teachings to further his beliefs; but his primary aim was to present a religion based on reason and scripture. His humanism was a Protestant religious-, rather than a Renaissance philosophical humanism. This is "the old humanistic ideal of religion"<sup>25</sup> that Cassirer speaks of. To it, Cudworth adds nothing but his individual hand and his penchant for traditional validation. Yet this second characteristic

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<sup>24</sup> see Whichcote, "Eight Letters", pp. 60ff.

<sup>25</sup> Cassirer, p. 34.



is still very much subordinated to religion in the Sermon; the emphasis and primary interest is on scriptural exegesis. In the later writings, we shall find that this order is reversed; although the interest is still on religion, the emphasis is upon the place the religious tenets expressed in the Sermon hold in the western philosophical tradition. This desire to present philosophical validation for religious beliefs is characteristic of Cudworth more than any other Platonist. In this way, his later writings could be called individual works; the Sermon, on the other hand, indicates that during his early years Cudworth was still the apprentice, still the disciple.

## RALPH CUDWORTH: THE LATER YEARS

When we come to the works written and published by Cudworth after his appointment to Christ's College in 1654, we are aware of a new and different author. There are a number of factors which help to explain this difference. The first is obvious: there are thirty-one years during which Cudworth published nothing. Between the Sermon in 1647, and The True Intellectual System in 1678, nothing, so far as we know, was sent to the printers. The differences in attitude, interests, and expression between a man at thirty and a man at sixty-one must always be great, if that man is a thinker. Beyond that, almost the entire period of the Interregnum falls between these dates; this undoubtedly had a marked effect upon a man so close to the Commonwealth leaders. Finally, there is the obvious difference of the type of prose Cudworth wrote, with the attendant effects upon the aims of the works, and the considerations of the audience to whom they were addressed. The early work was a sermon written to expound God's word; the latter works were treatises, written for the most part to justify God's design. Yet we shall find that the differences between the works, though prominent, are but secondary differences; that the central theme of all Cudworth's

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writings is always the same.

Cudworth wrote two major treatises in his later years: the massive True Intellectual System of the Universe, and the shorter Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality. Their aims do not depart radically from that end which was always foremost in Cudworth's mind: to validate a religion based on love, freedom, and responsibility. The first of these works was a defense of religion against atheism. The second was written to assert the existence of unchanging (eternal and immutable) values, a point particularly necessary to Cudworth's belief. Neither work, in the final analysis, could be called philosophical; the aim in both was solely religious. As J. H. Muirhead tells us, in a passage found in his article on the Platonists:

It would not perhaps be fair to say that they were theologians first and philosophers only secondarily, but to them philosophy and theology were the same thing, namely, the conceptual expression of the ideas that underlie essential religious experience.<sup>1</sup>

Though this passage deals with all the Platonists, it is particularly applicable to Cudworth, who merely used the intellectual tools with which he was equipped to further the convictions he held. Much of what Cudworth wrote loses all value if we lose sight of the religious faith that was both its basis and its end. When studying his writings, we must

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<sup>1</sup> J. H. Muirhead, "The Cambridge Platonists (I)", Mind, XXXVI (1927), 159.



remember that his philosophy, "however much it might extend to include a theory of knowledge and of nature, was a 'philosophy of religion'."<sup>2</sup> This fact is obvious, if we look at statements Cudworth himself made as to what, in fact, the works were meant to do.<sup>3</sup>

The True Intellectual System received its imprimatur in 1671, and was published seven years later.<sup>4</sup> When the work finally went to press, it was but one-third of the proposed study; the work had expanded beyond all expectation because of Cudworth's desire to overlook nothing he felt might affect his cause. This necessitated breaking the work into three parts:

This is therefore that which in the First place, we here Apologize for, our Publishing One Part or Book alone by it self; We being surprized in the Length therof; Whereas we had otherwise Intended Two more along with it.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the portion should, according to Cudworth, stand as a whole:

...there is no Reason, why this Volume should

<sup>2</sup> Muirhead, Mind, p. 161.

<sup>3</sup> See The True Intellectual System of the Universe (London, 1678 / facsimile edition: Stuttgart, 1964/), Dedicatory Epistle, A2<sup>r</sup>. See also E.I.P., p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> The reasons for this delay are not known, but in all likelihood the work was withheld because public reaction was expected to be antagonistic.

<sup>5</sup> Cudworth, T.I.S., Preface to the Reader, [A4<sup>v</sup>]. Italics reversed.

therefore be thought Imperfect and Incomplete, because it hath not All the Three Things at first Designed by us; it containing All that belongeth to its own Particular Title and Subject, and being in that respect no Piece, but a Whole.

The aim of this particular volume was to refute atheism in all its attributes; as the subtitle explains, it is a book "wherein, all the reason and philosophy of Atheism is confuted; and its impossibility demonstrated."

This was but the first of three volumes, however, treating only one-third of the chosen subject. In the original outline of the book, Cudworth planned to disprove those theories which denied self-activity or self-involvement to the soul. In other words, he was writing against fatalistic philosophies, since fatalism, in whatever form it appeared, removed man's freedom of choice, and negated the moral validity of his actions. The three volumes planned were to treat the three theories of fatalism found in Western thought:

For First, The Democritick Fate, is nothing but The Material Necessity of all things without a God: it supposing Senseless Matter, Necessarily Moved, to be the onely Original and Principle of all things: Which therefore is called...by us, the Atheistick Fate. Besides which, The Divine Fate is also Bipartite; Some Theists supposing God, both to Decree and Doe all things in us, (Evil as well as Good)....From whence it follows, That his Will is no way Regulated or Determined, by any Essentiall and Immutable Goodness, and Justice; or that he hath nothing

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., sig. [A4v]. Italics reversed.



of Morality in his Nature, he being onely Arbitrary Will Omnipotent. As also That all Good and Evil Morall, to us Creatures are meer Thetical or Positive things. ...This therefore may be called, The Divine Fate Immorall, and Violent. Again, There being other Divine Fatalists, who acknowledge such a Deity, as both suffers other things, besides it self, to Act, and hath an Essentiall Goodness and Justice in its Nature; and consequently, That there are things, Just and Unjust to us Naturally, and not by Law and Arbitrary Constitution onely; and yet nevertheless take away from men, all such Liberty, as might make them capable of Praise or Dispraise, Rewards and Punishments, and Objects of Distributive Justice:....And this may be called The Divine Fate Morall, (as the other Immorall;) and Naturall, (as the other Violent;)...<sup>7</sup>

Against these, Cudworth presents what he calls

...the Fundamentals or Essentials of True Religion. First, That all things in the World, do not Float without a Head and Governour; but that there is a God, an Omnipotent Understanding Being, Presiding over all. Secondly, That this God being Essentially Good and Just, there is...Something in its own Nature, Immutably and Eternally Just, and Unjust; and not by Arbitrary Will, Law, and Command onely. And Lastly,... That we are so far forth Principles or Masters of our own Actions, as to be Accountable to Justice for them...<sup>8</sup>

Since these purposes were not fulfilled, The True Intellectual System now stands, with its completed section and incompleting aim, as a refutation of atheism alone.

#### The Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality

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<sup>7</sup> Cudworth, T.I.S., Preface to the Reader, sig. A3<sup>r</sup>. Italics reversed.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Preface to the Reader, sig. [A3<sup>v</sup>]. Italics reversed.



holds a definite place in Cudworth's "grand argument"; it is, "in a way, a series of footnotes to The True Intellectual System of the Universe."<sup>9</sup> Yet this does not define the work; the argument is not against atheism, but against arbitrary standards of morality. Bishop Chandler sees Cudworth's aim in the Treatise as being a desire to complete the task set in the earlier work:

IN this view he drew up the Book, with which the world is now presented, wherein he proves the falseness of the consequences with respect to natural justice and morality in God, which are deducible from the principles of those that maintain the second sort of Fate, denominated by him Theologick. And thus it may be reckon'd to be a sequel in part, of his first book against material Fate.<sup>10</sup>

The work was written to refute those reasons by which "the Vulgar generally look no higher for the Original of Moral Good and Evil, Just and Unjust, than the Codes and Pandects, the Tables and Laws of their Country and Religion."<sup>11</sup> Thus, in many ways it is an argument more specifically for system than for God. But since God enjoys a primary position in Cudworth's argument, then in the sense that the system must be of God, so too must the arguments deal with Him.

Yet for all the philosophical terminology and objec-

<sup>9</sup> Passmore, p. 29.

<sup>10</sup> Preface to Cudworth's E.I.M., p. ix.

<sup>11</sup> Cudworth, E.I.M., p. 1.

tivity, the discussions of atheism and mutability, of Hylozoism and Protagoreanism, the forces with which Cudworth is dealing remain the same as those found in his early work.

In The True Intellectual System, the attack may be levelled at atomic corporealism, belief in sense alone as the foundation of knowledge, and in the Treatise, against belief in mutability, which implies a philosophy based upon sense experience. Yet Cudworth attacked them only because the former tended to take man's freedom of action from him, and the latter seemed to negate any validity that decision could have. His attacks, then, were on religious grounds, and his writings, an attempt at a systematic defence of the tenets of Cambridge Platonism.

There are four points which form the foundation for Cudworth's religion. These can be stated simply: that there is a relationship between body and soul; that there is a relationship between the soul and God; that man is responsible for his actions; that God is infinite goodness. These four points (and we notice that three of them are drawn from his Preface to The True Intellectual System, and the fourth is a fundamental of the Christian faith) have a decided taste of Whichcote. Compare them, for example, with the following:

We are very apt to lay all the fault upon our natures; but really our wills are rather to be blamed. ...But this will be the world's condemnation, ...that men put out the candle of God's spirit in them, that they may do evil without

check or control; that men take upon them to control the settled and immutable laws of everlasting righteousness, goodness and truth, which is the law of heaven;...that men do evil knowingly in the abuse of their liberty and freedom; whereas...His ways are ways of Goodness, righteousness and truth.<sup>12</sup>

But though Cudworth's beliefs remained similar to Whichcote's even this late in his life, his aims were different from his mentor's. Whichcote asserted his beliefs; Cudworth set out to prove them. Whichcote presented his beliefs within the Christian framework; Cudworth attempted a philosophical justification. This necessitated the system which these later works presented.

