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Book Review: Cambridge Platonist Spirituality

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Cambridge Platonist Spirituality; edited and introduced by Charles Taliaferro and Alison J. Tepley; preface by Jaroslav Pelikan. Paulist Press, 2004. Pp. 257. \$34.95 (hardcover); \$24.94 (paperback).

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The Cambridge Platonists have been, for too long, the forgotten cousins of seventeenth-century intellectual history. This new volume provides a clear and accessible source of the writings of the Cambridge Platonists. Although aimed primarily at readers in Christian thought, this publication should also be of interest to scholars in the intellectual and religious history of the seventeenth century. The editors, Charles Taliaferro, a distinguished American philosopher of religion, and Alison Tepley, a talented young British intellectual historian, have made the core ideas and themes of the Cambridge Platonists available in an affordable format for the first time since the publication of C. A. Patrides' well thumbed collection on the Cambridge Platonists in 1967.

The Cambridge Platonists have traditionally been viewed, rather too literally, as a group of Neoplatonic philosophers who lived and worked in the University of Cambridge in the middle decades of the seventeenth century. The core of this collection follows this traditional rubric, with several of the texts being familiar to students of the Cambridge Platonists: Ralph Cudworth's *Sermon before the House of Commons*; a selection of Benjamin Whichcote's celebrated sermons and aphorisms; the lyrical mysticism of the brilliant John Smith; and the poems and prose of Henry More. This collection, however, unlike those that have preceded it, has benefited from recent scholarship in this field to bring Cambridge Platonism beyond a three-mile radius of Great St. Mary's. The editorial line of this volume has been to understand Cambridge Platonism as an intellectual, as much as a geographical, grouping. On page twenty-five of the excellent introduction the editors argue that:

The term *Cambridge Platonism* is, after all, an umbrella for many different influences and different focal points in thought, which nevertheless share an allegiance to the Platonic outlook of toleration; optimism regarding human potential; the goodness of inquiry; the sovereignty of the good, the true, and the beautiful; and the rationality and essential goodness of God.

This editorial position has therefore allowed for the inclusion in the volume of writings of thinkers who, although commonly viewed as on the periphery of Cambridge Platonic thought, are now generally viewed as adding breadth and depth of this tradition. The volume therefore includes works by the Cambridge educated thinkers Nathaniel Culverwell, whose influence on John Locke is well documented, and Peter Sterry, who came to prominence as Oliver Cromwell's chaplain. Most interestingly the editors have included a section from *Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, written by Henry More's "heroine pupil," Anne Conway.

The inclusion of these less recognizable figures helps, I believe, in the broader appreciation of the Cambridge Platonists as a whole. For

many, a volume on the Cambridge Platonists within a series on Western Spirituality would only seem to confirm the traditional characterization of the Cambridge Platonists' political quietism and intellectual other-worldliness; whilst others were fighting and dying for their beliefs in the English Civil (for many, religious) Wars, the Cambridge Platonists remained cocooned in their ivory towers writing *Divine Dialogues*. The pitch and tenure of this collection does much to explode this prejudice. By including a broader range of thinkers the editors are able to show how the principles of Cambridge Platonism were used as more than simply cold academic exercises. From the start of this collection the spirituality of the Cambridge Platonists is defined, if you will excuse my own turn of phrase, as intellectual worldliness. Far from distancing themselves from the world, the Cambridge Platonists, in fact, marked themselves out from their Platonic forbears by rejecting the traditional Platonic antipathy towards the body. They viewed the corporeal world, not in stark opposition to the intellectual and spiritual world, but merely as a lower rung on a continuous spiritual ladder leading to the divine. For this reason it is no surprise to find the Cambridge Platonists as the earliest English critics of Cartesian dualism. The Cambridge Platonists approached the world with the belief that all things within creation are related to, and oriented towards the creative power of God. Therefore, the spiritual imperative of the Cambridge Platonists was, by implication, implicitly ethical and political. Man's knowledge of this is not from religious impulse or enthusiasm, but from the intellectual comprehension that the spiritual ladder of creation is infused with the rationality of the divine. Man's spiritual obligation is therefore to use his intellect—the oft quoted “Candle of the Lord”—to orient all things towards the love of God.

In the context of the religious upheavals of the seventeenth century the simplicity of the intellectual spiritualism of the Cambridge Platonists sat in stark contrast to the dogmatic institutionalism of Laudianism and the doctrinal certainties of Calvinism. The belief that the path to truth lay in the use of intellect, over authority or passion, also brought Cambridge Platonism into bitter conflict with the arch materialism of Thomas Hobbes. Against these opposing intellectual positions, the clarity and, if not immediately obvious, the systematic practicality of the Cambridge Platonic message shines through. For all the writers included in this volume, the end of religion was to orient all things in life to the love of God. As long as this intellectual orientation towards the love of God was maintained, then individual differences could be tolerated and comprehended within the overarching power of the divine intellect. Nowhere is this belief more strongly shown than in Cudworth's *Sermon before the House of Commons*. In this remarkably brave piece of public oratory, the then only 29-year-old Master of Clare-Hall argued, using a modification of the dilemma of the *Euthyphro*, that God's power and justice is defined by eternal principles of goodness and love, not the reverse. In an outright attack on the prevailing Calvinist theology of the Westminster Assembly, Cudworth argued that man should not prejudice the lives of others, or privilege his own view, but come to all things seeking the unchanging principles of divine love. Essentially, Cudworth argued, as beings created in the light and form of God's reason, whatever temporal factors divide us the eternal love of God

will always unite us and overcome those human divisions. In the magnificence of God's love it is not only desirable but our duty to create a world where, quoting Isaiah 11:6–9, "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb . . . [where] . . . they shall not hurt nor destroy in all God's holy mountain; for the earth shall be full with the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." Admittedly there is very little in this volume, or in fact in the writings of the Cambridge Platonists as a whole, to explain how this laudable aim can be manifested in reality. However the intellectual influence of the Cambridge Platonists lived on in the emerging liberal politics of late seventeenth-century England. Rather than stress their differences, religious and political thinkers in late-seventeenth-century England such as Archbishop Tillotson, Bishop Burnet, and arguably even John Locke, drew on the Cambridge Platonists as an intellectual source, and spiritual guide for how to respect human and religious diversity, within a cohesive and respectful society. One cannot help thinking that, living as we do in a time where increased religious and social diversity is leading more and more to virulent and violent tension, that perhaps we too could benefit from some of the spirit of intellectual worldliness that pervades the spirituality of the Cambridge Platonists.