

Edited by Christian Hengstermann

# The History of Religious Imagination in Christian Platonism

Exploring the Philosophy of  
Douglas Hedley



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# Contributors

**Alfons Fürst** is Professor of Early Christian Studies and Christian Archaeology and Director of the Origen Research Centre at the University of Münster. His primary research interests are Origen, the Alexandrian tradition and the reception of Origenian freedom metaphysics from late antiquity to modern theology and philosophy. Among his most recent publications are several German translations of Origen's works, the monograph *Origenes: Griechen und Christ in römischer Zeit* (2017) and an edited essay collection entitled *Origen's Philosophy of Freedom in Early Modern Times: Debates about Free Will and Apokatastasis in 17<sup>th</sup>-Century England and Europe* (2019).

**Per Bjørnar Grande** is Professor at the Department of Pedagogy, Religion and Social Studies at the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences in Bergen. In his research, he focuses mainly on René Girard, the notion of sacrifice and the religious dimension of literature on which he has published a great number of articles. Among his recent publications is a monograph entitled *Mimesis and Desire: An Analysis of the Religious Nature of Mimesis and Desire in the Work of René Girard* (2009).

**Douglas Hedley** is Professor of the Philosophy of Religion at Cambridge University and Fellow of Clare College as well as Director of the Cambridge Centre for the Study of Platonism. His research interests focus on contemporary religious philosophy as well as the Neoplatonist and Romantic traditions and Cambridge Platonism. Hedley has published on the history of religious philosophy from antiquity to the present day and the theory of imagination and its role in religious epistemology and ontology. His most recent books are *The Iconic Imagination* (2016) and *Revisioning Cambridge Platonism: Sources and Legacy* (2019), an essay collection co-edited with David Leech.

**Christian Hengstermann** is an associate lecturer at the Classics Department of Wuppertal University and Fellow of the Cambridge Centre for the Study of Platonism. His research mainly focuses on Origen and the Cambridge Platonists and their relevance to contemporary debates in philosophy and systematic theology. His most recent books are *Origenes und der Ursprung der Freiheitsmetaphysik* (2016) and an edited collection entitled *'That Miracle of the Christian World': Origenism and Christian Platonism in Henry More* (2020).

**Klaus E. Müller** is Professor of the Philosophical Foundations of Theology and Religious Philosophy at the University of Münster. His chief research interests include panentheist theories of God and panpsychist cosmologies as well as the history of religious philosophy, especially Thomas Aquinas, Baruch de Spinoza, Immanuel Kant and German Idealism. Among his major monographs are a three-volume exposition



of the philosophy of religion entitled *Glauben – Fragen – Denken* (2006–10) and *In der Endlosschleife von Vernunft und Glaube: Einmal mehr Athen versus Jerusalem* (2012).

**Daniel Soars** teaches in the Divinity department at Eton College and is on the editorial board of the *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*. He holds a PhD from the University of Cambridge with a dissertation entitled ‘Beyond the Dualism of Creature and Creator: A Hindu-Christian Theological Inquiry into the Distinctive Relation between the World and God’ (2020). His principal research focus is philosophical theology done from a comparative perspective.

**Friedrich A. Uehlein** is Professor Emeritus at the University of Freiburg. His principal research interests are Anthony A. Shaftesbury and Samuel T. Coleridge as well as aesthetics, literature, theories of self-consciousness and the philosophy of religion. Uehlein is the author of two monographs on Shaftesbury and Coleridge entitled *Kosmos und Subjektivität. Lord Shaftesburys Philosophical Regimen* (1976) and *Die Manifestation des Selbstbewußtseins im konkreten Ich Bin: Endliches und Unendliches Ich im Denken S. T. Coleridges* (1982).

**Margit Wasmaier-Sailer** is Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Lucerne. Her main research interests are contemporary religious philosophy, notably William Alston, the current human rights discussion and Kantian and post-Idealistic philosophy. Her most recent publications include the monograph *Das Verhältnis von Moral und Religion bei Johann Michael Sailer und Immanuel Kant: Zum Profil philosophischer Theologie und theologischer Ethik in der säkularen Welt* (2018) and an essay collection co-edited with Matthias Hoesch entitled *Die Begründung der Menschenrechte: Kontroversen im Spannungsfeld von positivem Recht, Naturrecht und Vernunftrecht* (2017).

# Preface

Douglas Hedley's trilogy on the religious imagination is a major work of contemporary philosophy of religion. It propounds a new epistemology of the Divine and a sacramental ontology of a reality suffused by God's ubiquitous creative and salvific work in nature and culture. It also constitutes a revival of the rational theology of the seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonists Ralph Cudworth, Henry More and John Smith, whom the author acknowledged as the greatest of his precursors in his inaugural lecture as Professor of the Philosophy of Religion at the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge on 7 May 2018. It is under Professor Hedley's leadership that the Cambridge Platonists' major writings have been newly edited and translated on the AHRC-funded project *Cambridge Platonism at the Origins of the Enlightenment*, which ended in the online publication of a major Sourcebook in November 2019.

