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978-0-521-10823-2 - Light and Enlightenment: A Study of the Cambridge Platonists and the Dutch Arminians

Rosalie L. Colie

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

THE BACKGROUND OF ANGLO-DUTCH
ARMINIANISM

Out of the bitter and dissident chorus of Reformation England the quiet voices of the Cambridge Platonists afforded in their time a welcome peace from the theological and political hubbub of that distressful period. Seventeenth-century theology, so much the blood of the seventeenth-century body politic that no vein could be tapped without political reaction, had little of either calm or toleration; and theological writing, commentary upon the word of God, ran from intolerable rudeness to intolerant barbarity. 'Yet, it is neither in the word nor in the thing, but in yourself exists all vice and all obscenity. Lewder than any fawn or naked satyr, your manners have converted words of chastest meanings into words of naked ribaldry. No shade could veil your filthiness, not even that notable fig-tree. Whoever speaks of you, and of your debaucheries, cannot choose but speak obscenely', wrote England's greatest seventeenth-century poet, accustomed to command the attention of the lords and commons of England and of continental intellectuals, capable of poetry purer than that of any of his contemporaries. When he could write so—and he was as nothing to Edwards or Prynne—a tone habitually gentler can only delight us. 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.¹

¹ There are many books dealing with the Cambridge Platonists,

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Cambridge Platonism was, in our strange terminology, radical, though without the sharp exclusiveness of the more fundamentalist sects. Like the fundamentalists and like Chillingworth, with whom they had much in common, the Cambridge Platonists relied principally upon the authority of Scripture for their truth: they sought the 'root' of Christianity, of religion, not as their own exclusive property or their particular password to heaven, but as the strong essence of faith that might draw together into one communion all Christendom—or at least all Protestant Christendom. Equally, in our terminology, they were conservative. They had the scholar's approach to religion, the academic desire to save from the past any remnant of doctrine or observation that might have value, whatever wide and generous thought might add to the lustre of Christianity's light. The Platonists were, no doubt about it, typical academicians in their avoidance of actual strife in a period when differences in religion split families asunder, set house against house, parish against parish, and finally the country against itself. Academic they certainly were in the sense in which the word is almost never used, the good one: they believed that articles of faith must be put to the scrutiny of reason, the reason not only of the philosophical mind but of what we loosely call common

as a group, as part of the English tradition of theology, as individuals. The best of these remains John Tulloch's *Rational Theology and Christian Philosophy in England* (Edinburgh and London, 1874, 2 vols.). Other studies are by Eugene Austin, E. T. Campagnac, G. R. Cragg, J. J. de Boer, J. H. Muirhead, W. C. de Pawley, G. P. H. Pawson, and F. J. Powicke, all of which should be consulted by the careful student. Ernst Cassirer's *The Platonic Renaissance in England* (London, 1953) is by far the best short analytical study.

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sense. It was reason only, they thought, that could stem the flood of religious ‘enthusiasm’ sweeping over England and could turn men’s minds to brotherly love and God’s honour, away from blood and persecution. Henry More’s passionate extollings of reason, God’s right reason, are equalled in intensity only by his fearful pictures of the havoc wrought by enthusiasm. In this sense the Cambridge Platonists surely were, as they have so often been called, the heirs of Erasmus; in their irenicism and broad theology they were, whether they liked it or not, also the forerunners of eighteenth-century deism.¹ Like Erasmus, like Chillingworth, like Jeremy Taylor and Lord Falkland, the Cambridge Platonists sought religious and civil peace in a world torn apart by physical and spiritual war; they attempted to draw a philosophical blueprint for a practical utopia among men.

However radical—i.e. daring and uncommon—this position was in the seventeenth century, it was at the same time basically conservative, indeed, in the last analysis, more conservative than radical. The Cambridge Platonists sought to save as much of life for men as could be saved, to open men’s minds to the love of God, to divest men of their fear of vengeful Jehovah, so that all men might pass their lives quietly and properly in the pursuit of their callings and in the worship of God. Selectively, they reviewed the knowledge available to them and chose of it what they felt appropriate to their enlightening philosophy. In the tradition of Erasmus in the North and the Florentine Academy in the South,

¹ For an interesting discussion of the relation of latitudinarianism to deism, see G. R. Cragg, *From Puritanism to the Age of Reason. A Study of Changes in Religious Thought within the Church of England, 1660 to 1700* (Cambridge, 1950), Chapter III.