Cudworth's system was based, to a large extent, upon his own sense of reality. One basis of the Christian faith, that man has both a body and a soul, was necessarily accepted by him. Yet he knew that there was little value in making such a distinction without having some understanding of the influence that each of these beings has. The need for definition led, in Cudworth's case, to the atomic theory. In The True Intellectual System, much of the first chapter is devoted to showing, first, that atomism has a place in Christian thought, and second, that atomism not only need not rule out theism, but that it offers the best grounds for assuming the existence of incorporeal substance. "He that

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<sup>12</sup> Whichcote, quoted in Powicke, p. 82.



will undertake to prove that there is something else in the World besides Body," says Cudworth, "must first determine what Body is, for otherwise he will go about to prove that there is something besides He-knows-not-what."<sup>13</sup>

Body, in the atomic sense, is described in the following manner:

The Atomical Physiology supposes that Body is nothing else but...Extended Bulk; and resolves therefore that nothing is to be attributed to it, but what is included in the Nature and Idea of it, viz. more or less Magnitude with Divisibility into Parts, Figure, and Position, together with Motion or Rest, but so as that no Part of Body can ever Move it Self; but is al-ways moved by something else.<sup>14</sup>

The point to note, from Cudworth's point of view, is that the body is essentially passive. This creates the necessity for some agent which could act upon that passive body; which could, in fact, have control over the body. This is the point upon which Cudworth's disagreement with atomic corporealism is based:

...Democritus and Leucippus...were undoubtedly the first that ever made this Physiology to be a complete and entire Philosophy by it self, so as to derive the Original of all things in the whole Universe from senseless Atoms, that had nothing but Figure and Motion, together with Vacuum, and made up such a System of it, as from whence it would follow, that there could not be any God, not so much as a Corporeal one.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cudworth, T.I.S., p. 49.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 7. Italics mine.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

This is what Cudworth calls "the Atomical Philosophy Atheized and Adulterated,"<sup>16</sup> and he counter-poses to it an atomic dualism, derived, he insists, from Moses, and therefore a solid foundation for theism.

This same argument is applied to the idea of Protagorean mutability, which is attacked in the Treatise. Here the conflict arises because the concepts of flow and relativity ultimately rest upon sense perception, and abstracted decisions which are based upon it. To this system, Cudworth opposes once more the Mosaic or theistic atomism.

The dualism which is at the centre of this system must, of course, be an interacting dualism, for having distinguished body from non-body, the problem is to have one exert force upon the other. This is done through the counter-positioning of the qualities of passivity and activity. When the dispute is no longer between body and non-body, but rather between passivity and activity, there is more flexibility (and more complexity) for Cudworth to work with. It only remains for him to show that there are ideas other than those derived by sense impression, and that these have value only through activity within the person (and because there is activity involved, it must therefore be by a non-body in that person). From this point, it need only be shown that

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<sup>16</sup> Cudworth, T.I.S., p. 17.

certain of these ideas do not vary according to each individual's awareness, but are the same for all people at all times, and are therefore eternal and unchanging, and all but the final stage in the system has been presented. The final necessity is an eternal mind, made necessary because these eternal ideas have reality only through the self-activity of mind or non-body. The eternal mind is, of course, God.

This is obviously only the briefest outline of the argument Cudworth presents; there are many critical works which will offer a more exact and critical study of the ideas found in his writings.<sup>17</sup> Yet even as I have presented it, the system obviously fails to support the demands Cudworth makes of it. It does establish a distinct body and soul, and it grants them certain characteristics: viz. passion and action respectively. Further, the attribute of activity establishes a link between God and the soul. But on three points vital to his system (the goodness of God; the relation of body to soul; and the validity of freedom) Cudworth's solutions are clearly not satisfactory.

The relationship between body and soul presents the most difficult problem. Nor could this be overlooked: Cudworth's religious belief insisted upon vitality; a passive

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<sup>17</sup> The most complete study of Cudworth's philosophy is found in John Passmore's Ralph Cudworth: An Interpretation, mentioned above.



religion is no religion at all. In both of his later works, he approaches this point, and has little real success either time. In The True Intellectual System, he presents the idea of a "plastic" or "spermatic" nature. Its necessity is explained in the following passage:

...unless there be such a thing admitted as a Plastick Nature, that acts...for the sake of something, and in order to Ends...it seems that one or other of these Two Things must be concluded, That Either...every thing comes to pass Fortuitously, and happens...without the Guidance and Direction of any Mind or Understanding; Or else, that God himself doth all Immediately, and as it were with his own Hands...<sup>18</sup>

Obviously, neither alternative is satisfactory. The first returns to causal necessity, which was abhorrent to Cudworth; the other would involve God too directly in the mechanics of the world, and would not only prove advantageous to the cause of atheism (by invalidating the concept of providence, and raising problems of how to explain the mistakes of nature), but would also be incongruous with God's position.

The answer, for Cudworth, is "Plastick Nature", "which as an Inferior and Subordinate Instrument, doth Drudgingly Execute that Part of his Providence, which consists in the Regular and Orderly Motion of Matter."<sup>19</sup> Yet this force was not equivalent to nature, and although it did involve

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<sup>18</sup> Cudworth, T.I.S., p. 135 (numbered incorrectly as p. 147).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 138 (numbered incorrectly as p. 150).

God in the world more immediately, and therefore present some Divine reason for the interaction of bodies,<sup>20</sup> it did little else. It became an "inward Principle" of natural existence,<sup>21</sup> but remained inferior in certain ways to human reason. For nature is "Reason Inmersed and Plunged into Matter, and as it were Fuddled in it, and Confounded with it,"<sup>22</sup> while man's mind can break entirely free of nature, to contemplate the mental realities. In effect, then, nature is passive, or at best, but fatally active. In the final analysis, "Plastick Nature" is that part of God's reason which touches the corporeal elements of the world. Cudworth's own confusion as to its exact nature is apparent in his conclusion of his discussion of it:

...it is a certain Lower Life than the Animal, which acts Regularly and Artificially, according to the Direction of Mind and Understanding, Reason and Wisdom, for Ends, or in Order to Good, though it self do not know the Reason of what it does, ...it operating Fatally and Sympathetically, according to Laws and Commands, prescribed to it by a Perfect Intellect, and imprest upon it; and which is either a Lower Faculty of some Conscious Soul, or else an Inferior kind of Life or Soul by it self; but essentially depending upon an Higher Intellect.<sup>23</sup>

Nor is this problem more fully or more adequately

<sup>20</sup> see T.I.S., p. 138 (numbered incorrectly as p. 150); see also the ideas of mental causality, pp. 143ff (numbered incorrectly as pp. 155ff).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 143 (numbered incorrectly as p. 155).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 145 (numbered incorrectly as p. 155).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 162 (numbered incorrectly as p. 172).



solved in the Treatise. There, Cudworth makes the point (a good one) that the mere presentation of an object to the sense organs cannot account for the cognition of that object. Yet in order to circumvent this point, he must infuse vitality into that which must by definition be passive if his dualism is to remain effective. This quality he terms "passive perception", made operative by a "vital sympathy" which must exist between body and soul:

...Sense it self is not a meer Corporeal Passion; but a Perception of the Bodily Passions proceeding from some Power and Ability supposed to reside in a Sensitive Soul, Vitally united to that respective Body. Which Perception, though it have something of Energy in it, as being a Cogitation; yet it is rightly called a Passion of the Soul, because it is not a clear Intellectual or Cognoscitive Perception of the Motions of the Body, but a Passive or Sympathetical Perception only.<sup>24</sup>

His attempt to show a sympathetic relationship between body and soul while upholding his distinction is an attempt to do the impossible. One of the premises must be waived in preference to the other: if one is to draw a distinction between the active and the passive, then either the two must remain mutually exclusive, and therefore nullify that Christian tenet of belief that there is a relation between body and soul, or one must unite the two, and let fall the distinction between the two that is vital to the faith. "Passive perception", in whatever form or description, must

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<sup>24</sup> Cudworth, E.I.M., p. 151.



remain a contradiction.

Yet if we can ignore how the soul can influence the body, we can make better headway where we are faced with the two other problems Cudworth set himself: the goodness of God, and the responsibility of freedom. We can begin with an equation: wisdom equals goodness in action. If we grant that God is the author of all things, including those ideas which exist eternally and immutably, then it would be a negation of God's wisdom to confute man's attempts to know that which is of God. Further, the mind, in exercising its power to conceive of those immutables which are of God, becomes more aware of the fact that these immutables exist for the good of God's creation. Cudworth explains this idea in the following manner:

...considering further, how all Things in this great Mundane Machine or Animal (as the Antients would have it) are contrived, not only for the Beauty of the whole, but also for the Good of Every Part in it, that is endued with Life and Sense, it exerts another Idea, viz. of Goodness and Benignity from within it self, besides that of Art and Wisdom,...now both these Things, whereof the First is Art, Wisdom and Knowledge; the Second, Goodness, Benignity and Morality, being looked upon as Modes of some Intellectual Being or Mind in which they exist, it from hence presently makes up an Idea of God, as the Author or Architect of this great and Boundless Machine; A Mind infinitely Good and Wise....<sup>25</sup>

These two attributes of God, wisdom and goodness, are fundamental to the religion the Platonists professed.

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<sup>25</sup> Cudworth, E.I.M., p. 177.

When we discuss the final problem, that of man's freedom to be responsible, there is really but one distinction that must be made: that between morality and duty. Duty is yet another side of fatalism, which again is the negation of religion. It implies obedience to will, which can be mere arbitrary force. Will, to Cudworth, has validity only when governed by wisdom, and wisdom, we have seen, is one divine and immutable aspect of nature - is, in fact, the active goodness of God. Duty is merely acquiescence to the will of the commander; Cudworth believes, on the other hand, that

...this thing cannot be the product of the meer Will of the Commander, but it must proceed from something else; namely the Right or Authority of the Commander, which is founded in natural Justice and Equity, as an antecedent Obligation to Obedience in the Subjects;...And if this were not Morally Good and Just in its own Nature before any Positive Command of God, That God should be Obeyed by his Creatures, the bare will of God himself could not beget an Obligation upon any to Do what he Willed and Commanded, because the Natures of things do not depend upon Will, being not things that are arbitrarily Made, but things that Are.<sup>26</sup>

The belief that there are immutable, omnipresent qualities, "things that are", and that these qualities are knowable to man, places upon him the responsibility of choice, and makes reconciliation work on us, rather than upon God.