The chapters collected in this volume are intended to provide an introduction to both Hedley's own thought and the tradition of divine sensation which it seeks to revive and refine. Written by colleagues, friends and pupils, the chapters mostly go back to talks presented at a conference on the trilogy of the *Iconic Imagination* held at the University of Münster from 1 to 2 April 2016. However, they also reflect Hedley's more recent research in the AHRC project and as Professor of the Philosophy of Religion and director of the Cambridge Centre of the Study of Platonism. The additional chapters by Per Bjørnar Grande and Daniel Soars are intended to do justice to René Girard's seminal influence upon Hedley's trilogy and its ecumenical scope and importance to interreligious dialogue. Moreover, an exposition of Hedley's philosophy of religion written by Christian Hengstermann has been added alongside a transcription of the author's inaugural lecture.

It is my great pleasure to express my gratitude to the authors for preparing their chapters for print and to the Bloomsbury editors Colleen Coalter and Becky Holland, and Dhanuja Ravi, the project manager, for their untiring guidance and unfailing support. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments. My greatest gratitude is to Professor Hedley himself for a decade of great Platonic dialogue and friendship.

Christian Hengstermann



Part I

# Cambridge Platonism past and present



# The 'devout contemplation and sublime fancy' of the Cambridge Platonists and their legacy

Douglas Hedley

Edward Gibbon, in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, while considering the education of Boethius, wrote that he attempted to reconcile the 'strong and subtle sense of Aristotle with the devout contemplation and sublime fancy of Plato'.<sup>1</sup> Most modern commentators seek in the dialogues Plato the dialectician. Yet Plato is also, and perhaps more importantly, a consummate fashioner of philosophical images and scenes in which he invokes a vision of the supreme reality as absolute and fecund goodness. Gibbon is being ironic, of course. Yet in his irony there is much truth about the contemplative power and elevated imagination of the Athenian, and I will endeavour to expand on the reception of that 'devout contemplation and sublime fancy' in the thought of the Cambridge Platonists.

When in 1996 I arrived in Cambridge to give a lecture for my interview in the philosophy of religion, I nervously presented my interest in the Cambridge Platonists. At the end of my presentation, the then Norris-Hulse professor sniffed, and remarked, somewhat disconcertingly, 'Yes, but we in Cambridge are embarrassed about the Cambridge Platonists.' It is very satisfying to reflect that now we have a team in Cambridge and Bristol to research and edit this remarkable group of writers. Even then, these thinkers appealed to me as a paradigm of philosophical activity, a vibrant combination of hermeneutic and speculative interests, open to the great issues of the age while fully cognizant of the rich history of the subject. The Cambridge Platonists are the most important Platonic school between the Renaissance and the Romantic period, and yet never properly edited, though much studied. They exerted an influence upon Leibniz, Locke, Newton, Shaftesbury, Berkeley, Reid, Hume, Coleridge and the German Idealists.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the ideas, arguments and problems of the Cambridge Platonists are currently the focus of attention in philosophy and theology – especially the issues of atheism and religion, nature and the ecological question, tolerance and politics, and the foundation of ethics.<sup>3</sup> Even though they were drawing on a Platonic perspective – many of the problems they are addressing only emerged with the New Science or with other aspects of modern society, such as tolerance and authority, equality and hierarchy.

As an undergraduate in Oxford, I was introduced to the canon of the British Empiricists, reading Locke, Berkeley and Hume. All of those philosophers were influenced by Cudworth, who was rarely mentioned by my tutors. In a sense, Cudworth, Berkeley and Coleridge represent another strand of British thought and one which is critical of Empiricism and appeals generally to Platonism as an alternative.<sup>4</sup> One might claim that this Platonism is a system, but nevertheless an open and flexible structure of thought. And 'Neoplatonism' is used as a term that denotes not so much one school of philosophy, but rather an intellectual paradigm and a way of life, disseminating its influence in myriad forms of thought and culture. It is said, for example, that Hegel is the founder of the Philosophy of Religion. Hegel opened his 1821 Inaugural Lecture on the *Philosophy of Religion* delivered at the University of Berlin with these words: 'The object of these lectures is the Philosophy of Religion, which in general has the same purpose as the earlier type of metaphysical science which was called *theologia naturalis*.'<sup>5</sup> Unbeknownst to many, it is actually Ralph Cudworth who for the first time coined the word 'Philosophy of Religion', and wrote the first treatise that can be called a Philosophy of Religion. George Berkeley, himself openly indebted to 'the learned Dr Cudworth', in his *Siris* (1744) writes:

Proclus, in his *Commentary on the Theology of Plato* observes there are two sorts of philosophers. The one placed Body first in the order of beings, and made the faculty of thinking depend thereupon, supposing that the principles of all things are corporeal; that Body most really or principally exists, and that all other things in a secondary sense, and by virtue of that.

