

LEARNED AND INGENIOUS MEN

The Lives and Times of the Cambridge Platonists

The philosophical movement known as Cambridge Platonism is usually said to consist of a ‘core group’ of four thinkers: Benjamin Whichcote (1609–1683), Henry More (c. 1614–1687), Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688) and John Smith (c. 1618–1652), with a number of others orbiting in their periphery. All four took degrees at Cambridge during the 1630s and 1640s and then went on to become fellows and heads of colleges.

Many studies of the Cambridge Platonists focus on their later lives and works, after the Restoration in 1660, when (with the exception of Smith, who died in 1652) they had reached the most prominent and influential stage of their respective careers. This book, however, is primarily concerned with their early years at Cambridge in the 1630s and 1640s, when their philosophical vision was still in its formative stages.

These earlier years were characterised by religious and political strife and were among the most disruptive England has ever known. When John Smith, the youngest of the Cambridge Platonists, entered the university in 1636, Charles I was England’s king and William Laud the Archbishop of Canterbury. By 1651, when the Cambridge Platonists had all attained higher degrees and were occupying high-level academic positions in Cambridge, both Charles and Laud had been beheaded and the offices of king and bishop entirely abolished. These seismic alterations to church and state would be reversed in 1660, with the triumphal return of Charles II, but they left England irrevocably changed.

The Cambridge Platonists had the dubious privilege of witnessing much of the religious and political turmoil of the civil wars first-hand. This is because they were deeply embedded in the ‘Puritan’ community at Cambridge: a tightly knit, influential network of preachers, statesmen and scholars – described by

some historians as ‘mafia-like’ – which played a pivotal role in the abolition of the monarchy and the unprecedented transformation of England into a kingless and bishopless Commonwealth.¹ Historians debate the usefulness of the term ‘Puritan’, but the word captures one of the most important religious goals of this theological faction: the ‘purification’ of the English Church from all the corrupting influences of its Catholic past and of new heresies that sought to dilute or obscure the Gospel as they understood it. ‘Reformed’ is probably a better descriptor of their theological convictions than ‘Puritan’ (which was in fact a term of abuse used by their enemies), for the Reformation was the standard of ‘purity’ to which they sought to make the Church conform. A pure church, faithful to the Reformation, would be one that held in uncompromising and unambiguous terms the central Protestant doctrines of double predestination and salvation by faith alone: no sacraments, no ceremonies, no clerical orders or ascetic practices could play any role in salvation, which was understood entirely as a free and gracious gift from God.

The causes of the civil wars were complex and diverse, but the religious concerns of the Puritan, or Reformed, faction of English Christians played a significant role in the breakdown of relations between the king and Parliament. King Charles and his hand-picked chief cleric, Archbishop Laud, alienated the Reformed community, both by failing to suppress religious ideas and practices that the Reformed party considered heretical and by actively promoting men of questionable orthodoxy (especially on the matter of predestination) to positions of influence in the Church of England and the universities. For Puritans across England, and especially at the ‘Puritan seminaries’ of Emmanuel and Christ’s colleges in Cambridge (to which the Cambridge Platonists belonged as students and fellows), this was a dark time: a time when true religion was being opposed and undermined by the most powerful authorities in the land.

When, after a bloody civil war, Parliament emerged victorious and the king was stripped of his power, the Puritans found their political fortunes miraculously reversed. Where before they were viewed with suspicion by the royal and ecclesiastical authorities, the new regime empowered them to embark upon a vigorous programme of national theological reform, undoing the damage wrought by Charles and Laud.

As part of this political and religious reformation, Parliament commissioned the Earl of Manchester in 1644 to begin purging the University of Cambridge of all persons who were perceived to have royalist leanings. In

¹ The term ‘mafia’ was first used in this context by Bendall, Brooke and Collinson in their *History of Emmanuel College, Cambridge*; see Chapter 3.

all, nearly half the total fellowship of the university were forcibly ejected, along with the masters of ten colleges.² The positions they left vacant were promptly filled by men more aligned with Parliament's aims, and these were largely drawn from the Puritan colleges, especially Emmanuel and Christ's. As young scholars at the beginning of their careers, in good standing with their Puritan colleagues, Whichcote, Cudworth and Smith were all suddenly promoted to (or 'intruded into') positions of influence within the university.³

When Charles II resumed the throne in 1660, most of these intrusions were reversed. But the Cambridge Platonists, who had developed a reputation for tolerance and moderation, fared relatively well in this second purge: Cudworth retained his position as the master of Christ's College, and Whichcote probably would have remained the provost of King's had it not been for the aggressive and relentless politicking of an ambitious army chaplain.⁴ And apart from Smith, who had died of a respiratory illness in 1652, the Cambridge Platonists were about to enter their most productive and intellectually fruitful phase. In the newly re-established Church of England, many of their students would go on to become influential and celebrated clergymen, including two who would serve as successive archbishops of Canterbury.⁵

These upheavals, which played out at both the university and the national level, are essential to understanding the intellectual trajectories of the Cambridge Platonists. On the one hand, as scions of Puritan households and products of Puritan colleges, they were entrusted with prominent university positions during the Interregnum. But they also maintained a fierce independence of thought in both theological and political matters that endeared them to many of those who were most disaffected by the fanaticism and intolerance of the Puritan regime.

Benjamin Whichcote (1609–1683)

The oldest member of the group, often identified as its 'founder', was Benjamin Whichcote. Whichcote entered Emmanuel College, Cambridge,

² See Chapter 4.

³ Whichcote became the provost of King's College; Cudworth became the master of Clare Hall (before being elected the master of Christ's). Smith, who was still a student at Emmanuel in 1644, was made a fellow of Queens' College. Henry More was already a fellow of Christ's College, a position he retained under the new regime (and for the rest of his life).

⁴ Roberts Sr (1968) 7–10.