The work of Cudworth's which deals most fully with the

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<sup>26</sup> Cudworth, E. I. M., pp. 19-20.



positive aspects of freedom has never been published in full.<sup>27</sup> Passmore, who has gone to the manuscripts, finds three distinct kinds of freedom presented: a freedom identical with goodness (freedom); the capacity to choose this freedom (free-will); and the capacity for not exercising this capacity (privation). And although this subject is not directly treated in either The True Intellectual System or in the Treatise, yet from what we have seen so far, there would be ample opportunity to develop a theory of free-will along the lines Passmore indicates. We are given some indication of what attitude Cudworth would have defended had he completed his design for The True Intellectual System. The third book was to deal with this problem, and from the outline Cudworth offers of the argument he would have pursued, we have a good idea of what his feelings would be:

...That Necessity is not Intrinsecal to the Nature of Every thing, God and all Creatures, or Essentiall to all Action; but...That we have some Liberty, or Power over our own Actions: which is the Defence of a Distributive or Retributive Justice, dispensing Rewards and Punishments throughout the whole World.<sup>28</sup>

And even without the work itself, a belief in a good and wise God, and in the existence of immutable ideas intelligible

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<sup>27</sup> The manuscripts are in the British Museum, Add. mss. 4978-82. A Treatise on Free Will, drawn from the first of these and edited by John Allen, was published in London in 1838.

<sup>28</sup> Cudworth, T.I.S., Preface to the reader, sig. [R5<sup>r</sup>]. Italics reversed.



to man, coupled with an abhorrence of control by arbitrary will, or of atomic corporealism, necessitates at least an attempt to justify freedom in man.

The idea of freedom of action ran counter to two philosophies that were popular during the seventeenth century. Hobbism, which teaches that man should submit his will to that of the state, and Calvinism, which believes in the ordinances and arbitrary will of God controlling man's destiny, were disciplines Cudworth neither could nor would accept. Much has been written stating that Cudworth presented his two major treatises as refutations of these two systems, but this fact must be understood in its proper perspective, or Cudworth will be grossly misunderstood. He did not at any time openly attack either Calvinism or Hobbism, except in the most specific way. Cudworth, we are told,

...was impressed by the recurrence of certain patterns of philosophical controversy; he was not impressed by the claim of his contemporaries that they had shaken themselves free from tradition in order to embark upon an enterprise quite novel, in a manner untrammelled by the errors of the past. In an age which insisted above all upon originality, he insisted upon the continuity of tradition.<sup>29</sup>

This presents a different light on his criticism. It was not Hobbism that was attacked in The True Intellectual System, but rather atomic atheism, of which Hobbes' writings were the latest example. This is fully illustrated in Cudworth's

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<sup>29</sup> Passmore, p. 13.

presentation of the atheistic argument for civil authority in man's actions,<sup>30</sup> or in the more obvious mention of Hobbes in the Treatise, where he is described as "that late Writer of Ethicks and Politicks."<sup>31</sup> It is not so much an attack on Hobbes' philosophy that Cudworth had undertaken, but on that philosophy of which Hobbes was the latest proponent.

The case is not so clearly presentable when dealing with Cudworth's criticism of Calvinism. In the Treatise, for example, the reference to "divers Modern Theologers" who "zealously contend...That there is nothing Absolutely, Intrinsicly and Naturally Good and Evil,...but that the Arbitrary Will and Pleasure of God,...by its Commands and Prohibitions, is the first and only Rule and Measure thereof,"<sup>32</sup> is quite specific. Further, it is generally true that Cudworth's writings were anti-Calvinist; Passmore, for example, says "it was against Calvinism, not against Hobbism, that Cudworth was first led to assert the eternity and immutability of morality."<sup>33</sup> But again, it was the spirit of Calvinism that Cudworth was intent upon refuting. As Hobbism was but the latest manifestation of atomic corporealism, so Calvinism was the most recent doctrine involving an arbitrary

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<sup>30</sup> T.I.S., pp. 83ff.

<sup>31</sup> E.I.M., p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> Passmore, p. 11.

and external force over which man had no control. As with his criticism of Hobbism, so with Calvinism: it was refuted not so much as a system in itself, but rather as an example of a system which, in Cudworth's eyes, negated the value of morals and the basic premises of faith.

If Cudworth's attitude towards the fatalistic philosophies is obvious and negative, his reactions to the third great philosophic system of the seventeenth century are somewhat more complex. Cartesianism was first brought to Cambridge by John Smith, and was hailed by both Henry More and by Cudworth. But from the beginning, Cudworth held reservations about Descartes' works, and these grew until the Cartesian method was rejected.

In spirit, there are definite affinities between the beliefs of Descartes and Cudworth; this complicates the problem of understanding the relationships between the two men's works. Passmore feels there is a definite case to be made for Cartesian influence upon The True Intellectual System and the Treatise, stressing the fact that Descartes' work found acceptance at Cambridge:

That there was a welcome for 'the new philosophy' at Cambridge, as there was not at Oxford, is indisputable.<sup>34</sup>

Further, he cites (fairly) many parallels between the works

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<sup>34</sup> Passmore, p. 7.



of Cudworth and Descartes in aim, attitude, and images. But these parallelisms do no more than off-set the many times Cudworth mentions Descartes in a derogatory manner. This balance leads Passmore to make the following statement:

...Descartes was in the camp of the enemy, but no further. It is still not misleading to call Cudworth a Cartesian, so great was their agreement on so many vital issues.<sup>35</sup>

It is indisputable that there are affinities between the two philosophies. Nevertheless, I am convinced that if we begin to see the affinities between Cudworth's writings and Descartes' as the result of influence alone, we shall misinterpret the position Cudworth and the Platonists held. The numerous attacks upon Descartes found in The True Intellectual System and the Treatise indicate that although there were points held in common, and although the ends were in many ways equivalent, there was no slavish imitation of Descartes' doctrines, but rather a studied, informed, and objective understanding of it, ready to offer not only criticism, but reasoned and logical criticism, of them.

The disagreement centers around two major points. The first of these is the scepticism upon which Descartes founded his system. In the Treatise, Cudworth outlines his argument against this attitude:

...if we cannot otherwise possibly be certain

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<sup>35</sup> Passmore, p. 8.

of the Truth of any Thing, but only ex hypothesi, that our Faculties are rightly made, of which none can have any certain Assurance but only he that made them, then all Created Minds whatsoever must of Necessity be condemned to an Eternal Sceptis. Neither ought they ever to assert to any Thing as certainly True, since all their Truth and Knowledge as such, is but Relative to their Faculties Arbitrarily made, that may possibly be false, and their clearest constant Apprehensions nothing but perpetual Delusions.<sup>36</sup>

That this was meant to apply to Descartes is obvious: this entire section of the Treatise is designed to show the errors inherent in his system. Cudworth's complaint against Descartes is against the necessary acceptance of the arbitrary will of God:

AND this is plainly asserted by that ingenious Philosopher Renatus Des Cartes, who...writes thus: It is a Contradiction to say, that the Will of God was not from Eternity Indifferent to all things which are or ever shall be done; because no Good or Evil, nothing to be Believed or Done or Omitted, can be fixed upon, the Idea whereof was in the Divine Intellect before that his Will Determined it self to Effect that such a thing should be.<sup>37</sup>

It is not a new theory in Descartes that Cudworth is disagreeing with, then, but rather another aspect of an old atheism.

The second point of disagreement was with the static quality of Cartesianism dualism. The premises for the dualism of the two men were obviously the same: that there is

<sup>36</sup> Cudworth, E.I.M., p. 273.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

a distinct mind and body. But in the hands of Descartes, the system became inertial: body was extended matter, and all else was mental.

In Cartesianism the incorporeal is the mental, the mental is the conscious, the conscious is the immortal; dualism is a prop to theology as it cannot directly be in Cudworth's philosophy.<sup>38</sup>

As Cudworth saw it, there was no affective unity of the two worlds in the Cartesian dualism. In fact, there was no need for such a unity in Descartes' system; the only unity lay in the common inception of mathematical law. There were laws which governed nature (body, or material substance), as evidenced in analytic geometry; there must be equivalent laws which applied to man (mind, spirit, or thought). It was not a causal relationship, but a mathematical one, that Descartes was searching for.

This type of division was, of course, directly opposed to the end of Cudworth's religion, for "if the soul is prevented from affecting the corporeal world, then it has lost both substance and sense."<sup>39</sup> If good faith was founded upon a good life, then a good life was concomitant with good (moral) action. Descartes, in his Discourse, had not only removed God from a close association with His creation, but had also divorced man from his surroundings. This left man

<sup>38</sup> Passmore, p. 23.

<sup>39</sup> Cassirer, p. 144.



with a dual nature, with no single factor common to both parts. And this lack of integration, to Cudworth, smacked of static existence, and had "an Undiscerned Tang of the Mechanick Atheism"<sup>40</sup> about it.

Descartes, then, like Calvin and Hobbes, was attacked for separating what could be called the doctrine of man from the doctrine of God. Cudworth is still defending that belief in the indwelling spirit of Christ which he professed in the Sermon delivered over thirty years previously. In fact, if we look at Cudworth's reasons for writing, and the thought behind the writing, we shall find few changes during the thirty years separating the Sermon and The True Intellectual System. The Platonism, the humanism, and the particular type of Christianity still stand out as the fundamental beliefs behind the ideas expressed.