Others, making all corporeal things to be dependent upon Soul or Mind, think this to exist in the first place and primary sense, and the being of bodies to be altogether derived from and presuppose that of the Mind.<sup>6</sup>

There are thus for Berkeley two sorts of philosophers. The first placed body first in the order of reality and mind emerges from it. Others, those with whom Berkeley identifies, make corporeal things to be the product of soul or mind. The Cambridge Platonists belong to an Idealistic tradition in Berkeley's sense of 'those who make all corporeal things to be dependent upon Soul or Mind'. They belong, in an important sense, to the tradition that derives from Plato, Plotinus, Origen, Eriugena, Eckhart, Cusa and Ficino. They are Idealists in that they claim the dependency or derivation of the material realm upon or from the spiritual. Hence, their metaphysics attempts to explain the 'lower' (nature) in terms of that which is higher (spirit), whereas the naturalist explains the higher in terms of the lower, the spiritual realm in purely natural terms.

The Idealists follow the 'interior' path. The absolute, or God, is not to be inferred from the facts or the very contingency of the cosmos, but is intuited or apprehended in consciousness or the structure of the spirit. The distinction between the spiritual and material is such that the transcendence of the Divine is not conceived in materialistic terms as remoteness. The refusal to envisage divine transcendence as 'out and up there' and the absolute as the apex of a cosmic pyramid has sometimes been mistakenly interpreted as pantheism when in fact it is the opposite. The enigmatic image of God

as a circle whose centre is everywhere and circumference is nowhere is the attempt to dispel materialistic or anthropomorphic conceptions of the first principle:

A Circle whose circumference no where  
Is circumscrib'd, whose Centre's each where set,  
But the low Cusp's a figure circular,  
Whose compasse is ybound, but centre's every where.<sup>7</sup>

And for Ralph Cudworth, in his *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, we find the more prosaic explanation:

Wherefore although some novelists make a contracted idea of God consisting of nothing else but will and power, yet his nature is better expressed by some in this mystical or enigmatical representation of an infinite circle, whose inmost centre is simple goodness, the radii or rays and expanded area (plat) thereof all comprehending and immutable wisdom, the exterior periphery or interminate circumference, omnipotent will or activity by which every thing without God is brought forth into existence.<sup>8</sup>

John Henry Muirhead, pupil of T. H. Green in Balliol, viewed Cudworth and More as the forefathers of British Idealism. According to Muirhead, the following are the main metaphysical points of the Cambridge Platonists:

(1) Their view of the divine principle in the world as the action not of an arbitrary Will acting on it from without but of an immanent will to good whether conceived of as Beauty, Justice, or Truth; (2) The view of nature which they pressed against the mechanical systems both of other times and of their own; (3) The theory of mind as an active participant in the process of knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

This is almost a paraphrase of Cudworth's words:

First, for making a Perfect Incorporeal intellect to be the Head of all; and Secondly, for resolving that Nature, as an Instrument of this Intellect, does not merely act according to the Necessity of Material Motions but for Ends and Purposes, though unknown to it self; Thirdly, for maintaining the Naturality of Morality; and Lastly, for asserting the τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν, Autexousie, or Liberty from Necessity.<sup>10</sup>

Recently, Dimitri Levitin has questioned the existence of the 'Cambridge Platonists'. I am not quite sure which part of the 'Cambridge Platonists' might be objectionable. Most of them were here! And their enthusiasm for Platonism is hard to question. Yet the central claim has been gathering support and is widely and respectfully cited by historians. One should consider his claims in more detail. He writes:

One did not have to be a 'Cambridge Platonist', or in any way connected to the supposed group, to be interested in ancient thought. As is shown throughout this



book, there was no such thing as a 'Cambridge Platonist' attitude to the history of philosophy. For a start, apart from Henry More, they were not 'professional philosophers', but – like most senior university fellow – theologians and philologists who used philosophy when it suited them. Second, both their coherence and importance are predicated on the same nineteenth-century whig story that sought to trace a 'rationalist' lineage for 'liberal' Anglicanism. The idea that they represent an anachronistic remnant of 'Renaissance humanism' in an otherwise 'modern' world is based on the old assumptions about 'ancients and moderns' and about traditions of Platonic 'syncretism' we met earlier.<sup>11</sup>