⁵ The so-called 'latitudinarians', including archbishops John Tillotson (1630–1694) and Thomas Tenison (1636–1715); see Tillotson (1683); Griffin Jr (1992) 22–3.

in 1626, where he was tutored by two prominent Calvinists: Anthony Tuckney and Thomas Hill.⁶ As he ran the gamut of degrees from Bachelor (1630) and Master (1633) of Arts to Master (1640) and Doctor (1649) of Divinity, Whichcote gained great popularity as a preacher and a tutor.⁷ After briefly serving a parish in North Cadbury, he was recalled to Cambridge in 1644 to take up a post left vacant by the Earl of Manchester's purge of the university. Whichcote and both of his former tutors were made heads of colleges: Tuckney of Emmanuel, Hill of Trinity and Whichcote of King's.⁸ Whichcote accepted this position only reluctantly, insisting that a significant part of his salary be given to the ejected provost, Samuel Collins, for as long as he held the post (an act of magnanimity that won him much respect from all sides and was typical of his conciliatory character).⁹ As we will see later, Whichcote's anti-Calvinist theological convictions would quickly become a sore point dividing him from his former tutors and other college heads. After the Restoration, he was ejected from his university position by royalists seeking to undo the parliamentary intrusions, and spent the rest of his life as a popular priest and preacher in London.¹⁰

Whichcote published nothing while he lived; all the works published in his name are posthumous, and in some cases edited together rather messily.¹¹ They include sermons, aphorisms and the eight letters exchanged between himself and his former tutor Anthony Tuckney in late 1651. As a result, his intellectual development is difficult to trace, although this book aims to shed light on some of Whichcote's early relationships, especially with his fellow Cambridge Platonists, using the few clues provided in early, dateable, works.

Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688)

Born in 1617, Ralph Cudworth was eight years Whichcote's junior. His father, Ralph Cudworth Sr, numbered among the Puritan elite, as did his stepfather, John Stoughton; both were alumni of Emmanuel College,

⁶ Roberts Sr (1968) 1–2.

⁷ Whichcote held two prominent preaching posts, one as Sunday afternoon lecturer at Trinity Church in Cambridge (where he preached weekly for twenty years) and another as 'university preacher', *EL* xxxviii; Tillotson (1683) 24; Roberts Sr (1968) 2; Hutton (2005).

⁸ *EL* xxii; Knighton (2004); Collinson (2004).

⁹ Tillotson (1683) 22–3. As Bishop Burnet would later recall of Whichcote, 'He had great credit with some that had been eminent in the late times; but made all the use he could of it to protect good men of all persuasions', Burnet (1724) vol. I, 339.

¹⁰ On Whichcote's later career, see Roberts Sr (1968) 7–14.

¹¹ See Roberts Sr (1968) 267–74; Hutton (2005).

Cambridge.¹² It is hardly surprising then that in 1630, at the age of thirteen, Cudworth entered Emmanuel College as a pensioner.¹³ He appears to have excelled there; according to an early biographer, Cudworth's tutor (whose identity is unfortunately unknown) declared, '*That no person had been ever admitted into that Society so young, who was such a Proficient in School-Learning as he*'.¹⁴ While at Emmanuel, Cudworth sent two letters to his stepfather that reveal the beginnings of his interest in Platonic theology.¹⁵ He passed through the full series of degrees: Bachelor and Master of Arts, then Bachelor and finally Doctor of Divinity, which he attained in 1651.¹⁶ After becoming a fellow of Emmanuel in 1639, Cudworth became an extremely popular tutor, 'crowded with Pupils, insomuch that he had no fewer than twenty-eight at once'.¹⁷

In the purge of 1644, Cudworth swore the Solemn League and Covenant and in 1647 became the master of Clare Hall by parliamentary appointment.¹⁸ During this time, he made occasional visits to North Cadbury, where he served at Whichcote's former parish, but returned to Cambridge full-time in 1654 after being elected the master of Christ's College to replace the late Samuel Bolton.¹⁹ He was held in high enough esteem by the Puritan Parliament to be honoured with an invitation to deliver a sermon to the House of Commons in 1647, at the height of the civil war. The sermon was apparently well received; writing from prison, the royalist former master of Emmanuel Richard Holdsworth (who remained warmly disposed to Whichcote and Cudworth), wrote: 'Mr Cudworth hath gained well by his sermon, it comes up to the great prizes which have bene given for poetry.'²⁰ Frederick Wilson suggests that the proud legacy of Cudworth's late, nonconforming stepfather, John Stoughton, had something to do with

¹² Ralph Cudworth Sr served as chaplain to James I, and was an intimate friend and a posthumous editor of the most famous English Calvinist, William Perkins; see 'Memoirs of Ralph Cudworth' (1736) 24; Gill (2006) 7–11; Pailin (2008). On Stoughton's prominence and connection to Emmanuel, see Wilson (1969) 131; Stoughton (1640).

¹³ 'Pensioners' were undergraduate students wealthy enough to pay their own fees (in the form of a recurring 'pension' to the college); see Skinner (2018) 121, nn. 16 and 17.

¹⁴ 'Memoirs of Ralph Cudworth' (1736) 25. ¹⁵ For more on these letters, see Chapter 2.

¹⁶ BA 1635, MA 1639, BD 1646, DD 1651; see Pailin (2008).

¹⁷ 'Memoirs of Ralph Cudworth' (1736) 25.

¹⁸ Bodl. Tanner MS 56 fol. 242. Cudworth appears to have retained his fellowship at Emmanuel while serving as the master of Clare Hall; in 1647, Thomas Smith wrote: 'though [Mr Cudworth] be chosen Master of Clare hall, his modesty suffers him not to make use of the title, but makes him content ... to keepe himself Fellow of Emanuel, as I conceive; for there he still lives' (Thomas Smith to Samuel Hartlib, 22 October 1647, 15/6/3A).

¹⁹ Pailin (2008).