The most obvious of these three ideas is humanism; there is no single page in the later writings of Cudworth that is devoid of some reference to classical precedent or authority. Indeed, the greater part of the fourth chapter of The True Intellectual System, which comprises two-thirds of that work, is a lengthy humanist study. Regardless of the meaning or the outcome of this desire to quote antiquity (and we shall discuss these aspects shortly), the fact

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<sup>40</sup> Cudworth, T.I.S., p. 134 (numbered incorrectly as p. 146).

itself must stand out as the most obvious characteristic of Cudworth's later works.

The role religion plays can also not be overlooked, even by the most secular reader; Passmore, who explicitly states he is going to ignore the influence of religion on Cudworth, can only do so by ignoring one of the three pre-suppositions fundamental to the argument of The True Intellectual System.<sup>41</sup> The position Cudworth's faith occupies in his system has been fully emphasized, however, and need not be reiterated at this point.

As is always the case with Cudworth, religion and humanism are linked with a close, and sometimes individual use of Platonism. Indeed, the spirit of Platonism found in the later works remains largely untouched by any critic. Even Cassirer, whose study deals most adequately with the Platonic tenets professed by the Cambridge group, has been able to do little more than indicate the nature of Renaissance Platonism as it appeared in England, and show in the briefest of manners how the Cambridge School fitted in. This is an understandable limitation; the task would be monumental, and the gains slight. So great is the incidence of Platonism, that rather than say the works contain Platonic elements, we could better say they are a restatement

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<sup>41</sup> see Passmore, p. 15; cf. Cudworth, T.I.S., sig. [A4<sup>r</sup>].

of Renaissance Platonism.

There are two aspects of Platonism found in Cudworth's works. The first is that of Plato himself: whether used as an objective authority or for subjective interpretation, there are distinct elements of Plato's thought throughout the later works. One critic has even described The True Intellectual System as a work in which Cudworth is "playing Plato to Hobbes's Protagoras."<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the same closely reasoned, methodically subtle changes of argument which are found in the Platonic dialogues are fully apparent in both The True Intellectual System and the Treatise. But beyond the presence of this most pervading element of Platonism, there is also the continued use of that phrase which recurs more than any other: "as Plato saith [or "phraseth"] it...". Add to this the use of statements by neo-Platonists such as Plotinus, Proclus, Ficino, and others, and some indication of the debt Cudworth owes to his intellectual antecedents becomes overwhelmingly apparent. Nor does such extended use bother Cudworth; this is but his acknowledgement of his heritage.

Plato is used in other ways too, of course. There is one section of The True Intellectual System where Cudworth defends Plato as a theologian, and discusses the similarities of Platonist and Christian belief.<sup>43</sup> This is not to say that

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<sup>42</sup> see Passmore, p. 14.

<sup>43</sup> see T.I.S., pp. 206ff (numbered incorrectly as pp. 216ff).



Cudworth saw either Plato or any of the Classical writers as Christians, for this is definitely not the case. He merely felt that any man who would venture to leave the sense-cave could and would be led to a realization of the existence of the God the Christian faith professes. This is but a reiteration of that principle Cudworth presents in his Sermon, which reads:

This is the Covenant, saith the Lord, that I will make with them in those dayes; I will put my Law into their inward parts, and write it in their hearts, and then I will be their God, and they shall be my people: they shall be all Kings and Priests unto me.<sup>44</sup>

It is the desire to show the true divinity of Christianity, by showing its appearance before Christ and his gospel, the desire to show that the good life is of God, and has God's blessing, that leads Cudworth to this point. It was the same desire that led him to state:

I perswade my self, that no man shall ever be kept out of heaven, for not comprehending mysteries that were beyond the reach of his shallow understanding; if he had but an honest and good heart, that was ready to comply with Christs Commandments.<sup>45</sup>

Still, it should not be thought that there was a total and uncritical acceptance of Plato's doctrines, for this is not the case. Certainly, there are passages where Plato is used as an authority for the simple and rather

<sup>44</sup> Cudworth, Sermon, p. 32. Italics reversed.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 14. Italics mine.

invalid reason that he is Plato. But at points of disagreement, Cudworth does not hesitate to state his rejection of Plato's decisions. As in his use of Descartes, Cudworth has given a great deal of thought to the works of his spiritual mentor, and his honesty will not allow him, within the limits of his own religious consciousness, to bow to Plato in facts obviously antagonistic to his design.

A discussion of the second aspect of Platonism is somewhat more difficult. It is definitely drawn from the more nebulous tradition of religious Platonism, and as such has neither the purity nor the simplicity of Plato's teachings. Rather, it draws upon that curious mixture of Plato, Aristotle, and the post-Classical Greek writers, all transformed, through fifteen centuries of study, contemplation, and translation, to form what is now called the neo-Platonic tradition. It is virtually impossible, therefore, to state specifically from where Cudworth drew many of his ideas, or to indicate his exact indebtedness.

As is indicated in nearly all studies of the Cambridge group, the doctrine of Platonic Love plays an important role in, and rests at the foundation of, their faith. This is, with few exceptions, an implicit influence; so thoroughly has the tradition of Eros (particularly as presented by Ficino) as a vital force been incorporated into their own, it is now difficult to find explicit examples of the traditional forces

as such. There is one excellent example found in Cudworth's Sermon, however, and another is present in The True Intellectual System, centering around the discussion Cudworth offers of "Plastick Nature."

Plastic nature, we remember, is the unconscious executor of Divine wisdom; it is that force which enacts God's will in the corporeal world. There is, of course, a sentient counterpart to the plastic nature in the figure of Christ, for the idea of infusion of a spirit or force of God in nature finds an obvious parallel in the idea of the spirit of Christ within man. This latter topic was the subject both of the Sermon (in the discussion of the "self-moving principle") and of the Treatise (with the idea of "passive perception"); both attempted to reassert the presence of God in the mind of man.

This idea is not new; Edwin Hatch clearly shows that an amazingly similar belief grew out of a fusion of the Stoic Logos and the Platonic Eros:

In Stoicism, there was the theory of the one Law or Logos expressing itself in an infinite variety of material forms: in Platonism, there was the theory of the one God, shaping matter according to an infinite variety of patterns. In the one, the processes of nature were the operations of active forces, ...each of them a portion of the one Logos which runs through the whole. In the other, they were the operations of the infinitely various and eternally active energy of God, moving always in the direction of His thoughts.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Hatch, Greek Ideas, p. 180.



According to Hatch, Philo the Jew was the first writer to synthesize these two distinct systems:

It is at this point that the writings of Philo become of special importance. They gather together, without fusing into a symmetrical system, the two dominant theories of the past, and they contain the seeds of nearly all that afterwards grew up on Christian soil. ...God is mind. From Him, as from a fountain, proceed all forms of mind and reason. Reason, whether unconscious in the form of natural law, or conscious in the form of human thought, is like a river that flows forth from Him...<sup>47</sup>

There is a marked similarity between the idea of reason as being unconscious "in the form of natural law" and Cudworth's "Plastick Nature," which is "Reason Immersed and Plunged into Matter,"<sup>48</sup> as there is between conscious reason "in the form of human thought" and Cudworth's belief that:

It is all one to affirm, that there are Eternal Rationes...necessarily existing, and to say that there is an Infinite, Omnipotent and Eternal Mind, necessarily existing,...and all Particular created Intellects are but Derivative Participations of it...<sup>49</sup>

I am not attempting to show that Cudworth drew from these early sources alone; Cassirer has shown,<sup>50</sup> and any reader of The True Intellectual System or the Treatise must be aware, that Cudworth's sphere of knowledge was much wider than an

<sup>47</sup> Hatch, pp. 182-3. Italics mine.

<sup>48</sup> Cudworth, T.I.S., p. 145 (numbered incorrectly as p. 155). Italics reversed.

<sup>49</sup> Cudworth, E.I.M., p. 251.

<sup>50</sup> see Cassirer, Platonic Renaissance, pp. 86ff.

awareness of the Classical philosophers alone. What I am trying to point out is that the Christian religion and post-Classical Greek philosophy were united in a system which rests at the base of the Christian gospel, and that Cudworth attempted to further and explicate this unity. Indeed, one critic is led to make the following statement, which for all its exaggeration, indicates how large a role the ancient philosophies play in Cudworth's religion:

It is not too much to say that what particularly attracted him in Christianity was the Platonism in it, but, of course, he did not know that there is Platonism in Christianity.<sup>51</sup>

Cudworth attempted to forward the relation he sensed between the two systems. That his goal - to use the similarities between the two traditions to prove the universality of Christianity - was misplaced is not so much a limitation of his intellect as of his times. The fact that he probed these similarities unites him to the tradition he intuited and revitalizes the primitive faith he desired.

The bases for his faith remained constant throughout his life; there is little variation to be found between the ideas found in The True Intellectual System or the Treatise and those expressed in the Sermon. When Cudworth writes that

...the Criterion of true Knowledge is not to be looked for any where Abroad without our own Minds, neither in the Height above, nor in the Depth beneath, but only in our Knowledge and

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<sup>51</sup> Passmore, p. 85.

Conceptions themselves,<sup>52</sup>

he is asserting his conviction of the existence of "the candle of the Lord" in man. Nor did the irenic qualities of his faith change; certain of the importance of the good life in a life of faith, Cudworth felt that salvation was the reward of any man whose life was an adventure in goodness. Nature too continues to play an important role, for to Cudworth, nature in the normal sense is God's participation in the government of the world, and in the widest sense, is man's participation in God's eternity.

That particular and distinctive quality found in Cudworth's early work, which we termed an individual and deliberate widening of the Platonism of Whichcote, is still present in the later works; indeed, it is more apparent in The True Intellectual System and the Treatise than it is in the Sermon. Cudworth's awareness is greater, and this is reflected in his writing. The question of how man lives a good Christian life has become a question of the responsibility of a good life. The belief Cudworth held in the truth of Christianity had not changed, its validity had merely been expanded. It is this expansive quality which marks the difference between the works of his youth, and those of his maturity.

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<sup>52</sup> Cudworth, E.I.M., p. 272.



## RALPH CUDWORTH: AN EVALUATION

It is important, when attempting an evaluation of Cudworth, to keep in mind the times in which he lived and wrote. His writings spanned more than the thirty-seven years between his first publication and his last; they spanned a world. Between the year he was called to preach before the House of Commons, and 1678, when his True Intellectual System was finally made available to the reading public, lies the birth of a new world attitude.