Ralph Cudworth emerges not as an anachronistic 'Platonist' but as a cutting-edge European philologist. Most importantly, a huge number of scholars, natural philosophers and divines were acutely interested in ancient wisdom without having anything to do with the Cambridge group. Levitin's brief is that of a historian rather than a philosopher or theologian and one might excuse a lack of familiarity with some of the salient principles at stake. The mocking tone of Levitin, however, is frankly absurd. The authors known as the 'Cambridge Platonists' were indeed mostly Cambridge figures, and closely knit through friendship and elective affinity; and their adherence to Plato and his school is in marked opposition to the Aristotle of the schools. Unless one is utterly sceptical about tags like 'The Renaissance Platonists' or 'The German Idealists', both of which are more questionable as groups than 'The Cambridge Platonists', it is quite reasonable to use the term helpfully. The existence of figures such as Henry Hallywell (1640–1703) and his teacher George Rust (1628–70), who shared very close beliefs about the soul, enthusiasm and atheism, reveals a wider group of students who paraphrase, develop and repeat the arguments of More and Cudworth.<sup>12</sup> The existence of a school is evinced by contemporary critique in the form of Herbert Thorndike, Joseph Beaumont and especially Samuel Parker's *A Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophy* in 1666. And contrary to Levitin's jejune proposition that Cudworth was in reality a theologian and philologist, Cudworth is, in fact, the nearest thing to a professional philosopher in England until T. H. Green in the nineteenth century. In response to Levitin's last point about Cudworth being a philologist rather than a philosopher, we find Cudworth himself asserting:

We were necessitated by the Matter it self, to run out into Philology and Antiquity; as also in the other Parts of the Book, we do often give an Account of the Doctrine of the Ancients: which however some Over-severe Philosophers, may look upon Fastidiously, or Undervalue and Depreciate; yet, as we conceived it often Necessary, so possibly may the Variety thereof not be Ungratefull to others; *and this Mixture of Philology, throughout the Whole, Sweeten and Allay the Severity of Philosophy to them*: The main thing which the Book pretends to, in the mean time, being the Philosophy of Religion.<sup>13</sup>

It is quite evident from this passage that Cudworth himself views his activity as primarily philosophical, that is, the philosophy of religion. And, later on, Cudworth defines philosophy as

not a Matter of Faith, but Reason, Men ought not to affect (as I conceive) to derive its Pedigree from Revelation, and by that very pretence seek to impose it Tyrannically upon the minds of Men, which God hath here purposely left Free to the use of their own Faculties, that so finding out Truth by them, they might enjoy that Pleasure and Satisfaction, which arises from thence.<sup>14</sup>

Cudworth is adducing a theological argument for philosophical autonomy. If we have been endowed with reason by God, then it is legitimate to use it freely. It is quite evident that he sees his own work as proceeding upon this rational basis. Hence the critique of 'latitude' from High Churchman, such as Joseph Beaumont, who was concerned that Cudworth failed to defend the authority of the church.

The philosophical endeavour of Cudworth's magnum opus is clear in the frontispiece of the first edition of 1678. There we find a copperplate engraving by Robert White (1645–1703), after a design by the portrait-painter Jan Baptist Gaspers. Called *The Six Greek Philosophers*, the engraving depicts, in two camps, the 'Theists', on the right (from the book's perspective), and the 'Atheists', on the left: the 'Theists', over whom we find the word 'Victory' in a laurel wreath, are Aristotle, Pythagoras and Socrates. The 'Atheists', who have the word 'Confusion' over their heads in a broken wreath, are Strato of Lampsacus, Epicurus and Anaximander. Spinoza is the new Strato, and Hobbes the new Anaximander. Under the engraving, we find the Greek words of Plato from book 10 of his dialogue on *Laws*, which forms a sort of treatise against atheism: 'Well now, how can one argue for the existence of gods without getting angry? You see, one inevitably gets irritable and annoyed with these people who have put us to the trouble, and continue to put us to the trouble, of composing these explanations.'<sup>15</sup> Book 10 of the *Laws* is perhaps the foundational text of Western natural theology.

Coleridge is perhaps the most significant inheritor of the Cambridge Platonists in the Romantic period. When challenged about his obligations from Schelling, Coleridge replied that he and Schelling shared many similar sources in Platonism and Boehme. However disingenuous Coleridge's response to those legitimate accusations of plagiarism may have been, his claim that the Cambridge Platonists were forerunners of Kant and the post-Kantians was shared by other British philosopher such as Dugald Stewart (in 1815) and later by James Mackintosh (in 1872), two of the most significant early interpreters of Kant in Great Britain.<sup>16</sup> Coleridge writes:

The greater number were Platonists, so called at least, and such they believed themselves to be, but more truly Plotinists. Thus Cudworth, Dr. Jackson, Henry More, John Smith, and some others. What they all wanted was a pre-inquisition into the mind, as part organ, part constituent, of all knowledge, an examination of the scales, weights and measures themselves abstracted from the objects to be weighed or measured by them; in short, a transcendental aesthetic, logic, and noetic.<sup>17</sup>

Coleridge's criticism of the Cambridge Platonists in this passage amounts to the claim that they did not attain the heights of Kant's transcendental logic!