²⁰ Holdsworth to William Sancroft, 14 April 1647, Bodl. Tanner MS 58, fol. 55.

the invitation to address Parliament.²¹ But Cudworth also had his own merits to recommend him, and he became an important consultant for the parliamentary authorities, including Oliver Cromwell himself.²²

Despite his high standing with the Interregnum regime, Cudworth avoided the fate that befell other college heads intruded by Parliament (including Whichcote and Tuckney) after the Restoration, retaining his position and remaining the master of Christ's College until his death in 1688, despite bitter and persistent attempts by royalists to have him ousted, along with his friend and colleague Henry More.²³

Far more than Whichcote, who was Cudworth's lifelong friend and a kindred spirit, Cudworth was actively engaged with the philosophical currents sweeping England during his life. He drew widely but carefully from René Descartes and was apparently the main instigator of More's brief correspondence with the ageing Descartes in 1649.²⁴ Accordingly, along with Henry More, Cudworth is one of the only Cambridge Platonists who receive regular attention from philosophers and historians of ideas.²⁵

Apart from a small number of sermons and poems, Cudworth published only one major work during his lifetime, the ambitious and lengthy tract against atheism and determinism titled *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678). This work was intended to be the first part of a trilogy defending the three 'Fundamentals or Essentials of True Religion', namely: the existence of God, the existence and immutability of morality, and free will.²⁶ The *True Intellectual System* defends the first fundamental, while the second and third parts of the trilogy (or portions of them) were published from manuscripts as the *Treatise of Eternal and Immutable Morality* and the *Treatise of Freewill*, although much important manuscript material remains unpublished.²⁷

John Smith (c. 1618–1652)

Of the four major Cambridge Platonists, John Smith is the one about whom least is known; in John Tulloch's poignant phrase, Smith is 'a thinker

²¹ Wilson (1969) 131. On the context and reception of Cudworth's sermon, see Hutton (2018).

²² Rogers (1997) 8–9. ²³ Nicolson (1929) 42–7; Crocker (2003) 84–6.

²⁴ Crocker (2003) 65.

²⁵ Especial attention has been given to Cudworth's ethics. Stephen Darwall (1995) 109–48 has noted that in some ways Cudworth's theory of obligation is an important precursor to Kant's theory of practical reason, as discussed in Chapter 10. See also Schroeder (2005); Wielenberg (2014).

²⁶ *TISU* 'Preface' ii.

²⁷ Hutton, *TEIM* xii–xiii; Carter (2011) 161–8; Leech (2017a, 2017b).

without a biography'.²⁸ His small literary legacy and relatively short lifespan have often caused him to be passed over or investigated merely 'as an ancillary curiosity or source of contextual (or rhetorical) leverage for the study of the more famous Cambridge Platonists'.²⁹

Smith was born in 1618 (or perhaps 1616). His early life is obscure, but he enrolled in Emmanuel College, Cambridge, in 1636 as a sizar under the tutelage of Benjamin Whichcote.³⁰ He graduated his BA in 1640 and MA in 1644. In the aftermath of the parliamentary ejections of royalists from Cambridge in 1644, Smith was intruded as a fellow of Queens' College. During his time at Queens', he held three teaching posts: Hebrew lecturer, geometry lecturer and censor of philosophy (*censor Philosophicus*).³¹ From 1648 to 1651, he held a university lectureship in mathematics, in which capacity he became an important disseminator of the philosophy of Descartes.³² He also served for some time as the college's dean and catechist, delivering sermons at the college chapel in 1650–1.³³ This is the context in which Smith developed much of the material later published as his *Select Discourses*.³⁴

Smith's life was tragically cut short by illness. He developed a 'husking cough' in 1651 and, despite consultations with physicians (including the Paracelsian alchemist Theodore de Mayerne), fell into a stupor, finally passing away on 7 August 1652, while still in his mid-thirties.³⁵ Were it not for the efforts of his friend and Emmanuel colleague John Worthington, Smith would have left behind no literary legacy worthy of study. But in 1660, eight years after Smith's death, Worthington published ten of Smith's sermons (edited from notes in Smith's own hand) in a volume of *Select Discourses*. The book sold well enough that it was reprinted in 1673.

²⁸ Tulloch (1874) 122.

²⁹ Michaud (2011) 142. Nonetheless, some valuable treatments of Smith are Saveson (1958, 1959); Micheletti (1976); Schneewind (1997) 194–215; Michaud (2015, 2019a, 2019b); Sheppard (2015) 156–65; Levitin (2015) 128–9; Ridley-Johnson (2016).

³⁰ Ridley-Johnson (2016) 4–5. A sizar was an undergraduate student unable to pay their way as a pensioner: 'Besides receiving a subsidy from the College, sizars often paid their way through university by waiting on other students and acting as servants to the Fellows', Skinner (2018) 121. Smith, it seems, waited on his tutor Benjamin Whichcote, which is probably what Worthington means when he says that Smith 'lived off' Whichcote (*SD* iv).

³¹ Ridley-Johnson (2016) 7, n. 19.

³² See Chapter 2. On Smith's early engagement with Cartesian ideas, see Saveson (1959).

³³ *SD* 69; Ridley-Johnson (2016) 41.

³⁴ *SD* v. It is worth noting that Smith's *Fourth Discourse*, if delivered as a sermon in 1650–1, is another example of Smith's role as an early English promulgator of Cartesian ideas.

³⁵ A touching account of Smith's last days found its way into Simon Patrick's autobiography; see Patrick (1858) 421f.

The lengthy discourse on prophecy met with particularly high praise and was even translated into Latin by Jean Le Clerc in 1731. Dmitri Levitin recently called Smith's discourse on prophecy 'perhaps the most detailed mid-century discussion on the epistemological differences between natural reason, divine inspiration, and enthusiasm ... posited against the dual threats of illuminationism and Socinianism'.³⁶ A subordinate goal of this book is to bring out the philosophical value of Smith's *Discourses*.³⁷

Henry More (c. 1614–1687)

Along with Cudworth, Henry More is one of the most famous Cambridge Platonists, and the one who has received the most consistent attention from philosophers.³⁸ He was born in 1614 in Grantham, the youngest child of a well-off and pious Puritan family. His father, Alexander More, alderman and, later, mayor of Grantham, was 'a strict and pious Calvinist of a kind that was then fairly typical within the Anglican Church'.³⁹ In More's own words, as a child he was 'educated by both parents and a tutor who were Calvinists, albeit very pious and conscientious'.⁴⁰ But he also recalls that, much to the chagrin of his relatives, he began to reject the harsh Calvinist doctrine of predestination while still a teenager.⁴¹

After going to school at Eton, he followed the path of his uncle and two of his brothers by entering Christ's College, Cambridge, in 1631, at the age of seventeen, as a pensioner. Christ's College was, like Emmanuel, a bastion of Calvinist theology, but More was no doubt delighted to find that his tutor, Robert Gell, and the prominent Christ's theologian Joseph Mede were no orthodox Calvinists.⁴² It was while he was at Christ's that More had something like a conversion experience, occasioned by his reading of 'the *Platonick Writers*' and '*Mystical Divines*'.⁴³ He made a public declaration

³⁶ Levitin (2015) 128.