The Sermon before the "House" was delivered to a receptive audience. It was written and presented in 1647, shortly after the end of the first Civil War. That struggle had been largely political, but the role religion played both in the struggle itself and in the establishment of parliamentary power and control cannot be over-emphasized:

In the Puritan revolution the religious problem may not have been - was not, in fact - more important than the civil, but in itself it was certainly the more difficult of solution, and it so combined with the civil problem as to render it, too, well-nigh insoluble.<sup>1</sup>

Cudworth, called before the "House" by invitation on "a day of Publick Humiliation,"<sup>2</sup> and aware of the tension in his

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<sup>1</sup> Woodhouse, Puritanism and Liberty, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Imprimatur for Cudworth's Sermon, sig. [M2<sup>r</sup>].

audience, nevertheless had merely to perform his function of a minister of God's word. That he fulfilled this function admirably, deriding the sectarianism and the misguided zeal of the attending Parties, and calling upon them to live in Christian charity, is outside the present point. The facts worth noting about this encounter are the following: first, that Cudworth had been summoned to preach, that the audience had, in a sense, come to him; secondly, that he was performing a task in his own field of endeavour; and thirdly, that the subject - religion - was a common bond between him and his listeners. The points of difference between Cudworth and the members of the "Commons" are secondary to the common bond of religious faith that drew them together.

With The True Intellectual System, and to a certain degree, with the Treatise (which we shall return to later), the situation was quite different. Here, Cudworth's abilities as a preacher and lecturer would not aid him; his audience was, we might say, unknown to him. If indeed an audience existed for The True Intellectual System, it was an audience vastly different from the one which heard the sermon: an audience with wide-ranging interests, who had returned with relief to the monarchy they had so violently rejected twenty years earlier; who were relaxing after the religious exorcism of the Protectorate; who were rapidly becoming educated, and were therefore more interested in

the affairs of state and the things of this world. There was a new, forward-looking attitude prevailing, particularly in the natural sciences. Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes: these men, and the systems they presented, were the foundations of the new awareness. The True Intellectual System, a long and weighty consideration of the intransigence of atheism and moral existence, was divorced from the interests of the people for whom it was intended, and held little meaning for them.

Cudworth had not substantially changed; we have seen that the dominant theme of all his works remains the same. But his audience's interests had altered considerably; there was no longer present the tie which had bound Cudworth and the audience of the Sermon together. This meant that Cudworth had to approach his reader, rather than being called by him. As we look more closely at his works, we shall see that, either through ignorance or oversight, Cudworth was neither aware of this fact, nor equal to the task.

Much of the reason for the lack of interest in Cudworth's later writing stems from his prose style. Sir Francis Bacon had argued, as early as 1605, that:

...the admiration of ancient authors, the hate of the schoolmen, the exact study of languages, and the efficacy of preaching, did bring in an affectionate study of eloquence and copie of speech, which then began to flourish.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis (Oxford World Classic, London, 1906), p. 29.



This could be a description of Cudworth's writings. But Bacon immediately adds to this statement the following:

This grew speedily to an excess; for men began to hunt more after words than matter; more after the choiceness of phrase, and the round and clean composition of the sentence, the sweet falling of the clauses, and the varying and illustration of their works with tropes and figures, than after the weight of matter, worth of subject, soundness of argument, life of invention, or depth of judgement.<sup>4</sup>

In particulars, this quotation does not apply to Cudworth, but the two general criticisms indicated by it definitely do. First, Bacon is censuring writers in the humanist tradition; not for a misuse of style, as it might first seem, but rather for a misapprehension of the value of good prose style. Secondly, if we study the statement in its full context, we see that Bacon is drawing a distinction, as James R. Sutherland points out in his excellent book On English Prose,<sup>5</sup> between prose for edification and prose for persuasion.

The Sermon before the "House" is a good example of persuasive prose. Cudworth presents his case forcefully and lucidly; there is never any question of his intentions or feelings. At the same time, it is interesting to note that Cudworth's Sermon makes use of three of the four techniques mentioned in the first passage quoted above from Bacon.

<sup>4</sup> Advancement of Learning. p. 29

<sup>5</sup> (Toronto, 1957), p. 78.

But in The True Intellectual System, and to a lesser extent, in the Treatise, Cudworth turns in upon himself - gets so lost in his knowledge that his topic is at times completely submerged. Further, the change in readers' tastes and interests had been largely ignored by Cudworth. The result was, of course, failure; his magnum opus was lost in public indifference.

The case revolves around what might be called "topic consciousness." Cudworth's academic and religious training had more than prepared him for the size and type of topic a sermon encompasses. Indeed, the Sermon before the "House" is magnificent. W. F. Mitchell, in his admirable study of the seventeenth century sermon, praises Cudworth's work highly:

The sermon before 'the House,'...is not only remarkable for the enlightenment of the positions advanced, but for the sustained beauty and mobility of its expression.<sup>6</sup>

Cudworth proves in this work that he has taken his rhetorical training so much to heart that he is able to transcend the strictures of the "formula" sermon, the standard of many of his contemporaries. There is little comparison to be made, for instance, between this sermon and those of either Whichcote, who is still regarded as the greatest of the Platonist

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<sup>6</sup> W. F. Mitchell, English Pulpit Oratory from Andrewes to Tillotson (London, 1932), p. 296.

preachers,<sup>7</sup> or of John Tillotson, whose sermons were used as standard texts by later divines. In the works of these latter two authors, the sense of "formula" is always discernable, apparent particularly in the almost scientific approach found in the plan and (we assume) in the delivery. But in Cudworth, there is the distinct feeling that the author is speaking from his heart in Christian zeal, rather than from his notes in rhetorical elegance.

Still, the work follows the "rules" of sermon composition; there is no lack of mechanical skill beneath its surface. The standard rhetorical divisions are apparent,<sup>8</sup> but the artificial flavour is lost in the flow of Cudworth's pen and mind. His use of antithesis is striking, whether in the simplest or most complex form;<sup>9</sup> his ability to visualize his argument is highly commendable.<sup>10</sup> His control over his audience is marked; he works with them to create the effect he desires.<sup>11</sup> He never loses control, either of himself, his

<sup>7</sup> In the Preface to Select Sermons of Dr. Whichcot: in Two Parts (Edinburgh, 1742 [Xerox reprod., Univ. of Michigan, 1966]), W. Wishart says (p. iii):

Their Excellency I have had a very great Opinion of, since the first time I had the Happiness to meet with them; and have been much confirmed in it, by the Judgment of some of the best and most understanding Men I ever conversed with.

<sup>8</sup> see Mitchell, p. 95.

<sup>9</sup> see Cudworth, Sermon, pp. 76 and 40 respectively.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 70.



audience, or his topic.

What Cudworth is doing, in fact, is showing his mastery of the prose of persuasion. The sermon, the religious emblem of the Renaissance, was the natural outgrowth of both the religious and secular belief in the individual; in the protestant countries its force was directed at winning converts as much as saving souls. This was so in England more than in any other country; both Haller and Woodhouse mention the distinctive use of the sermon for political as well as religious indoctrination. To this end, rhetoric was the obvious tool, and Cudworth used it so well in his sermon, that those he attacked and criticized commanded that the work be sent to the printer.

There was no device fundamental to the writing of the more scientific and expository prose which corresponded to rhetoric in persuasive writing. It is true that certain standards had been proposed; both Bacon and Bishop Sprat, the historian of the Royal Society, presented their ideas of a prose style which would express "facts" in a clear and comprehensible manner.<sup>12</sup> But in The True Intellectual System, Cudworth exhibits no awareness of these new attitudes, and

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<sup>12</sup> see Sutherland, p. 56. Cf. especially Sprat's The History of the Royal Society (London, 1667 [facsimile reprod., ed. by J. Cope and H. Jones; Washington Univ., 1959]), Book II, section 20, for an excellent presentation of prevailing attitudes to pre-Restoration prose writings.

although it could be argued that because his subject was not so much a presentation as a defense or apology, there was therefore no reason for Cudworth to adopt such a style; still, in not doing so, there is every indication that he was either unaware of or had no interest in both the new standards in prose style and in the new attitudes of his readers towards prose content.

The word most apt to describe the prose style of The True Intellectual System is "humanist", though no word can adequately contain the variety to be found in a work of nine hundred pages. Yet a reader can neither undervalue nor ignore this aspect of the work. On any given page, there is a considered use of at least one Classical authority. A personal random choice, for example, disclosed the following: mention of Anaximander, Anaximenes (twice), Democritus, Augustine, Plato (twice), Cicero, and Ficino.<sup>13</sup> Nor is this citation mere stylistic fancy; Cudworth's style is not embellished thoughtlessly, but is rather studiously exhaustive. He was a scholar of the most meticulous sort, attempting to overlook nothing. On that same page, for instance, are found references to different editions of texts used, and a number of quotations from the Classical writers, translated into English directly beneath. In its own limited way, this type of scholarship lends a certain authority to

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<sup>13</sup> see T.I.S., p. 232 (numbered incorrectly as p. 242).

the work, for it enhances the image of the author's concern for exactness. Yet this was not the main reason why Cudworth included such documentation.