Coleridge's pupil F. D. Maurice, Knightbridge professor of Casuistry, Moral Theology and Moral Philosophy at the University of Cambridge, following in the footsteps of his mentor, wrote memorably of his seventeenth-century predecessors:

There were English divines in their time who aimed at this reconciliation in a different spirit – by a different method. Cudworth, More, Whichcote, Worthington, John Smith – those men who have been sometimes called Platonists and sometimes Latitudinarians, who are eulogized by Burnet, whose influence was chiefly exercised in Cambridge, and was felt most there – were not memorable as preachers, and never sought popular reputation of any kind.<sup>18</sup>

Coleridge and Maurice were Platonists themselves, and part of a *living* tradition of Platonic thought. As such, they keenly recognized a kinship, albeit not an uncritical bond, with their intellectual ancestors.<sup>19</sup> Hence the historian John Hunt in his *Religious Thought in England* speaks of the Cambridge Platonists as the 'chief Rationalists of the age' and as critics of Hobbes, Platonists trying to establish 'religion and morality not on anything transient or arbitrary, but on principles immutable and eternal'.<sup>20</sup> Contrary to Levitin, Hunt is not proposing some dubious reification but providing an accurate description of the school, and a classification that draws upon the insights of earlier illustrious writers like Coleridge and Maurice, as well as the reflections of seventeenth-century contemporaries such as Richard Baxter and Gilbert Burnet. Far from being an artificial construction, 'Cambridge Platonists' is a term that denotes a living tradition of thought, and one without which I could not have embarked upon my trilogy.

## 1 Platonism as a systematic metaphysic and a way of life

The Platonism of the Cambridge Platonists is systematic and yet emphatically a philosophy of life and experience. For Cudworth and More, Plato's philosophy is a system and Plotinus is the greatest of all interpreters of Plato. The Good in Plato as both the sovereign principle of philosophy and beyond Being meant that both ethics and epistemology required a theological foundation. And this meant addressing questions that could not emerge in Plato's age, or that of Plotinus or Ficino. The Cambridge Platonists did just that. They belonged to a post-Galilean-Cartesian universe and they were equipped and ready to make the case for the philosophical truth of Platonism in the age of the New Science.

This stress upon Platonism as a system is linking, in a seemingly paradoxical fashion, with the insistence upon the affective dimension of philosophy. This has its roots in Plato's *Symposium*, but its most striking philosophical expression is in Plotinus's *Enneads*. Our thinkers can be called philosophical contemplatives, and I mean exactly this temper of mind in Plotinus that veers between a strongly contemplative rationalism and an emphasis upon that which resists conceptual analysis: will, life, experience, God. Some make the mistake of seeing 'Platonism' as purely contemplative or rationalist and then argue that the Cambridge Platonists are thus not properly speaking Platonists. In

a sense the 'Platonism' of the Cambridge Platonists lies precisely in the tension between 'reflection' and 'experience'. The appeal to 'experience' is characteristic of the Platonic approach in the philosophy of religion.

I have said something about Cudworth's frontispiece. Let me now say something about his title page, on which we find a quote from Origen's *Against Celsus*: Γυμνάσιον [. . .] τῆς ψυχῆς Ἡ ΑΝΘΡΩΠΙΝΗ ΣΟΦΙΑ, ΤΕΛΟΣ ΔΕ Ἡ ΘΕΙΑ.<sup>21</sup> The Cambridge Platonists were great admirers of Origen, 'that Miracle of the Christian world'.<sup>22</sup> This is in part because they associate the Christian and the pagan Origen as a pupil of Ammonius Saccas and schoolmate of Plotinus. Origen is thus integral for the 'Platonism' of the Cambridge Platonists.<sup>23</sup> The Cambridge Platonists are not simply fideists, but they use Origen as the paradigm of the rational theologian rather than Thomas Aquinas or other Schoolmen. Christian theology needs a proper metaphysical structure especially against the modern philosophical criticisms of religious beliefs. This may not be surprising to anyone aware of the significance of Scholasticism in seventeenth-century Europe. Although the Cambridge Platonists are using Scholastic ideas, arguments and themes, their paradigm is not Scholastic, but Patristic, and Alexandrian in particular. This in part explains the particularly strong Platonic strand in their thought. Plotinus, not Aristotle, becomes the 'definite article' philosopher.