³⁷ Valuable work in this regard has been done most recently by Derek Michaud (2011); Michaud (2017, 2019a, 2019b).

³⁸ For philosophical treatments of More's work, see for example Lichtenstein (1962); Reid (2012); Leech (2013); Henry (2016).

³⁹ Crocker (2003) 1.

⁴⁰ '... sub et parentibus et praeceptore Calvinistis, sed piis admodum atque probis, educatus sum' *Praefatio Generalissima*, More (1679) v.

⁴¹ See *Praefatio Generalissima*, More (1679) v, translated in Ward (2000) 15. See also Crocker (2003) 1–3.

⁴² On Gell's departures from Calvinism and potential influence on More's intellectual development, see Crocker (2003) 8–12. On More's connection with Joseph Mede, see Jue (2006) 39–40.

⁴³ *Praefatio Generalissima*, trans. in Ward (2000) 19.

of his affinity to Platonism with the publication in 1642 of his first published work, an allegorical poem entitled *Psychodia Platonica, or, A Platonicall Song of the Soul* (discussed in detail in Chapter 2). In 1641, he was elected a fellow of Christ's College, a position he retained until his death in 1687, surviving both the parliamentary ejections of royalist sympathisers during the civil wars and a post-Restoration attempt by royalists to oust him, along with his friend Cudworth. Like Cudworth and Smith, More was interested in the mechanical philosophy of Descartes and also kept himself abreast of important developments of the new experimental philosophy; he was even an early member of the Royal Society (although it is not clear how involved he actually was).⁴⁴

From his perpetual fellowship at Christ's, More launched a literary career that turned him into arguably the most famous and controversial philosopher in Restoration England after Hobbes.⁴⁵ An accomplished London bookseller wrote that 'for twenty years together after the return of King Charles II, the *Mystery of Godliness* and Dr. More's other Works ruled all the Booksellers in London'.⁴⁶ By this stage of his career, More had lost most of his earlier enthusiasm for Cartesianism, deciding now that the Cartesian philosophy, for all its strengths, led inevitably to atheism. His subsequent attempts to refute Cartesian atheism and provide irrefutable proofs of God's existence were bold and creative, but ultimately failed on multiple fronts, proving too theologically unorthodox for his co-religionists and too arcane to find much support from partisans of the new science. David Leech has even argued that More's anti-atheistic project actually paved the way for more robust assertions of speculative atheism.⁴⁷ These arguments also led him to positions that put him at a considerable distance from the other Cambridge Platonists, even though they can still be shown to have grown out of philosophical commitments he held in common with them in his earlier years. This serves as an important reminder that although, as this book argues, the Cambridge Platonists shared a fundamental Platonic outlook, they were far from homogenous.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ On More and Descartes, see Gabbey (1994); Bryson (2022). On More and the Royal Society, see Reid (2012) 3–4.

⁴⁵ For overviews of More's colourful philosophical career and controversial theological legacy, see Crocker (2003); Reid (2012); Leech (2013).

⁴⁶ Quoted in Leech (2013) 3.

⁴⁷ Leech (2013) 2: '[More] risked speaking much more univocally about God and his creatures than his predecessors, and was not slow to find atheist implications in the arguments of his coreligionists. This, ironically, contributed to a situation which was favourable to the emergence of avowed speculative atheism.'

⁴⁸ See Chapter 11.

On the Idea (and Existence) of Cambridge Platonism

The brief intellectual biographies in the previous section consist of relatively uncontroversial facts about the lives of the main actors of this study. The question of just how (or even whether) they should be grouped together as ‘Cambridge Platonists’ is much more complex but central to the project of this book.

In the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Whichcote, Cudworth, Smith and More were occasionally mentioned (rarely all four together and usually among others) by sympathetic commentators as a group of particularly enlightened and tolerant divines in an otherwise dogmatic and intolerant phase of Cambridge’s intellectual life. In some cases, their fondness for Plato was noted.⁴⁹ The only label applied to them during their own lifetime was the (initially pejorative) label ‘latitudinarian’ – referring to their tolerance, the ‘latitude’ they allowed in theological and political matters – which was applied to them and others in their broader circle in the latter part of the seventeenth century.⁵⁰

It was not until the nineteenth century that ‘Cambridge Platonists’ became the standard designation for the group. This was largely due to the influence of the historian of religion John Tulloch and his ambitious study titled *Rational Theology and Christian Philosophy*. The first volume, subtitled ‘Liberal Churchmen’, had focused on the religious rationalism of key

⁴⁹ Some important early mentions of some or all of these names together are made by Gilbert Burnet (1724) 186–9, Joseph Glanvill, in manuscript material published in Cope (1954) 273, 275, 279, 280, Thomas Birch (1753) 5–6 in his biography of John Tillotson, and Adam Smith (2004) 354–5.

⁵⁰ The term ‘latitudinarian’ appears to have been applied first to the Cambridge Platonists and then later to a younger group of churchmen mostly active in the Restoration, many of whom had been tutored or otherwise influenced by the Cambridge Platonists, such as Edward Fowler, Simon Patrick, John Wilkins, Gilbert Burnet, John Tillotson and Thomas Tenison. Gilbert Burnet and Simon Patrick both report that it was the older group – chiefly Whichcote, Cudworth and More, along with Whichcote’s pupil John Worthington – who were the first to be called ‘latitudinarians’ or ‘latitude-men’ by their critics; see *A Briefe Account of the New Sect of Latitude-Men* (1662); Burnet (1724) 188; Baxter (1696) II: 386. On the identification of Patrick’s ‘latitude-men’ with the Cambridge Platonists, see Gabbey (1994) 109–10. As a result, in the past, ‘latitudinarian’ was applied indiscriminately to both the older and younger group; see Micheletti (2011) 9–27; Griffin Jr (1992) 11–13. However, as early as 1806, Alexander Knox noted in correspondence that this latter, younger, group should be considered separately from the older generation who were Whichcote’s immediate contemporaries: ‘I conceive [Whichcote] to be the head of two stocks: the great leaders of the one, our well known friends [referring to a number of theologians including Smith and Cudworth]; those of the other, Wilkins and Tillotson’, Letter 36, in Forster (1836) 259; Micheletti (2011) 15–16. For a fuller treatment of the word’s origins and evolution, see Griffin Jr (1992) 3–13.