This weightiness, this excessive citation and documentation, was not meant to overwhelm the reader, but rather was intended for cross-reference to sources and parallel texts. The work was meant for scholarly study, as it would receive from the hands of such a man as Whichcote, who tells us: "I have not read manie bookes; but I have studyed a few..."<sup>14</sup> Were a person to read the work in this manner, he would undoubtedly gain tremendously from it. But this manner of reading was no longer in vogue:

...[Cudworth's] work fell almost still-born from the press. The few who pretended to read it, turned away contemptuous or hostile.<sup>15</sup>

For all its exhaustive qualities, the aspects of citation and documentation found in The True Intellectual System had become a definite burden to the reader. It was the third dominant characteristic of the style - the discursiveness and involution - that was the dominant reason for the reaction to the work. Cudworth becomes involved, and in places overwhelmed, with the minutiae of his sources, and finds himself struggling to return to the major point he is attempting. Sutherland's comments concerning another author readily

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<sup>14</sup> Whichcote, "Eight Letters", p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> Powicke, p. 115.



apply to Cudworth: "it is not the pressure of the thought that has become intolerable, but his inability to shape and order his material."<sup>16</sup>

There is every indication that this style was not Cudworth's natural one. This is borne out by an examination of his Treatise, which, as I mentioned earlier, was published posthumously from manuscripts in his grandson's possession. The work is considered to be the first manuscript copy of the second part of The True Intellectual System. Yet in the Treatise, the major thesis is not submerged by what are, properly considered, addenda. The difference this makes is astounding. The argument remains apparent, the movement of the work is smooth, and as a result the reader comes from it refreshed, rather than stifled. For the most part, this vitality arises solely from the different attitude towards the use of secondary sources. This indicates that the extensive Classical documentation was a formal, rather than a natural, inclination; something added to, rather than intrinsic to a thought sequence. Only two conclusions can be drawn from this. Cudworth either flaunted his learning in The True Intellectual System, or he felt that his works were incomplete without full and precise documentation.

It is interesting to note that even in the later,

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<sup>16</sup> Sutherland, p. 7.

more philosophical works, Cudworth has not left his rhetorical training behind him. His style, when viewed apart from his digressions, is remarkably similar to that found in the Sermon. And indeed, this similarity is not limited to style alone, but extends to the delineation of the ideas themselves. This is particularly apparent in the Treatise. The first chapters deal with a close consideration of a specific fact. This is followed by a discussion, first of the negative, and then the positive aspects of the statement under consideration. These two aspects are balanced one against the other until a conclusion is reached: the effect or meaning of that conclusion can then be discussed. And although the flow of The True Intellectual System is worried by lengthy digressions, this same pattern is found.

The close similarity between this stylistic outline and the systematic rhetorical design used in seventeenth century preaching is quite apparent;<sup>17</sup> there is even some support for Cudworth's classical amplifications. He has taken advantage of his skill with the sermon form, by expanding it to encompass the arguments of the later works. This tends to lay stress upon background and associated meaning, rather than upon speculation and formulation; it works only with the presented facts, rather than any deductions which they may point towards. But this limitation would not have concerned

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<sup>17</sup> see Mitchell, p. 95.

Cudworth, who "insisted upon the continuity of tradition."<sup>18</sup>

That this system has its merits is beyond question. It offers a logical sequence for development of a theme, and the Treatise, as we have pointed out, owes much of its excellence to its rhythm and flow. This vital quality is only possible when a solid outline or base underlies the work itself, and the rhetorical tradition had been proven over twenty centuries of use. But when this outline is subordinated to or distorted by a bulk of humanist documentation, as is the case with The True Intellectual System, then its usefulness is seriously blunted, and the order and precision of the plan is lost. And because the Treatise cannot be considered as a presentation of Cudworth's later style, but rather as an extensive plan for development, he must be judged according to the style of The True Intellectual System.

That style does not compare favourably with any contemporary prose writing.<sup>19</sup> Even compared with works written almost half a century earlier, Cudworth does not fare well. A comparison with Milton's Areopagitica, for instance, written thirty-four years before The True Intellectual System, shows the latter work in an unfavourable light. Areopagitica.

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<sup>18</sup> Passmore, p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> I am speaking here only of the later style; the Sermon, as I mentioned, compares favourably with any sermon written at this time.



itself a difficult work, is better stylistically; the use of diction and stylistic conventions, of emphasis and authorial opinion, attracts and holds the reader to the argument, while Cudworth's studied objectivity and impersonality add only deadness and weight to the work, causing the reader's interest to flag.

Nor is the case different if we compare Cudworth and Sir Thomas Browne. The Religio Medici, written about 1635, has the force and clarity found in the Serson, but it far outstrips The True Intellectual System. And the closer we approach 1678, the more marked the separation between Cudworth's prose and that of other authors becomes. By 1678, Dryden had been Poet Laureate for eight years, and his prose as much as his poetry set the standards of good style. The emphasis was upon clarity and wit, rather than upon weighty documentation. "Restoration prose is, in the main, a slightly formalized variation of the conversation of gentlemen;"<sup>20</sup> Cudworth's, on the other hand, was still enclosed in the scholar's study.

The only writers with whom Cudworth compares well are his fellow Platonists. John Smith, author of Select Discourses, has a style similar to Cudworth at his best. Henry More, in certain of his writings, has much the same manner of expression

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<sup>20</sup> Sutherland, p. 67

as his mentor.<sup>21</sup> But More's writings, like those of Cudworth, are "often obscure, burdened with the strange, confused, and uncritical learning of his time."<sup>22</sup> The similarities between these writers indicates that the defect in Cudworth's writing style was not an individual one, but rather one that pervaded all the Cambridge group. Even Whichcote was criticized; Tuckney, in his second letter, spoke of the cloudiness and obscurity of his lectures and sermons, brought about from his study of "Philosophie and Metaphysicks".<sup>23</sup> Again, this points out that defect we first noted in Cudworth: the excessive use of Classical authority, which obscures and confuses the main thoughts, and causes the reader to turn away.

The difficulties with the style of Cudworth's writings should not turn us from the amount of knowledge contained in them, however. In both The True Intellectual System and the Treatise, he displays an acquaintance with much more than ancient philosophy, and an interest that encompasses much more than Christian theology. In his discussion of the contemporary philosophers alone, he shows a critical insight which indicates a considered study and highly developed awareness of the current trends in northern European thought.

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. particularly Antidote Against Atheism and The Immortality of the Soul.

<sup>22</sup> F. I. MacKinnon, Philosophical Writings of Henry More (New York, 1925), p. iii.

<sup>23</sup> Tuckney, "Eight Letters", p. 36.

His discussion of and reference to seventeenth century scientific thought further indicates his involvement in the speculations of his own time; his use of mechanism in the Treatise - even his description of the hypothetical experiment he creates - echoes the aims and interests of the Royal Society,<sup>24</sup> of which he was a member; and the passages in which he deals with the psychological attitudes of his age show but another aspect of his knowledge.

E. A. Burtt says of Cudworth that he is "a thinker essentially conservative and failing to share the dominant interests of the main current of his day, [though] certain of its significant results had taken firm root,"<sup>25</sup> but this is true in only the most limited sense. Burtt indicates that Cudworth's work was merely derivative, and while it is true that Cudworth's interests were not positive in the sense that he forwarded the knowledge of the subject he dealt with, he

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<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that the aim of the Royal Society was to gain not so much scientific, as practical, knowledge. Sprat tells us (p. 134) that the aim of the Society was to "indeavour by solid Experiments either to reform or improve Philosophy. ... [They are] to be employed for the promoting of the knowledge of natural things, and useful Arts..." Cudworth's writings reflect two interests of this group: first, the interest in "scientific" prose; secondly, their interest in clock mechanisms. Almost one-fifth of their mechanical inventions (7 of 41) involved either clockwork or the pendulum principle. Cudworth, in presenting his "watch" experiment (E.I.M., pp. 150ff.), drew upon both of these factors.

<sup>25</sup> E. A. Burtt, Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science (London, 1950), p. 142.



offered a new fullness and richness to the tradition he adhered to. Cudworth was not interested merely in the empirical attitudes which dominated England, nor in what he calls the "physiology" of life or thought, the study of nature for its own sake; nor in the dissemination of spiritism, or the belief in phantasms; though he was a member of the Royal Society, an atomist, and was not averse to using Cabbalistic writings in his own.<sup>26</sup> All such studies, however, held interest for him only insofar as they could either explain or exemplify the force of God and the validity of religion in the world.

Nowhere is Cudworth's attitude more apparent than in his "watch" experiment, in which "some Ingenious Piece of Mechanism, or Artificial Automaton; as for Example, an Horologe or Watch,"<sup>27</sup> is viewed by

...these three Things together: First, a Mirror, Looking-glass or Crystal Globe; Secondly, a Living Eye, that is, a Seeing or Perceptive Mirror or looking-glass; Thirdly, a Mind or Intellect Superadded to this Living Eye or Seeing Mirror.<sup>28</sup>

In creating this experiment, Cudworth has but one interest only. He is attempting to confirm the existence of an in-

<sup>26</sup> The exact extent of Cudworth's belief in the occult philosophies of his time is not known. Certainly, much of his interest is derived from Henry More, who was vitally interested in this field.

<sup>27</sup> Cudworth, E.I.M., p. 153.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

ternal activity in man, upon which to build the argument of the Treatise:

...be they what they will, Real or not Real, certain it is that they are the Objects of the Intellect, and they must of Necessity be raised in it by its own Innate Vigour and Activity.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, in his discussion of dreams,<sup>30</sup> Cudworth is not vitally interested in dream psychology, but only in the meaning such mental creations could have as a vital aspect of the soul. The same is true in his discussions of rainbows,<sup>31</sup> or of spectres and ghosts.<sup>32</sup> In whatever aspect, or from whatever quarter, Cudworth is interested in knowledge only as it affects, alters, or aids his beliefs.

This is but another example of the lack of real communication between Cudworth and his contemporaries, and it was an attitude which is also found in Henry More, the other member of the Cambridge school who was a fellow of the Royal Society. Neither man had the mind of a scientist, but rather that of a metaphysician. They were attempting to reunify the new science with the old faith. In fact, although they had a knowledge of scientific discoveries, they had no awareness of the scientific attitude. Cassirer sums up this

<sup>29</sup> Cudworth, E.I.M., p. 156

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 113ff.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 197. See also T.I.S., p. 9.

<sup>32</sup> T.I.S., p. 68

situation succinctly:

...they were not without scientific interests and knowledge....But all this knowledge remained to the last mere raw material, defective in intellectual mastery and penetration.<sup>33</sup>

Their greatest limitation was their inability to appreciate the meaning of the new science, and their desire to impose the restrictions of metaphysics upon the study of phenomena.