The Cambridge Platonists were wary of the powerful justifications of atheism in their own culture. The erosion of teleology or even the very idea of spirit as substance in Hobbes and Spinoza was to these thinkers an index of a new form of atheism. Cudworth and More assert the need for a Christian metaphysics in which the irrational bases of Materialism and Determinism are exposed and confuted. For Henry More, it is essential 'to cut the sinews of the Spinozan and the Hobbesian cause'.<sup>24</sup> And in order to do this, Cudworth deems necessary to construct a metaphysical system by 'joyning *Metaphysicks* or *Theology*, together with *Physiology*, to make up one entire *System of Philosophy*'.<sup>25</sup> Philosophy, however, is not just a system, but also a way of life:

Were I indeed to define divinity, I should rather call it a divine life, than a divine science; it being something rather to be understood by a spiritual sensation, than by any verbal description, as all things of sense and life are best known by sentient and vital faculties. γνῶσις ἐκάστων δι' ὁμοιότητος γίνεται, as the Greek Philosopher hath well observed: every thing is best known by that which bears a just resemblance and analogy with it. (Plotinus, *Enneads* I 8,1)<sup>26</sup>

For John Smith:

The true Metaphysical and Contemplative man . . . endeavours the nearest union with the Divine Essence that may be, κέντρον κέντρῳ συνάψας, as Plotinus speaks; knitting his owne centre, if he have any, unto the centre of the Divine Being. . . . This life is nothing else but God's own breath within him, and an Infant-Christ (if I may use the expression) formed in his Soul, who is in a sense . . . the shining forth of the Father's glory.<sup>27</sup>

This ‘Metaphysical and Contemplative man’ is an image of Plotinus, the ‘divine philosopher’:

*Plotinus aimed at such a kind of Rapturous and Ecstatic Union with the Τὸ ἕν and Τὰγαθόν, the First of the Three Highest Gods, (called The One and The Good) as by himself is described towards the latter end of this Last Book [Ennead VI 9], where he calls it ἐπαφήν, and παρουσίαν ἐπιστήμης κρείττονα, and τὸ ἑαυτῶν κέντρον τῷ οἷον πάντων κέντρῳ . . . συνάπτειν, a kind of Tactual Union, and a certain Presence better than Knowledge, and the joyning of our own Centre, as it were, with the Centre of the Universe.<sup>28</sup>*

One of the inheritors of the Cambridge Platonists in the twentieth century was A. E. Taylor. Taylor was a product of Oxford Idealism (he dedicated his first book to F. H. Bradley) but felt committed to a Neoplatonic variant of theism, in which the conversion of the soul to the Divine source is the pith and kernel of genuine philosophical inquiry. Following in this living tradition, A. E. Taylor writes:

The first step towards the ‘conversion’ of the soul from the world to God, as we learn from the Platonic Socrates, is that knowledge of self which is also the knowledge of our own ignorance of true good. How do we pass from the discovery that we are in this miserable and shameful ignorance of the one thing it is incumbent on us to know to apprehension of the scale of true good? How do we get even so far beyond our initial complete ignorance as to be able to say that a good soul is immeasurably better than a good body, and a good body than abundance of possessions? We know how the Augustinian doctrine, which is Christian as well as Platonic, answers the question. It does so by its conception, traceable back to the New Testament, that God Himself is the *lumen intellectus*, a view which has been, in substance, that of all the classical British moral philosophers from Cudworth to Green, and seems, in fact, to be, in principle, the only solution of the difficulty.<sup>29</sup>

The claim is in striking contrast to the interpretations of some of Taylor’s brilliant contemporaries such as Cornford and Julius Stenzel. Stenzel, for example, regarded the theory of ideas in Plato as a means that Plato employs to describe the ideal functioning of the polis, and he holds to a view of Plato giving up the theory of forms. Taylor is also quite unlike Cornford in attributing a view to Plato that connects unproblematically, if not without certain modifications, with the views of later Platonists such as Augustine and Cudworth.<sup>30</sup>

## 2 Contemplating nature, imagination and the sense of the sublime

J. N. Findlay once observed: ‘The basic strength of Platonism lies in its appeal to our imagination, our understanding and our sense of values.’<sup>31</sup> The beautiful, the true

and the good is at the very mainspring of the Platonic vision in European culture and thought. The link between the axiomatic and the ontological is forged in Plato's *Timaeus*, where the demiurge creates the physical cosmos out of generosity, and the imaginative coupling between beauty, truth and goodness finds expression in Dante or Schiller. The Cartesian or Newtonian universe seemed much less habitable for the radical conjunction of fact and value expressed in the myth of the demiurge of *Timaeus*. Yet it is precisely this awareness of goodness pervading the cosmos that informs the philosophy of Cudworth. In a passage that is redolent of Rudolf Otto's account of the Holy and the Romantic sublime, Cudworth writes:

And Nature itself plainly intimates to us, that there is some such absolutely perfect Being, which though not inconceivable, yet is incomprehensible to our finite understandings, by certain passions, which it hath implanted in us, that otherwise would want an object to display themselves upon; namely those of devout veneration, adoration, and admiration, together with a kind of ecstasy and pleasing horror.