figures in the so-called ‘Great Tew Circle’, like William Chillingworth, John Hales and Jeremy Taylor. The second volume was subtitled ‘The Cambridge Platonists’ and purported to trace a distinct but kindred movement of the same kind of religious rationalism that had flourished at Great Tew. This movement, Tulloch wrote, ‘is represented throughout by a succession of well-known Cambridge divines, sometimes spoken of as “Latitudinarians”, and sometimes as “Cambridge Platonists”’.⁵¹ He goes on to name the group’s chief members, along with an account of what binds them together:

The chief names in this illustrious succession are Benjamin Whichcote, John Smith, Ralph Cudworth, and Henry More. Apart from the affinities of thought which bind these men together into one of the most characteristic groups in the history of religious and philosophical thought in England, they were all closely united by personal and academic associations.⁵²

Tulloch’s basic picture of the Cambridge Platonists as a school of philosophers gathered around Whichcote as a father figure continued to hold wide sway for much of the twentieth century.⁵³ Despite the challenges to be discussed later, this basic grouping continues to represent a wide consensus.⁵⁴ It is still not unusual, for example, to find Whichcote referred to as ‘the founder’ or ‘main inspiration’ of Cambridge Platonism.⁵⁵ Books and articles on ‘Cambridge Platonism’ are still published with regularity; at the time of writing, there is even something of a renaissance of ‘Cambridge Platonist scholarship’.⁵⁶

However, the notion of a Cambridge Platonist movement consisting of Benjamin Whichcote, Henry More, Ralph Cudworth and John Smith has come under increasing scrutiny. Critics allege that the grouping is both anachronistic and misleading, artificially creating a school of thought out of a group of thinkers who are neither as tightly associated nor as Platonic as their collective name implies. ‘The usual claim’, wrote A. R. Hall, ‘for the existence of a coherent and co-operative group of philosophers called the Cambridge Platonists must appear weak to anyone who applies a critical eye to the

⁵¹ Tulloch (1874) 6. ⁵² Tulloch (1874) 6–7.

⁵³ Some scholars also see the Christ’s College theologian Joseph Mede as an important forerunner, or even a kind of ‘father figure’, for the Platonist movement; see Jue (2006) 37–8.

⁵⁴ One of the most comprehensive surveys of the historiography of Cambridge Platonism is by Mario Micheletti (2011) 9–21. See also Hall (1990) 58–61; Lewis (2010) 12–17.

⁵⁵ e.g. Gill (1999) 271; Taliaferro (2005) 15.

⁵⁶ In 2017, an issue of the *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* was dedicated to the Cambridge Platonists, edited by Sarah Hutton (*British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 25 (5)). See also Hedley and Leech (2019).

membership of the group and to their various activities.⁵⁷ More recently, Dmitri Levitin has gone so far as to argue for the ‘non-existence of Cambridge Platonism’, contending that once we shed the anachronistic and tendentious lens of a ‘rationalist tradition’ in English philosophy (exemplified by Tulloch’s *Rational Theology*), ‘the Cambridge group – which certainly existed as a loose set of acquaintances linked by tutorial relationships and a strong anti-Calvinism (hardly unique in seventeenth-century England) – begins to lose both the intellectual coherence and importance attributed to it’.⁵⁸ In other words, apart from their proximity in time and place and their anti-Calvinism (which they shared with many others both in Cambridge and beyond), there is very little that marks out Whichcote, More, Cudworth and Smith as a group.

A distinct but related criticism concerns the ‘Platonism’ of the group or of its various members. In particular, it has been argued that close attention to Benjamin Whichcote’s works reveals very few traces of Plato or Platonism, and even (for some critics) a subtle antipathy to Platonic philosophy.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Hall (1990) 58. In particular, Hall noted differences between the ‘Emmanuel men’ (Whichcote and Smith) and the ‘Christ’s men’ (More and Cudworth): ‘The Emmanuel men were preachers, the Christ’s men were writers. The latter possessed and were influenced by a consciousness of their intellectual relationships to the new scientific movement of the seventeenth century of which the former were wholly innocent. In the sense of the word current during recent centuries, only Cudworth and More could be designated as philosophers; the Emmanuel men were theologians’ (ibid., 58).

⁵⁸ Levitin (2015) 16. For Levitin’s arguments against the existence of Cambridge Platonism, see Levitin (2015) 126–38, 171–2. It is worth noting though that Levitin’s focus is on the putative Cambridge Platonists’ approach to the history of philosophy, particularly their various attitudes to the idea of a *prisca theologia*, a tradition of philosophical wisdom revealed to Moses and then plagiarised by Pythagoras and Plato. Levitin persuasively demonstrates that More and Cudworth in particular held very different views on this idea (More believing firmly in a ‘Mosaic cabbala’ and Cudworth remaining staunchly sceptical) and that many scholarly treatments of the Cambridge Platonists have ignored or missed these important differences. The argument of this study, that the Cambridge Platonists hold a shared Platonic outlook developed via mutual influence, is not incompatible with many of Levitin’s conclusions, since it does not deny that many significant differences exist between the group’s members. However, this study does contend that for all their differences, Whichcote, More, Cudworth and Smith share a group of core Platonic positions, quite distinctive even against the background of broader English anti-Calvinism, suggesting that the standard picture of Cambridge Platonism gets more right than wrong.

⁵⁹ For Jon Parkin, curiously enough, Whichcote was an ‘empiricist’ and anti-Platonist, while More, Cudworth and Smith were the ‘mystical and eclectic’ thinkers of the group: ‘Examination of Whichcote’s background and extant works reveals a set of values in many ways far removed from the mysticism and eclecticism which characterised writers like More, Smith and Cudworth, although he was certainly a personal friend of the last. Indeed, far from espousing Platonism, Whichcote’s work contributes to a common-sense empirical intellectual tradition which would be profoundly critical of Platonist epistemology’ (1999) 75. See also Staudenbaur (1974) esp. 159; Hall (1990) 63.