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they formed in England a Christian Platonism of astonishing strength, resiliency and adaptability.¹

Their researches, though largely in the area of Biblical tradition and of idealistic and mystical philosophy, were not restricted to the conventional lines of the past. The Cambridge Platonists espoused much that was 'modern' in seventeenth-century thought: More and Cudworth, both profound students of Descartes, were acquainted with many of the major scientists of the age and both elected Fellows of the Royal Society.² Though they certainly were not leaders in the phalanx of scientific progress in the sense that Boyle and Barrow were, nor propagandists for the new science like Sprat and Wilkins, the Platonists were extremely modern in comparison with men of stricter religion. Indeed, More's poetic preoccupation with the wonders of the world would have had short shrift from the Baptists, for example, a sect that sternly forbade undue preoccupation with the external world. In the seventeenth century, fundamentalist sects tended to fear research into the natural sciences, to fear that the material world might beguile true believers to forget God, to fear that the study of the phenomena of natural science might prove, as it traditionally was viewed, as the easy sliding pathway to atheism, or at best to scepticism. Extreme protestant sects denied to their members the pleasures and the pitfalls of the new science.

Not so the Cambridge Platonists. Henry More and

¹ Cassirer, *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, *passim*.

² Paul B. Anderson, *Science in Defense of Liberal Religion: A Study of Henry More's Attempt to Link Seventeenth Century Religion with Science* (London and New York, 1923) is an excellent study of More's scientific 'modernism'.

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Ralph Cudworth were far from unaware of the dangers to true religion, dangers from ‘enthusiasticks’ and sectarians within the Christian fold, from heathens and atheists without. No less than the extreme sectarians they recognized that one contributing cause to atheism might well lie in too close study of natural philosophy, but they saw in natural philosophy also a newly-perceived manifestation of God’s eternal providence. The world was God’s as man was God’s, and man could have no fear of what was God’s. ‘This is the cause I grope after in the works of Nature; on this hangs the providence of God. To raise so beauteous a structure as the World and the Creatures thereof, was but His Art; but their sundry and divided operations, with their predestinated ends, are from the Treasure of His Wisdom’, wrote Sir Thomas Browne, in many ways close to Cambridge Platonism. ‘Nature hath made one World, and Art another. In brief, all things are artificial; for Nature is the Art of GOD.’¹

The Platonists knew too that religion was never entirely safe, that revealed truth was always threatened; indeed, if there had not been dangers, no great apologies would ever have come to be written—the Gospels themselves, written when Christianity was just alive; the Pauline Epistles, the *City of God*, the *Summa*, the *Institutes*, the multitudinous *Theologiae Christianae*. Cudworth and More wrote in a period when the one true church was no more, certainly not for them, and even the one true Church of England needed definition and policy—a state of ecclesiastical indecision that made for the breeding and interbreeding of sects, those merciless groups of men

¹ Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici* (Everyman edition, 1945), pp. 16, 19.

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and women, each convinced of his salvation—by election, by faith, by works—most of them denying salvation to the followers of other creeds. And as if the danger of heresy and schism within Christianity were not enough, there was also the danger from without, from atheism, from rudimentary deism, from scepticism. Against atheism as they understood it, in all its seventeenth-century forms (Epicureanism, atomism, Hobbism, Spinozism, materialism, determinism, necessitarianism), More and Cudworth did yeomen's service: among their consistent defences of God's truth, More's *Antidote against Atheism* and Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe* stand out as arguments for Christian revelation. The Cambridge Platonists may not have taken sword and horse for King or Parliament, but they were nonetheless brave men. They fought truths with Truth and attempted to meet all their opponents with the two-edged sword of reason. Against the reasoning atheists they used their God-given right reason; against the proponents of deistic natural religion they advanced a religion deeply involved with the fact of the natural world. Theirs was even a kind of 'natural' religion, natural to man and natural to God.

As many recent studies have been at pains to show, the Cambridge Platonists, and particularly More and Cudworth, were extremely influential in their generation and beyond it. Their place in the history of English philosophy, in particular of English idealism, is an established one; the more we know of English latitudinarianism, of English Cartesianism, of English materialism in the seventeenth century, the more we realize how deeply involved the Cambridge Platonists were in the fabric of seventeenth-century social and intellectual life. Their correspondence, the references in their works, all indicate

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their range of contemporary awareness; references to them by other men, Englishmen and foreigners, give a suggestion of their importance in that intellectual life.

Henry More had some acquaintance among Dutch scholars, largely through his friends Samuel Hartlib and the well-named Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont. In his travels to unite Christendom, Hartlib necessarily came into contact with Protestant divines all over Europe; and van Helmont, a member of the Lady Conway's circle at Ragley, knew most of the liberal divines in his country as well as most of the scientists. It is not surprising, then, to find among the papers of the Dutch Arminian Philippus van Limborch, minister and professor at Amsterdam, record of correspondence with Henry More and with Ralph Cudworth carried on over two decades, from 1667 to 1687, the year of Cudworth's death. Examination of the extant correspondence and of the writings of Limborch and the Platonists reveals a genuine connection between the aims of the Platonists in England and the Arminians in Holland, a closeness of purpose indicative of an astonishingly similar mental attitude and outlook upon the spiritual and physical worlds. But let us turn back in time to the establishment of Dutch Arminianism.