This 'pleasing horror' evokes the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of Otto, that sense of the holy:

Which in the silent language of Nature, seems to speak thus much to us, that there is some object in the world, so much bigger and vaster than our mind and thoughts, that it is the very same to them, that the ocean is to narrow vessels; so that when they have taken into themselves as much as they can thereof by contemplation, and filled up all their capacity, there is still an immensity of it left without, which cannot enter in for want of room to receive it, and therefore must be apprehended after some other strange and mysterious manner, viz. by their being as it were plunged into it, and swallowed up or lost in it.<sup>32</sup>

Coleridge, in his *The Eolian Harp* (1795), expresses the same feeling:

And what if all of animated nature  
Be but organic Harps diversely framed,  
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps  
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,  
At once the Soul of each, and God of all.<sup>33</sup>

This 'animated nature', 'Plastic and vast', is a barely veiled reference to Cudworth's plastic nature. What is the relation between spirit and matter? How one goes about answering such a question depends to a very significant degree upon how one imagines nature itself. Thus, from at least the late eighteenth century, the rapid and radical success of the early modern scientific world view appeared to offer an unambiguous answer: there was no relationship between spirit (or the mental) and matter; the mental was either regarded as an epiphenomenon of matter or taken to be explanatorily inert. Of course, this apparent answer has always had its critics. However, contemporary

discussions about the relation of 'mind and cosmos' alongside other seemingly intractable difficulties with the problem of consciousness have generated renewed arguments against a narrowly materialistic world view.

René Descartes's philosophy is commonly considered the point of departure for the exorcism of spirit from nature. His strict separation of spirit and matter constituted a methodological revolution with far-reaching ramifications. Descartes interpreted nature as an interaction of mechanical – which is to say, 'spirit-less' – forces. However, a number of brilliant contemporaries of Descartes already argued against his account. Most notably, the Cambridge Platonists insisted that the material and mechanistic world view with its spiritless account of nature left crucial questions unanswered. Drawing especially upon Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophies, they attempted to articulate an account of the ongoing presence of spirit in nature despite emerging Cartesian concerns. Hence, the criticism of a merely mechanistic conceptualization of nature begins with the Cambridge Platonists. Henry More (1614–87), for instance, engaged Descartes's philosophy in a variety of formats, from his comprehensive study *Antidote to Atheism* to his own personal correspondence with Descartes himself. Ralph Cudworth (1617–88) was More's ally in this, especially in his monumental *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, in which Cudworth develops the notion of 'plastic nature', the idea that nature implies a spiritual but form-giving principle. Although often overlooked today, Cudworth and More's work exerted an enormous influence on thinkers in England and America, but also in both France and Germany.

### 3 Conclusion

The starting point of the 'philosophy of religion' is not Christian theology but 'religion'. It is the experience of the sacred in human life, together with the sad array of desecration, the sublime and the presence of evil witnessed by the varieties of religious experience in human culture, for example, from the earliest cave paintings to abstract expressionism, from the Vedas to Dostoevsky, from Pythagoras to Gandhi. The Barthian critique of 'religion', together with post-structuralist attacks on 'essentialism', has generated a misplaced hostility to the idea of 'religion'. My own research in Hindu tradition, inspired by Julius Lipner in the faculty, was in the way of those latitudinarians of the seventeenth century who were eager to explore the rites and beliefs of the great cultures, whether that of ancient Babylonia, Egypt, the philosophy of the 'Turks' or the mystical Jewish cabbala. The philosophy of religion of the Cambridge Platonists was more open to non-Christian religion than most proponents in the field in the twentieth century, with notable exceptions such as John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite. The frequent appeals I have heard within these walls to a *deus ex machina* in the fideist tradition of Pascal, Kierkegaard and Barth and their Anglo-American epigones have to be rejected, if only because it blocks the exploration of religions outside of Christianity. The philosophy of religion is a *philosophical* activity, not a subsection of Christian apologetics. It may be legitimately used as Christian apologetic, and I have done that myself, but that is not its proper brief.

The bedrock of the strand of Platonic philosophy of religion as a living tradition is a theory of the absolute as the first principle or *arche* and unconditioned principle, which



is intelligibility in itself and which furnishes intelligibility for all subordinate beings, and which the Christian Platonists of Alexandria identified with the great I AM of Exod. 3.14. Such an absolute is precisely the kind of limit of explanation that the analytic tradition of philosophy has dismissed or critiqued as straying beyond the bounds of logic and experience. The forgetting of this tradition of ancient Platonic speculation led to the Babylonian captivity of Heidegger's critique of the onto-theological in postmodern theology and phenomenology. Talk of 'theology overcoming metaphysics', so fashionable when I arrived in the faculty, would have been frankly unfathomable to the 'Platonick' divines of this university's greatest era.