Indeed, as early as 1901, E. T. Campagnac warned that the label ‘Cambridge Platonists’ is ‘more than a little misleading’, on the grounds that in their own time ‘Platonism was brought against them as a serious charge, which they were sometimes anxious to rebut’.⁶⁰ For these critics, the concern is that some or all of the alleged Cambridge Platonists do not actually endorse philosophical positions that can be meaningfully described as Platonic or that they themselves would not acknowledge as Platonic (although, naturally, a great deal depends on how one defines ‘Platonism’, a question to which we will turn in Chapter 2).

Such criticisms have been influential enough that even scholars who use the term tend to preface any discussion of ‘Cambridge Platonism’ with a caution that the name ‘Cambridge Platonist’ might make the group out to seem more coherent, or more Platonic, than they really were.⁶¹

At any rate, the conflicting views about the nature (or even the existence) of Cambridge Platonism as a distinct school of Platonic thinkers raise at least two important issues that this study attempts to address. The first is the question of whether Whichcote, More, Cudworth and Smith constitute a coherent and distinct group of thinkers. Just how closely connected were they to one another in historical terms? What exactly are the common philosophical doctrines, arguments or sources that bind them together? And are these philosophical resonances best explained by close personal association and mutual influence, or are they simply a result of their inhabiting a shared milieu?

The second issue is their alleged Platonism. What exactly would it mean for seventeenth-century English Protestants to be ‘Platonists’? Did they see themselves, or did any of their contemporaries see them, as Platonists? If they did, what was this understood to mean?

The Evidence of the *Eight Letters*

Much of the debate about the existence and nature of Cambridge Platonism is at least partly caused by an unfortunate lack of historical data for the formative period when the alleged Cambridge Platonists were all at Cambridge together, circa 1636–52. But although we have very little historical data to illuminate their early university years, there is at least one

⁶⁰ Campagnac (1901) xi–xii.

⁶¹ For example Hall (1990) 58; Crocker (2003) xvii; Jue (2006) 37, n. 1; Lewis (2010) 11; Sheppard (2015) 137; Ridley-Johnson (2016) 4.

primary source, very close to the event, that casts an invaluable shaft of light into this otherwise obscure period. It is an account of Whichcote's time as a fellow of Emmanuel College, written in 1651, not by one of the Cambridge Platonists or their admirers but by one of their persistent critics: the Calvinist theologian Anthony Tuckney, Whichcote's former tutor. The account occurs in a series of eight letters exchanged between Whichcote and Tuckney between September and November 1651. At this point, both men were senior academics in the university: Tuckney was the master of Emmanuel College and sat on the Westminster Assembly, while Whichcote was the provost of King's College and the vice-chancellor of the university. The immediate spark that set off the exchange was a sermon delivered by Whichcote on 7 September, which Tuckney had perceived as a direct attack on a sermon of his own delivered the year before, but the seeds of the controversy had evidently been growing for some time.⁶²

As Tuckney explains in his opening letter, he had begun to harbour serious concerns about the orthodoxy of Whichcote's preaching and it was time that they discussed the matter frankly instead of continuing to sweep it under the rug. 'I know you are not ignorant', Tuckney wrote ominously in his second letter, 'what very sinister thoughts are conceived, and reports scattered, both of your selfe and some others.'⁶³ The lengthy and occasionally fraught exchange that followed has received much scholarly attention, and we will return to it in due course.⁶⁴

What matters for our purposes is that in the course of unburdening himself of his long-held misgivings about Whichcote's preaching, Tuckney sets down in writing an account of just how it was that Whichcote came to hold the views that he does.⁶⁵ From Tuckney's point of view, Whichcote's straying into unorthodoxy occurred while Whichcote was a fellow and lecturer at Emmanuel College (1633–43), as a direct consequence of his falling under the influence of others with attractive but unorthodox opinions and reading habits. He recalls nothing particularly unusual about Whichcote's views when he served as his tutor in the late 1620s.⁶⁶ It was only after Tuckney had left Cambridge 1629 and returned in 1648 that he found his former pupil significantly changed.⁶⁷ Although he was not there to witness the change, he was in close contact with people who were, and reports what he has heard:

⁶² On the immediate background to this correspondence, see Chapter 4; see also Roberts Sr (1968) 47–9; Micheletti (1976) 116–21; Morgan (2004) 479–82; Helm (2009) 84–6.

⁶³ *EL* 40. ⁶⁴ For example Micheletti (1976) 116–29; Helm (2009) 84–97. ⁶⁵ *EL* 36–9.

⁶⁶ *EL* 36. ⁶⁷ On Tuckney's movements, see Webster (1997) 246; Collinson (2004).

Whilst you were fellow here, you were cast into the companie of very learned and ingenious men; who, I fear at least some of them, studied other authors, more than the scriptures; and Plato and his schollars, above others ...⁶⁸

Unfortunately, Tuckney does not say who these men are, but he evidently has particular names in mind, for he goes on to recite a litany of questionable opinions for which they have developed a reputation within the university, including questioning God's decrees 'because, according to our reason, wee cannot comprehend; how they may stand with His goodness', making 'Philosophers, and other Heathens ... fairer candidates for Heaven; than the scriptures seeme to allow of, and 'giving too much' to reason 'in the mysteries of Faith'.⁶⁹

If some of these learned and ingenious men can be identified as those known to contemporary scholarship as Whichcote's fellow Cambridge Platonists, Tuckney's letter would prove to be an invaluable source of information about the formative years of Cambridge Platonism. If the group Tuckney is referring to included men like Ralph Cudworth, John Smith and Henry More, his letters would constitute compelling evidence that these men were viewed in their own time not only as a coherent group, but one conspicuously devoted to the study of 'Plato and his scholars'.

Tuckney's evidence is by no means unproblematic though, and there are some things we must keep in mind as we draw on it. The first is that Tuckney is a decidedly hostile witness, and that Whichcote vehemently denies certain elements of it. In response to Tuckney's suggestion that he was a keen student of metaphysics and scholastic philosophy, Whichcote protests vehemently that he is nothing like the avid reader or philosopher Tuckney takes him to be:

Sir, you are wholly mistaken, in the whole course of my studies ... I shou'd lay-open my weakness, if I shoul'd tell you; how little I have read, of the books and authours you mention: of ten years past, nothing at all. I know not, who shou'd be your informer: but trulie, in a thousand guesses you cou'd not have been farther off from the truth of the thing.⁷⁰

But Whichcote actually goes on to confirm that most of Tuckney's claims about whom he had been reading were correct, although he emphasises that he had not read these authors for more than ten years.⁷¹ And

⁶⁸ *EL* 38–9. ⁶⁹ *EL* 38–9. ⁷⁰ *EL* 53–4.