Yet for all the limitations of his writing, Cudworth nevertheless occupies an important place in the Cambridge Platonist movement. This has little to do with the influence he had upon the other members of the School: Benjamin Whichcote was obviously fixed in his beliefs while Cudworth was still an undergraduate;<sup>34</sup> John Smith, although he was Cudworth's pupil,<sup>35</sup> and although he dealt with the same topics in his Select Discourses as Cudworth did in his later works, had essentially religious, rather than philosophical interests. Like Whichcote, he was intent upon presenting his faith within a religious framework; he remained a student of Plotinus and Whichcote throughout his short life. Henry More, though he respected Cudworth highly, was

<sup>33</sup> Cassirer, p. 130.

<sup>34</sup> see Whichcote's first letter to Tuckney (p. 12): "I can shew you all these matters in a Position in EMANUEL college chappel, at Problemes made by me, fourteene yeares agoe,...which I wonder that those times shou'd beare, and not these."

<sup>35</sup> see Passmore, p. 15.



far from being a disciple, and indeed exerted a considerable amount of influence upon his senior.<sup>36</sup> Cudworth's importance lies in the distance his work carried him beyond the other Cambridge Platonists, into the world of non-religious justification. His aim was to unify philosophy and religion, that a new faith might unite man to God in reasonable reverence. To Cudworth, philosophical truth and divine reason meet in one; an awareness of this fact would, in his eyes, emancipate man from the strictures of dogmatic faith. Indeed, Cudworth has taken a doctrine of Ficino for his own:

'Religion and Philosophy are identical. For Philosophy consists in the study of truth and wisdom, and God alone is truth and wisdom, so that philosophy is but religion, and true religion is genuine philosophy. Religion, indeed, is common to all men, but its pure form is that revealed through Christ and the teachings of Christ is sufficient to a man in all circumstances.'<sup>37</sup>

To attempt such an objective, and to do so with the honesty and humility Cudworth displays, is a mark of nobility.

This is not meant to indicate that Cudworth was different from the others in the Cambridge School; the emphasis is upon individuality rather than difference. Indeed, the

<sup>36</sup> see Passmore, pp. 16ff.; especially the following passage (p. 18): "I do not think we do any grave injustice to More in regarding Cudworth as the leading systematic thinker among the Cambridge Platonists, but no doubt Cudworth learnt a great deal from his more volatile contemporary..."

<sup>37</sup> quoted in Powicke, p. 13.

aim of this paper has been to indicate that although their basic beliefs are to be found in the teachings of Whichcote, and are derived from the influence he had over the others, each of them remained an individual, altering, defining, and re-emphasizing those basic tenets according to his individual dictates of conscience and interest. Cudworth, in his desire to vindicate religion through philosophy, added to the movement we now call Cambridge Platonism an aspect which it would otherwise have lacked in such a systematic form. His importance to the Cambridge School rests in this fact.

Contemporary reactions to Cudworth's later writings were, we have seen, unfavourable. This attitude was not born of considered study, but of disinterest; Powicke's description deserves repetition:

...his work fell almost still-born from the press. The few who pretended to read it, turned away contemptuous or hostile, and spread a report of it which disturbed a whole nest of hornets.<sup>38</sup>

This same attitude applied to the Cambridge Platonists as a group. The individuality of the group, coupled with their lack of communication with the people of England outside their Colleges, presented to their contemporaries a 'phantom sect' of which, like the reports on The True Intellectual System, largely derived from guesswork, there was little known and much said.

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<sup>38</sup> Powicke, p. 115.



A letter written at Oxford in 1662 illustrates this fact well, for it demonstrates both the ignorance of and the statements being made about the Platonists at that time. In asking who the Platonists are, the writer of the letter offers the following observation:

...I find the chief discourse to be about a certain Sect of men called Latitude-men: but though the name be in every mans mouth, yet the explicit meaning of it, or the heresy which they hold, or the individual persons that are of it, are as unknown (for ought I can learn) as the order of Rosy-crucians. ...To say the truth, I can meet with nothing distinct concerning them, but that they had their rise at Cambridge...<sup>39</sup>

Yet regardless of the lack of positive knowledge about them, there are definite opinions concerning what they represent:

One the one side I hear them represented as a party very dangerous both to the King and Church, as seeking to undermine them both: on the other side, .../[that they] are followers for the most part, of the new Philosophy, wherewith they have so poysoned that Fountain, that there are like to issue out very unwholesome streams throughout the whole Kingdome.<sup>40</sup>

Patrick, in his answer to the above letter, discusses the Platonists in some detail. He explains who the "Latitude-

<sup>39</sup> "For my worthy Friend Mr. S. P. at Cambridge", included in S[imon] P[atrick], A Brief Account of the New Sect of Latitude-men (London, 1662 [facsimile edition, Augustan Reprint Society, 1963]), sig. A2<sup>r</sup>. Italics reversed. It is difficult to say exactly who is included with the "Latitude-men". In many places, Patrick indicates that these men are of the past (see p. 5). Nevertheless, it is certain that the term as he used it encompassed the Platonists.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., sig. A2<sup>r</sup>. Italics reversed.



men" are in the following manner:

...the greatest part of the men that seem to be pointed at under that name, are such, whose fortune it was to be born so late, as to have their education in the University, since the beginning of the unhappy troubles of this Kingdom;

adding that

...they are such as are behind none of their neighbours either in Learning or good manners...<sup>41</sup>

He then defends them against the charges listed above, presenting a list of their beliefs and tendencies:

Our Latitudinarians therefore are by all means for a Liturgy, and do preferre that of our own Church before all others,...As for the Rites and Ceremonies of Divine worship, they do highly approve that vertuous mediocrity which our Church observes....They are very conversant in all the genuine Monuments of the ancient Fathers, those especially of the first and purest ages, ...that they may discern between the modern corruptions, and ancient simplicity of the Church...<sup>42</sup>

It is clear, then, that those few men that did know of the Platonists and of their beliefs were impressed by them.

The religious attitudes of the Platonists, those attitudes which impressed Patrick, were to become the basis of the Anglican faith in England. The divines we now call the "Latitudinarians", contemporaries of the Cambridge scholars, and educated by them, were soon the most popular and widely heard preachers in England. Not that this later group upheld the standards of the Platonists; in the Latitudinarians'

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<sup>41</sup> Patrick, A Brief Account, p. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 7-9.

hands, the scholarly qualities were replaced by a social awareness, and the ideals we have seen as characteristic of the Cambridge group degenerated accordingly. Reason became reasonableness or common sense; Platonism was replaced by Cartesianism; nature became natural stability.<sup>43</sup> In this new form, the religion of the Platonists was presented to the public: it proved to be the dominant faith in England in the coming century.

More than the purely religious aspects of Platonism were influential in the following years. The particular qualities of their Platonism and their scientific attitude had their effect across the following three centuries. Locke, Shaftesbury, and Coleridge in philosophy; Swift, Emerson, and Yeats in literature; all were touched by, and in their own way influenced by, the writings of the Cambridge School, and by Cudworth in particular. Locke, who heard Whichcote preach at Cambridge, and who spent the last years of his life in the home of Cudworth's daughter, shows certain similarities with the Platonist in his work. Yet the influence is impossible to determine, for although there are "striking identities of doctrine between Locke and Cudworth,"<sup>44</sup> their starting points are vastly different. That Emerson rated Cudworth's writings directly below those of Milton,

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<sup>43</sup> For a good discussion of the differences, see Cragg, pp. 61ff.

<sup>44</sup> Passmore, p. 31.

Shakespeare, and Spenser, a very respectable position, indicates how highly he was regarded by the father of American Transcendentalism. And Swift, through the influence of Sir William Temple, who studied under Cudworth at Emmanuel for two years, shows in his writing an attitude towards scholastic philosophy that was the same as that which Cudworth held himself.

But to say that because these men had studied Cudworth, and because they show traces of that philosophy Cudworth presented in his writings, they must therefore have been influenced by him, is both to misunderstand the real importance of Cudworth's position outside the Cambridge group, and to deny the vitality of the belief he held. Cudworth was a neo-Platonist, and added to that tradition, but to think of him as the only or the leading English Platonist is absurd. It is not the influence Cudworth had upon other writers, but the influence he had upon the tradition of Platonism in England, that is most important.



## CONCLUSION

Ernst Cassirer, at one point in his study of the Platonists, makes the following statement:

Considered with respect to their position in seventeenth-century thought, the Cambridge philosophers stand out as typically 'unmodern' thinkers. But, whereas in the one case they are ahead of their age, in the other they remain behind it. In their position towards the conflict between faith and knowledge, and between reason and dogma, the essential feature of the eighteenth century, of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, becomes manifest. ...In their doctrine of nature, however, Cudworth and More proceed in the opposite direction.<sup>1</sup>

Here, in a clear and succinct form, is a popular evaluation of the Cambridge School, an evaluation which for the most part is true. These men stretch both into the past and towards the future; Janus-like, they contain within them both an end and a beginning. They stand at the end of a respected tradition in world thought, that last school that perhaps could hold the views they did; yet they are fully aware of, and consciously try to maintain contact with, the world system being born around them. The final triumph of science was conceived during their lives. The writings of Bacon, Descartes, even of Hobbes; the studies of Copernicus and Galileo, of Boyle and Harvey; these are the works associated with the scientific

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<sup>1</sup> Cassirer, p. 132.

spirit. And whatever the authors of those works wished or professed to the contrary, that spirit held no place for religion; the separation of science and faith was both necessary and total.<sup>2</sup>

The position of the Platonists with respect to the scientific revolution was an ambiguous one. Cudworth and More, both members of the Royal Society, were enthusiastic about its coming, yet their writings show little of the spirit of the scientific attitude. Like the scientists, however, the Platonists too were confined by a system. In their case it was a tradition which, though not anti-scientific, was definitely non-scientific: it was a system of metaphysics. But the dominion of metaphysical speculation had passed, almost imperceptably, and with it, the world of the Cambridge writers.

Yet if the system of the Cambridge Platonists had been stripped of its power by the boistrous youth of scientific discovery, its vitality still remained. Platonism could lift the spirit of man, as science could raise his situation; it could cast out the spectre of the soul's damnation, as science could rid the body of the disease of darkness. And for this reason, we can say that although their system

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<sup>2</sup> The difference between the Inquisition's treatment of Galileo and the treatment of Hobbes by Cudworth is, in the final analysis, one of degree alone.

was out-dated and dying, their spirit was not.