Some of the most ancient questions of philosophy remain the stuff of contemporary disputes: How can the mere clutter of phenomena form a harmonious whole? Or does the apparently random concatenation of cause and effect reflect a catena or chain of being? How does the indiscernible unity of inner experience mirror the unity of a lawlike universe? Do developments in the study of the brain or neurophysiology raise new questions about human freedom, or do the egregious horrors of the English civil war or the tumult and brutality across the world in the last century reignite questions of good and evil? What are the metaphysical implications of postulating or denying values as transcendent verities? These metaphysical obsessions of the Cambridge Platonists remain urgent and pressing questions, and not least because the contemporary legacy of the two powerful models of Hobbes and Spinoza is evident, whether in the form of a neo-Spinozism in which any contingency disappears, or the radical contingency of the purblind Watchmaker of materialistic neo-Darwinian metaphysics. If anything, the sinews of the Hobbesian and Spinozan cause have become all the more powerful in the contemporary period through the post-Darwinian theory of random mutation and natural selection on the one hand and also the deterministic component found in mechanical models of the DNA structure and function on the other. This has been reinforced by widespread and corrosive nominalism, derived more immediately from a heady cocktail of Nietzsche, Marx and Freud, presenting issues of class, race or gender as the final arbiter in questions of intellectual inquiry and the life of the university in particular.

Moving from the principle of the foundational and transcultural sense of the sacred, the insufficiency of piecemeal mechanical explanations, and the capacity of the mind to be an organon of transcendence, all of which I found in S. T. Coleridge and the Cambridge Platonists, I wrote the trilogy on the imagination by a desire to reject any crass dichotomy between rational judgement and imagination, linked to the belief in the capacity of finite images and symbols to unveil the infinite and the eternal. However, even if the religious imagination is endowed with a central role in the philosophy of religion, the logical and moral critic of religious images is equally part of the task of the philosophy of religion.

The religious imagination requires metaphysics in two respects. One positive: our metaphysical reflections can be inspired and shaped by images and symbols – Plato's cave being perhaps one of our most striking. Yet the rational critique of such images is equally necessary. It is chastening to recall in our self-esteem culture, and especially when giving lectures to a tender-minded generation, that false beliefs can be highly inspiring and true beliefs can be profoundly dispiriting. The cool appraisal of consoling



phantasies has been a part of philosophy since Xenophanes. If the cosmos is a heap of ultimately meaningless *disjecta membra*, then Nietzsche is right that Platonic–Idealistic metaphysics is the timid refusal to endorse the death of God.

While it was a scholar of literature who coined the phrase ‘the anxiety of influence’,<sup>34</sup> no one could have more reason for such Oedipal anxiety than students of Plato. Yet Platonism as a live philosophical option has been infinitely fertile in fusing together the legitimate desire for the explanation of value and intelligibility while resisting rationalism of the narrow kind. Long may the endeavour to climb out of the cave and up the divided line continue; long may we contemplate the Good that ultimately overcomes evil and consecrates the finite and the defective; and long may we continue to revere the finite and transitory as a precious icon of the great I AM that alone truly is.

## Notes

- 1 Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 6 vols (London: Everyman, 1993), vol. IV, 159.
- 2 See Douglas Hedley and David Leech (eds), *Revisioning the Cambridge Platonists: Sources and Legacy* (Dord: Springer, 2019).
- 3 Charles Taliaferro, *Evidence and Faith: Philosophy and Religion since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- 4 Victor Nuovo, *John Locke: The Philosopher as Christian Virtuoso* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 159. I had the good fortune of being taught by Michael Ayers, perhaps the pre-eminent scholar of Locke in recent decades.
- 5 Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. Vol. 1: *Introduction and the Concept of Religion*, edited by Peter C. Hodgson, translated by R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson and J. M. Stuart with the assistance of H. S. Harris (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.
- 6 Berkeley, *Siris*, § 263.
- 7 Henry More, *A Platonick Song of the Soul*. For the full poem, see *A Platonick Song of the Soul*, edited with an Introductory Study by Alexander Jacob (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1998), 407.
- 8 Ralph Cudworth, *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality With A Treatise of Freewill*, edited by Sarah Hutton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 27.
- 9 John Muirhead, *The Platonic Tradition in Anglo-Saxon Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1931), 35.
- 10 *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London: Printed for Richard Royston, 1678), 65.
- 11 Dmitri Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom in the Age of the New Science* (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 16.
- 12 See the work of Marilyn Lewis, ‘Pastoral Platonism in the Writings of Henry Hallywell (1641–1703)’, *The Seventeenth Century* 28 (2013): 441–63. See also her ‘“Christ’s College and the Latitude-Men” Revisited: A Seminary of Heretics?’, accepted for publication in *History of Universities* 33 (2020) 17–68.
- 13 Cudworth, *True Intellectual System*, ‘The Preface’.