⁷¹ *EL* 54. Tuckney's claim that Whichcote had been reading three particular authors – 'Dr Field, Dr Jackson, Dr Hammond' (*EL* 38) – was evidently based on information Tuckney had received from someone else, as he confirms in a subsequent letter: 'They that told mee of Field, Jackson, Hammond ...' (*EL* 80).

more importantly, Whichcote never directly denies or rejects Tuckney's claims about his having fallen into the company of certain 'learned and ingenious men' who read Plato more than Scripture. In fact, on the charge that their questionable vein of doctrine has flowed from an over-fondness for Plato, Whichcote holds his ground: '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.'⁷² What Whichcote rejects in Tuckney's account is his unflattering characterisation of Whichcote as someone who voraciously reads unorthodox theological writers for the purpose of embellishing his sermons with new and scandalous opinions, rather than humbly and plainly declaring the Word of God as a good preacher should. This picture Whichcote understandably rejects: 'You seeme in your letter to anatomize my life', he complains, 'but the description doth not characterize me: you cou'd hardlie have shot farther from the marke.'⁷³ But Tuckney's account is, by Whichcote's own admission, largely correct as regards the bare facts.

A second, potentially much more significant problem is that Tuckney was not based at Cambridge when this intellectual transformation is alleged to have taken place, having left in 1629 to be mentored by the great Puritan preacher John Cotton, and only returned to the university as a resident in 1648.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, it seems clear that Tuckney is speaking as a representative of a larger group of concerned Calvinists at Cambridge, and has evidently developed his picture of Whichcote's intellectual development in conversation with others who share his concerns and were there to witness it.⁷⁵ More importantly though, Tuckney's past absence becomes much less significant when we realise that (as will become clear) while the group Tuckney is speaking about may have formed around Whichcote during Tuckney's past absence, at least some of its members were still present and active in Cambridge and still closely associated with Whichcote at the time he was writing in 1651. This is one of the main reasons Tuckney was compelled to write to Whichcote, for these learned and ingenious friends from Whichcote's Emmanuel days were now actively promoting their dangerously Platonic 'veine of doctrine' in the university, giving some uncharitable observers the impression that Whichcote himself was their ringleader.⁷⁶ So although Tuckney only has second-hand reports about the group's formation in the previous decade, he is a first-hand witness to the doctrinal controversies that group engendered around 1651.

⁷² *EL* 60–1. ⁷³ *EL* 55.

⁷⁴ *EL* 36; Collinson (2004); Webster (1997) 246; Greene (1981) 232.

⁷⁵ 'Since I have heard ...' (*EL* 36). ⁷⁶ *EL* 18.

The Learned and Ingenious Men and Their Platonic 'Veine of Doctrine'

Let us take a closer look at the information Tuckney gives us about Whichcote's learned and ingenious friends. Towards the beginning of his second letter, Tuckney assures Whichcote that he still considers him a dear friend, but explains his concern as follows:

... we fear, the truth of Christ, much dearer than dear friendes, hath been and may be prejudiced; and so young ones in the universitie tainted, and others grieved, by a veine of doctrine; which runnes up and down in manie of Your discourses, and [in those] of some others of very great worth; whom We very much honour, and whom You head, as some think; though, for this last particular I verily think otherwise.⁷⁷

Three details are essential to note here about these 'others'. First, Tuckney sees a certain 'veine of doctrine' expressed both in Whichcote's discourses and the works of these other men. Happily, Tuckney goes on to give a detailed account of this 'veine of doctrine' in his third letter, to which we shall turn presently. Second, these others are not out-and-out heretics or *personae non gratae* in the university's Puritan community; on the contrary, Tuckney considers them, like Whichcote, to be men of 'very great worth' – generally well-respected, despite their unorthodox opinions. Lastly, and most importantly, these men are active at the university and still connected to Whichcote at the time of writing. Tuckney implies that there is an impression – presumably among those who disapprove of Whichcote's views – that Whichcote is 'heading' this theologically suspect group (an interpretation Tuckney himself rejects). This suggests that even though Tuckney blames these others for leading Whichcote astray, to at least some observers, Whichcote appeared to be the group's senior or leading member.

Tuckney leaves his comments about Whichcote's coterie there, but promises to give a 'brief *synopsis*, or some few particulars' of their questionable vein of doctrine 'by-and-bye'.⁷⁸ He fulfils this promise towards the end of the same letter, where, after having written lengthy replies to the theological points Whichcote raised in his last letter, Tuckney decides to end on a more personal note. Recalling his time as the teenage Whichcote's tutor, Tuckney writes: '[F]rom your first coming to Cambridge ... I loved you: as finding you then studious and pious, and very loving and observant of me. I remember, I then thought you somewhat cloudie and obscure in your expressions: but then I left you.'⁷⁹ As mentioned earlier, Tuckney then 'left' Whichcote in 1629, when he moved to the house of the famous Puritan

⁷⁷ EL 18. ⁷⁸ EL 18. ⁷⁹ EL 36.

John Cotton in Boston. He would not return to Cambridge (except for brief visits) until 1648.

Tuckney goes on to recount what he has since ‘heard’ about Whichcote’s development during his absence. First, he has been told that when Whichcote ‘came to be Lecturer in the colledge, you in a great measure for the yeare laid-aside other studies; and betook yourself to Philosophie and Metaphysicks: which, some think, you were then so immersed in; that ever since you have been cast into that mould’.⁸⁰ If what Tuckney has heard is true, then this philosophical awakening took place during Whichcote’s stint as a lecturer in Emmanuel from 1641–3.⁸¹ Tuckney’s absence and Whichcote’s protestations, however, suggest that we should probably not rely on Tuckney for a strict chronology of Whichcote’s reading habits.

