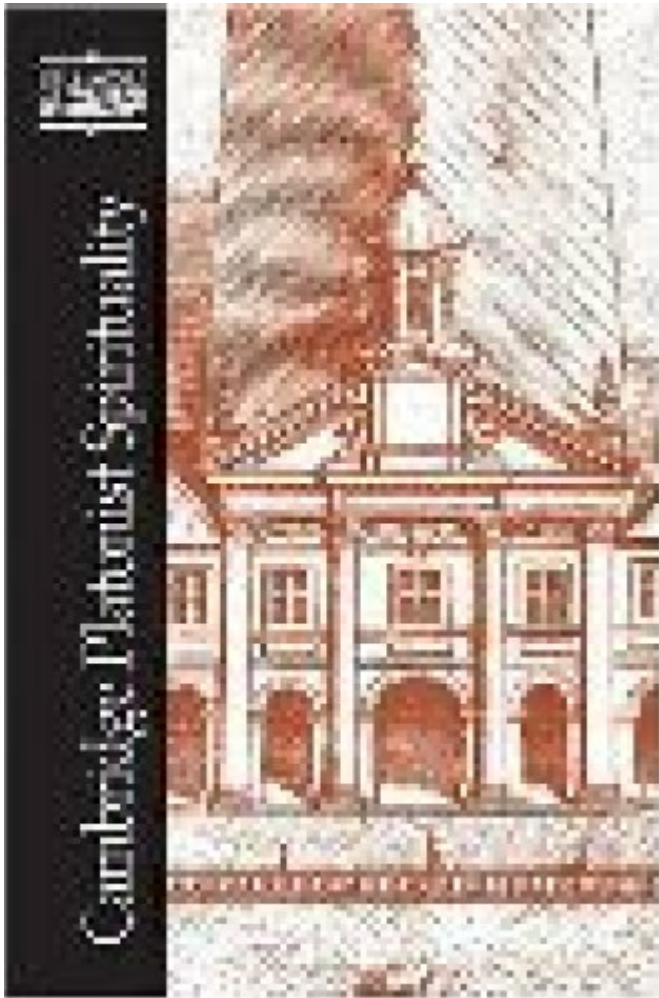


Cambridge Platonist Spirituality

reviewed by [Roger E. Moore](#) in the [May 3, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Cambridge Platonist Spirituality

Charles Taliaferro and Alison J. Teply, eds.
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At a time when religious conservatives claim a mandate and the best-selling Left Behind novels gleefully contemplate the destruction of all but a small remnant of

humanity, the works of the Cambridge Platonists speak with particular resonance. These 17th-century rational theologians also lived in a remarkably fractious age. We can learn a great deal from their sober, reasonable and tolerant answers to the exclusivism and dogmatism of their time.

One of the latest in Paulist Press's venerable Classics of Western Spirituality series, this is an important volume. Charles Taliaferro, a professor of philosophy at St. Olaf College, has been a student of Cambridge Platonism for years, and he has written a number of books on the philosophy of religion. Alison J. Teply, a recent Cambridge Ph.D. recipient, wrote her dissertation on one of the movement's leaders. Too often scholars consider the Cambridge Platonists philosophers and not theologians, so the editors chose selections mostly from these authors' sermons and poems. The introductory matter includes a preface by church historian Jaroslav Pelikan, an overview of Cambridge Platonist emphases, brief author biographies, and an essay on 17th-century religious history in England.

Benjamin Whichcote (1609-1683) established Cambridge Platonism at Emmanuel College. His students and followers included Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688), Nathaniel Culverwell (1618?-1651), John Smith (1618-1652), Peter Sterry (1613-1672) and Henry More (1614-1687), all of whose writings appear in this volume. The editors also include a selection from Anne Conway (1631-1679), a figure not traditionally ranked among the Platonists but whose philosophical thought and great friendship with Henry More certainly qualify her for inclusion. Although not widely known today, these thinkers were enormously influential in the English Enlightenment and anticipated many of the tenets of modern theological liberalism.

Unlike many Reformation theologians, who depended on Augustine's denigration of human effort and his belief in innate depravity, these thinkers turned to the more optimistic theology inspired by Plato and Plotinus and interpreted for Christians by patristic writers like Origen and Clement of Alexandria. That the movement arose at Emmanuel College, a hotbed of Calvinist theology, is ironic. Whichcote and followers had no patience for the doctrine of predestination; their belief in the eternal nature of the good prevented them from imagining the arbitrary and willful God who emerges in much Calvinist discourse.

As many of the selections in this volume show, the endless 17th-century debates over predestination, church polity and ritual repulsed the Platonists. For them Christianity was very simple: it consists in conformity of one's life to Christ's

example and is, in John Smith's famous words, "rather a divine life than a divine science." "The end of the gospel," Cudworth maintained, "is a divine nature, it is a Godlike frame and disposition or spirit, it is to make us partakers of the image of God in righteousness and true holiness." They believed that reason is a divine gift meant to help humans become properly godlike, and they reserved their harshest criticism for those "dogmatical" or fanatical ("enthusiastic" in 17th-century terms) people who denigrate reason in favor of blind faith or private revelation.

The writings of the Cambridge Platonists provide a refreshing viewpoint much needed in today's theological and political environment, with its increasingly Calvinist division of humanity into the elect and the reprobate. The Cambridge Platonists knew about "axes of evil," and they deplored the arrogance that accompanied such dualistic thinking in their own time. The selections in this book remind us of the perennial challenge of religious exclusivism and suggest a simple, positive spiritual vision relevant to religious divisions in any age.

Taliaferro and Teply's volume is the first comprehensive edition of the Cambridge Platonists since 1969. A number of editions appeared in the middle decades of the 20th century, when theological liberalism was ascendant, but interest in the Platonists has declined in the past 30 years. The appearance of this volume at this moment may provide a guidepost on the way to greater tolerance.