'Arminianism' turns up over and over again in the literature of seventeenth-century religious controversy in England, but the movement was not of native growth.¹ Jacob Harmanszoon, 'the acute and distinct Arminius', as Milton called him, lived from 1560 to 1609, a Dutch theologian of great gifts. He began his life within the Reformed Church of Calvin and studied in the Calvinist

¹ Frederic Platt, article, 'Arminianism', *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*.

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city of God, Geneva itself; after an active pastoral and intellectual life as minister in that church, he became Professor of Theology at Leiden University. Little by little—tradition tells that he was led into anti-Calvinist ‘error’ by the writings of the Dutch ‘libertine’ pietist Dirck Volckertsz Coornhert—Arminius fell away from total acceptance of the Calvinist theology, balking particularly at the ‘horrible decretum’ of election. Against that decree he laid his theological emphasis upon man’s free will and God’s mercy, until he finally denied the doctrine of predestination outright and asserted a church polity in conformity with his idea of man’s relation to God.

When Arminius died in 1609, the matter was not ended. He had been challenged and ordered to declare his views over and over again during his lifetime, and orthodox divines were not ready to trust his followers. In 1610 these followers, still within the Reformed Church, presented the Calvinist clergy with a Remonstrance dealing with five points of doctrine: they rejected the idea of election and predestination, in both its supralapsarian and infralapsarian forms; the idea that Christ died for the elect alone; the belief in irresistible grace; the idea that saints could not fall from grace.¹ This document, which necessarily called much of Calvinist orthodox doctrine into question, was the work principally of a powerful minister in the Hague, Jan van Uytenbogaert.²

¹ A. W. Harrison, *The Beginnings of Arminianism* (London, 1926), p. 149.

² H. C. Rogge, *Johannes Wtenbogaert en zijn Tijd* (Amsterdam, 1874–6, 3 vols.) is the standard work on Uytenbogaert and serves as a partial primary source in the number of letters there reprinted.

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Uytenbogaert had the highest connections: he was chaplain to Louise de Coligny, daughter of the Huguenot martyr-admiral and widow of the Stadholder William the First. The chief figures about Uytenbogaert were the heroes of early Arminianism: Pieter Bertijs, after the troubles a convert to Rome; Nicolaas Grevinchoven of Rotterdam, a powerful preacher and formidable opponent; Simon Bisschop or Episcopius, after Arminius the principal theologian of the movement; and two lay figures, Jan van Oldenbarnevelt, Pensionary of Holland, and Hugo Grotius, poet-classicist-jurist-theologian-scientist, the greatest man of genius Holland then could boast. With these men and many others across the land dissatisfied with the rigidities of overruling Calvinism, Uytenbogaert felt that the time was ready for a declaration of the Arminian doctrinal position.

He had not long to wait for action. Inevitably, the Calvinists called to account these Arminians, or Remonstrants, as they by 1610 came generally to be called. After preliminary skirmishes, in one of which King James figured to his discredit,¹ the clergy of Holland was summoned in 1618 to sit in synodal judgment at Dordrecht upon the doctrines declared in the Great Remonstrance.

The Synod of Dort, gathered to hear the argument of a religious question, was the stage on which were performed the two great political plays of the Dutch seventeenth century. As Mr Trevor-Roper has so ably pointed out in his biography of Laud, the seventeenth century did not go to war over matters of doctrine alone; religion was the language into which political questions were cast, and men believed in their religions.² Every war was

¹ Harrison, *The Beginnings of Arminianism*, ch. vi.

² H. R. Trevor-Roper, *Archbishop Laud* (London, 1940), pp. 2-3.

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a holy war: when Spain controlled trade routes to the Americas, England had fought Catholicism and the Spanish Jesuits with pen and sword and pirate ship; when France's power grew to threaten England more than Spain's, the holy war—with its invective—was transferred to France. The United Netherlands, threatened first by Spain and then by France, behaved in exactly the same way as England; within their boundaries countries were by no means less free with political accusation levelled in the language of religion. It has always been easier to fight a holy war than a just one. Even in the Age of Reason, wars were fought for faiths in things far deeper than justice alone, fought secularly with the language of the oldest religious war. Because of its latent independency, its possible declaration of *imperium in imperio*, sectarianism was always a political danger to established religion, as Elizabeth, James, Charles and Laud well knew in England and the Calvinist classis in Holland. The Synod of Dort, which seems to modern eyes an appalling travesty of justice—Episcopius appealed in vain to be heard by judges already his doctrinal enemies—was in fact a political event of the greatest significance. It involved church government, and church government involved civil government: the relations of church to state were such that a consideration apparently touching only one invariably touched the other as well.

In England after the Reformation the question of church and state had been left deliberately vague. Henry VIII, Defender of the Faith, was naturally the head of the church founded in his reign and under him and his son, religious matters were so closely tied to politics that to be a Catholic was to be a traitor to the Crown. Under his elder daughter the situation was reversed;