More valuable by far is the information Tuckney provides about the people with whom Whichcote is reported to have associated at that time. When Tuckney returned to Cambridge in 1648, he found Whichcote greatly changed – and not for the better. He blames the transformation on the influence of certain ‘learned and ingenious men’ who read Plato more than Holy Scripture:

Whilist you were fellow here, you were cast into the companie of very learned and ingenious men; who, I fear at least some of them, studied other authors, more than the scriptures; and Plato and his schollars, above others ...⁸²

Tuckney pauses at this point to reflect on the nature of these learned and ingenious men’s relationship to ‘Plato and his scholars’, and explain why he finds it concerning. In brief, Tuckney fears that these men have become unduly enamoured with the ‘manie excellent and divine expressions’ that are to be found in Plato and his scholars, failing to realise that these lovely expressions are merely ‘gemmes in dunghills’.⁸³ This important passage will be examined more closely in Chapter 2, but its relevance here is that this criticism of the learned and ingenious men’s excessive love for Plato leads directly into a long list of the problematic views that Tuckney sees as having resulted from their uncritical reading of Platonic texts. These men’s uncritical reading of ‘Plato and his schollars’, Tuckney writes, has left them ‘too much drawen-away with admiration of them. And hence in part hath runne

⁸⁰ *EL* 37–8.

⁸¹ The College Bursar’s Book records payments to Whichcote as a lecturer in the college (in different subjects) during these years.

⁸² *EL* 38. ⁸³ *EL* 38.

a veine of doctrine; which divers very able and worthy men, whom from my heart I much honour, are I fear, too much known by.⁸⁴

The recurrence of the phrase ‘veine of doctrine’ signals that the list of problematic views that follows is the ‘synopsis’ that Tuckney promised at the beginning of the letter.⁸⁵ Crucially, this tells us that the learned and ingenious men in this passage, who became Whichcote’s friends while he was a fellow of Emmanuel, are the same ‘others, of very great worth’, whom Tuckney fears are promoting their dangerous views in Cambridge at the time of writing. Tuckney is writing about a present theological controversy, one which he feels has its roots in the uncritical admiration for Plato and the Platonists exhibited by these old friends of Whichcote.

Tuckney’s list of the learned and ingenious men’s dangerous views is central to this study, so it is worth reproducing here at length:

— The power of Nature, in Morals, too much advanced — Reason hath too much given to it, in the mysteries of Faith ... — Mind and Understanding is all; Heart and Will little spoken of. — The decrees of God question’d and quarrel’d; because, according to our reason, wee cannot comprehend; how they may stand with His goodness: which, according to your phrase, Hee is *under the power of*. — Those Philosophers, and other Heathens, made fairer candidates for Heaven; than the scriptures seeme to allow of ... A kinde of Moral Divinitie minted; onlie with a little tincture of Christ added: nay, a Platonique faith unites to God. — Inherent righteousnesse so preached, as if not with the prejudice of imputed righteousness, which hath sometimes very unseemlie language given it; yet much said of the one and very little or nothing of the other ... — This inherent righteousness may be perfect in this life. — An Estate of Love, in this life; above a life of Faith ...⁸⁶

Although this list does not refer to any authors or works by name, it does provide an invaluable glimpse into the characteristic views of those in Whichcote’s immediate circle, both in his formative years at Emmanuel and, more importantly, in 1651 when the letter was written. These are views that, according to Tuckney, these learned and ingenious men have become somewhat notorious within the university for holding (or in his words, ‘are too much known by’).⁸⁷

To sum up then, Tuckney’s account gives us a number of important clues about the learned and ingenious men whose intellectual influence corrupted Whichcote’s faith: (1) Whichcote fell into their sphere ‘whilst he was a fellow’ of Emmanuel, meaning between 1633 and 1643; (2) they were eager readers of ‘Plato and his scholars’; (3) their fondness for Plato gave rise to a

⁸⁴ EL 38. ⁸⁵ EL 18. ⁸⁶ EL 38–9. ⁸⁷ EL 38.

‘veine of doctrine’ with all the characteristics listed above, which Tuckney and his Calvinist colleagues feared was spreading unchecked in the university in 1651.

This study uses Tuckney’s account of Whichcote’s development as a launching pad for an investigation into the origins of what will come to be known as Cambridge Platonism. It will argue that when we look at Cambridge during the relevant period, the three figures who stand out most forcefully as matching Tuckney’s description of Whichcote’s learned and ingenious friends are in fact the three men most commonly named alongside him as his fellow Cambridge Platonists: Henry More, Ralph Cudworth and John Smith.

Part I (Chapters 2–4) explores the historical and intellectual context of the Cambridge Platonists’ formative years: early interest in and reactions to ‘Platonism’ at Cambridge in the late 1630s (Chapter 2), the national controversy over predestination that constitutes the theological background of the Whichcote–Tuckney correspondence of 1651 (Chapter 3), and the particular events at Cambridge that immediately preceded that correspondence, especially the oft-ignored impact of the controversy surrounding John Goodwin (Chapter 4).⁸⁸ Part II (Chapters 5–7) examines the works of Cudworth, More and Smith alongside Whichcote in light of the doctrinal positions Tuckney attributes to the ‘learned and ingenious men’. These chapters examine the subversive, anti-Calvinist ‘veine of doctrine’ running through the thought of Whichcote, Cudworth, More and Smith, with a particular focus on the ways in which their ideas draw explicitly or implicitly on Platonic sources. Finally, Part III (Chapters 8–10) considers the Platonic philosophical framework underlying the Cambridge Platonists’ critiques of Calvinism, with a particular focus on their religious epistemology.

The overall thesis defended in these chapters is that the grouping together of Whichcote, More, Cudworth and Smith as a group of closely related Platonic thinkers is more than an anachronistic invention of modern scholarship, but a feature of their original intellectual context. Without denying the differences in style, emphasis and philosophical doctrine that exist between these four figures, I argue that they are bound together by striking affinities of thought and vocabulary which are best explained as a result of

⁸⁸ The historical detail in these chapters is important for establishing the coherence of the Cambridge Platonists as a distinct group, but readers interested primarily in their ideas rather than the historical question of their relationship might prefer to skip or skim Chapters 2 and 4 and proceed to Parts II and III.

close intellectual contact in their early careers. The Cambridge Platonists emerge from this investigation as a tightly connected set of thinkers who developed a common philosophical framework in response to the Calvinism that dominated their intellectual environment. While they each drew from and built on this framework in their own ways, their intellectual output makes the most sense when they are read together as purveyors of a distinctive Christian Platonism.