Wherever, from the author of the Fourth Gospel to St. Augustine, from St. Augustine to Thomas Aquinas and from Aquinas to Dean Inge, the spirit of Christian theology has been really alive, it has tended to fall back upon Platonism.<sup>3</sup>

The religion of the Cambridge Platonists, and more specifically the spirit of their religion, was in direct opposition to the Calvinist and Puritan doctrines; the enlightenment it embodied brought to English protestant faith a new vitality. The tenets the Platonists held, of irenicism and nature, and most important, of reason, were the beliefs that the post-Restoration and eighteenth century theologians would hold as the essential elements of their faith. The stress upon man as a reasoning creature was congenial to the following age; in this area of man's thought, Cambridge Platonism, as surely as the natural sciences, pointed to the future.

What we have seen of Ralph Cudworth emphasizes this point. Cudworth was the conscience of knowledge; the question he asked had been asked before: "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Math. XVI, 26) To Cudworth, all knowledge was self-knowledge; when man's mind negated his soul, it negated his reason, and the ensuing knowledge was invalid. This explains Cudworth's position in his century. In one sense he was far from the prevalent tendencies of his day; he was the face turned

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<sup>3</sup> Muirhead, "The Cambridge Platonists (1)", p. 160.



kind-wards. Hobbes, who by separating his faith from his reason was able to reach conclusions utterly irreconcilable to that faith, served what Cudworth saw as Anti-Christ. On the other hand, the belief which sponsored the Sermon is a belief in the vitality of man's reason, radically different from the theological opinions of his day, and still advanced for our society. Far from being the paradox that Cassirer implies, it is obvious that the conservatism and the forward-looking attitudes of Cudworth's thought are really aspects of the same belief; they are the two sides of the question Cudworth never turned from, the question of how to maintain personal integrity in a changing world.

Nor should we forget that the movement we call Cambridge Platonism is nothing more than an abstraction of the integrity of its members. Benjamin Whichcote set both the moral and the religious standards which the others abided by:

Sir, wherein I fall short of your expectation,  
I fail for truth's sake; wherto alone I acknowledge my self addicted.<sup>4</sup>

John Smith, in his 34 years, became the apologist for the group; in his writings, Whichcote's reason is defended through association with the early Church Fathers:

...now let no man accuse them of hearkning too much to their own reason, since their reason steers by so excellent a compass, the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Whichcote, "Eight Letters", p. 134.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick, A Brief Account, p. 10.

In the writings of Henry More, "in some ways the most fascinating of all the Platonist divines,"<sup>6</sup> we find the scientific interests of his day combined with the Platonism he professed. More wished to encompass all things, from spiritism through Cabalism to material and physical science. And in Cudworth, we have the philosophical justification of the order; his writings expand and extend what Smith had begun, showing religious Platonism to be philosophically valid. One force united these men - a love of God and faith in man. This synthesis was so strong that a distinct school emerged.

Still, the question must finally be raised: what is the importance of the Cambridge School? Their importance lies as much in a frame of mind as in specific influence. It lies in the personal integrity a phrase such as "I persuade myself..."<sup>7</sup> implies, and in the academic freedom they inherited from John Colet and Sir Thomas More, and which became such an integral part of their works that Whichcote becomes a living example of it through a single sentence:

Truth is Truth; whosoever hath spoken itt, or howsoever itt hath bin abused: butt if this libertie may not bee allowed to the universitie, wherfore do wee study?<sup>8</sup>

Nor should we forget the fact that through their writings,

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell, Pulpit Oratory, p. 293.

<sup>7</sup> Cudworth, Sermon, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Whichcote, "Eight Letters", p. 57.

particularly those of Cudworth, the Platonic tradition found a firm and respected position in the academic life of England; or overlook the effect of their teaching and ministry upon those who studied under them - particularly the Latitudinarian divines. But perhaps the most important fact is that the spirit of Cambridge Platonism is not out-dated, but rather undated. In their desire to hold the two halves of life together, that the good life and the good mind might grow together, the Cambridge Platonists re-assert the validity and the vitality of the religious experience, and celebrate the inner nature of man.



## APPENDIX

There are two major events in Cudworth's life about which critics disagree. The first of these concerns a living given to Cudworth by Emmanuel College; the second deals with his apparent dissatisfaction with his situation at Cambridge. All critics agree that these events took place, but there is disagreement, first, as to when he took the living, and secondly, as to what subsequent action he followed due to his dissatisfaction.

The earliest available life of Cudworth, written by Thomas Birch, offers the following account:

...in 1639 he was created Master of Arts with great applause. ...Not long after he was presented to the Rectory of North-Cadbury in Somersetshire, worth three hundred pounds per ann. ...In 1645 Dr. Metcalf having resigned the Regius Professorship of the Hebrew Language, Mr Cudworth was unanimously chosen...by the seven Electors to succeed him. From this time he abandoned all the functions of a minister... . Though the places which he held in the University were very honourable, yet he found the revenue of them not sufficient to support him; for which reason he had thoughts of leaving Cambridge entirely, and he actually retired from it, though but for a short time.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Birch, in Pierre Bayle's A General Dictionary, Historical and Critical, translated, edited, and enlarged by Thomas Birch and others (London, 1736), IV, 484-5.

According to this account, Cudworth held the living from shortly after 1639 until 1645, when he vacated that position for the Hebrew Professorship. Further, we are told that Cudworth did at one point leave Cambridge. In substance, the same account is offered in the Biographia Britannica:

Not long after [1639], he was presented by Emmanuel College to the Rectory of North Cadbury in Somersetshire, a living worth near three hundred pounds a year, and probably kept it till 1656. ...In 1651, he took the degree of Doctor of Divinity. Notwithstanding his preferments, yet, whether it was owing to that neglect and contempt of the things of this world, which are so common among studious persons, or to any other cause, certain it is, that Dr. Cudworth's income was not sufficient to maintain him; and therefore he left, upon that account, the University for a while: But, being extremely beloved he was soon invited thither again.<sup>2</sup>

Here, however, Cudworth is said to have held the living worth three hundred pounds a year, a substantial amount in the seventeenth century, for up to seventeen years. It seems odd that this income, combined with the remunerations as Master of Clare Hall and Professor of Hebrew, would be insufficient to support Cudworth.

Tulloch's explanation corrects this problem:

While tutor in his college, Cudworth was presented to the rectory of North Cadbury, in Somersetshire. This living was in the gift of Emmanuel College, and we find Whichcote presented to it in 1643. Cudworth appears to have been his immediate predecessor for about two years. He is

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<sup>2</sup> Biographia Britannica, ed. William Oldys (London, 1750), III, 1580.



said to have been appointed in 1641; but there is some doubt whether he ever left the university and settled in the country.<sup>3</sup>

...as master of Clare Hall and Professor of Hebrew, Cudworth may have had enough to support him as a bachelor, [but] he had not enough to enable him to marry and settle with comfort. ... Apparently he had left for a time, but whether to undertake any duty elsewhere is not stated.<sup>4</sup>

Leslie Stephen, writing only a decade after Tulloch, offers quite different information:

On 3 Oct. 1650 he was presented to the college living of North Cadbury in Somersetshire, vacant by the resignation of Whichcote (information from the master of Emmanuel).... Worthington expresses a fear (6 Jan. 1651) that Cudworth may be forced to leave Cambridge 'through want of maintenance.' He appears to have had a difficulty in obtaining the stipend for his mastership at Clare.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps this was based in part upon a statement made by Samuel Salter in 1753:

...[Whichcote] resigned his Somersetshire Living, and the College presented to it his friend the learned Mr. RALPH CUDWORTH, in MDCL;...

At any rate, both Salter's and Stephen's statements are echoed by the Encyclopedia Britannica:

In 1650 he was presented to the college living of North Cadbury, Somerset... . From the diary of his friend John Worthington we learn that Cudworth was very nearly compelled, through

<sup>3</sup> Tulloch, Rational Theology, II, 195.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>5</sup> L. Stephen, ed. Dictionary of National Biography (London, 1888), XIII, 271.

<sup>6</sup> Salter, Preface to Moral and Religious Aphorisms, p. xxi.



poverty, to leave the university.<sup>7</sup>

These three accounts, unlike the earlier ones, confine the two events in question to the years between 1650 and 1654.

Finally, we have Powicke's statement, which is similar to the two immediately preceding, but different from them in that this critic states that the two events are inter-related:

On 3 October, 1650, he succeeded Whichcote in the Rectory of North Cadbury. Whichcote came back to be the Head of King's College; and Cudworth would fain have stayed on at Clare Hall but for the fact that he was suffering 'through want of maintenance.' This sounds unlikely, till we learn that he had 'a difficulty in obtaining the stipend of his Mastership.' However, his exile was not for long.<sup>8</sup>

This last explanation is definitely most logical in itself, but does not conform to the dates which Powicke gives for Whichcote's return to King's College, which coincide with those given by Tulloch.

There are no available means to evaluate any of this material. Yet it seems probable that Cudworth did leave Cambridge in the early 1650's, and there are grounds for speculation as to how these years away might have affected his awareness of the political and religious temper of England during that period. It is interesting to note, for

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<sup>7</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, Eleventh edition (London, 1910), VII, 612.

<sup>8</sup> Powicke, p. 113.

instance, that there are two dates usually considered as the beginnings of the rise of Cudworth's influence - 1645 and 1654. The first coincides with his appointment to Clare Hall; the latter, with his position at Christ's. Yet both dates also occur only shortly after the only two periods of Cudworth's life when there is indication that he may have left Cambridge itself. Cudworth's appointments, like those of all other eminent scholars during this period of English history, were political. It would be interesting to find out exactly when Cudworth's political connections (which were strong during the final years of the Protectorate, from about 1655) began to form, and under what circumstances. Somerset being a centre of Puritan activity, there would have been ample opportunity to establish political contacts which could have furthered his career, and enough political and religious activity to cause a change of awareness in a person with Cudworth's interests.

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