

There is no writer of our times whose literary rank appears so ill-defined as that of Mr. Coleridge. Perhaps there is no one whose true standing in the literary world it is so difficult to determine.

Frederic Henry Hedge [\[1\]](#)

Coleridge is one of the greatest English poets, albeit the achievement is fragmentary. William Carlyle, Madame de Staël, and Victor Cousin contributed to the early reception of German thought in England and America, but the most profound channel was Coleridge, whom John Stuart Mill recognised as one of the seminal influences upon the Victorians. He claimed that 19th century England could be divided into mechanistic-Utilitarians and the Germano-Coleridgean party. In 1825 as *Aids to Reflection* was first published, Idealism or German thought in general was virtually taboo in England. Sixty years later almost all the philosophers in the English speaking world were adherents of idealism. In America Coleridge's influence was particularly strong — Coleridge ruefully remarked that he was a poor poet in England but a great philosopher in America. In 1829 James Marsh edited Coleridge's work, *Aids to Reflection*, together with an introductory essay where Marsh argued for the importance of philosophical speculation for the health of theology, and later as the president of the University of Vermont was able to reform American education upon broadly idealistic principles. The great American metaphysician Charles Hartshorne has written: 'When I was a Freshman at Haverford College I read Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*. This was my first reading, except for Emerson, of an idealistic writing. Since then I have read some of almost all German, British, American writers of this sort and some of the French. And I called myself an Idealist. Peirce and Whitehead came rather late in this influence and I was already an Idealist before I encountered them.'[\[2\]](#)

The assessment of Coleridge as a thinker in relation to Idealism is often obscured by prejudices and misapprehensions about the 'Philosophy of Religion', not least those perpetuated by twentieth century theologians of a Barthian or Thomist stamp. I wish to offer some reflections about the parameters of Coleridge's thought via considerations about the influence of 17th century Cambridge upon 18th century Tübingen.

In my paper I wish to explore the influence of the founder of the technical term 'Philosophy of Religion', the great early Enlightenment Cambridge Divine, Ralph Cudworth, upon the formation of the natural

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theology of the young Schelling on the basis of a manuscript from the Berlin Library Archive entitled 'Geschichte des Gnosticismus'. In this document we can see the powerful influence of Cudworth and Leibniz upon Schelling, and gain some insight into the common tradition of Platonic Idealism which bound Coleridge and Schelling. [\[3\]](#)

I wish to present some further evidence in support of the general thesis of my book *Coleridge, Philosophy and Religion*. I argue that Coleridge's claim that he found a 'genial coincidence' between his own mind and the Idealism which he discovered in Schelling's thought can be supported by reflections concerning the cultural links between England and Germany engendered institutionally by the House of Hanover, and even more importantly a common

Liberal Protestant Humanism which served as a fertile ground for the Christian Neoplatonic speculations of Cudworth, Coleridge and Schelling.

I want to spell out the genial coincidence in rather terms of the theological backdrop and the many common areas between Tübingen and Cambridge. It is worth remembering that Cambridge is on the East of England and traditionally open to continental influence, and Tübingen is on the far West of the old German Empire, and close to the influence of France and the Rhine culture. 'Heimat' for all the Tübingen Idealists meant Württemberg, not Germany in anything like the modern sense. I shall employ the rather infelicitous term of 'Liberal Protestant Humanism' and then look at some rather interesting evidence for a link between Schelling and Cudworth, which I think does much to support Coleridge's claim to have discovered a genial coincidence grounded in the

'early study of Plato and Plotinus, with the commentaries and the THEOLOGIA PLATONICA, of the illustrious Florentine, of Proclus, and Gemistus Pletho; and at a later period of the De la causa, principio et unio, of the philosopher of Nola, who could boast of a Sir Philip Sidney and Fulke Greville amongst his patrons, and whom the idolaters of Rome burnt as an atheist in the year 1660; had all contributed to prepare my mind for the reception and welcoming of the Cogito quia sum, et sum quia Cogito; a philosophy of seeming hardihood, but certainly the most ancient, and therefore presumptively the most natural.'^[4]

The appeal to the 'most ancient' philosophy is in the tradition of the appeal to the Attic Moses in the Cambridge Platonists^[5]—as is the condemnation of the ruthless oppression of the 'idolators of Rome'.

Let me explain the term 'Protestantism'. It is popularly associated with

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Luther's invective against Aristotle and the whore of Philosophy. But Luther's prophetic outbursts were unsustainable *Bildungspolitik* in those regions where the princes were Protestant and Lutheranism was more profoundly influenced by the great Humanist Melanchton than by Luther. Tübingen in particular was deeply affected by the Renaissance Humanism of Ficino and Reuchlin. The extent of the Platonic mystical legacy can be seen with particular clarity in a figure such as Kepler. The existence of a Swabian mystical pietist tradition as the *Geistesahnen* of Hegel and Schelling has been well documented, but the strong Platonic-Neoplatonic component at Tübingen has only recently been uncovered. ^[6]

This speculative Neoplatonic tradition has generally been much more at home in a Protestant than in a Catholic context. Even the successors of Victor Cousin (Coleridge's gallic equivalent) were Protestant. France despite having many Platonists like Descartes, Malebranche or even Bergson, does not have a Neoplatonic tradition of the English or German variety: no Leibniz or Hegel or Cudworth or Coleridge. Figures such as Eriugena, Ekkehart or Cusa were either condemned by Rome or forced into circumspection, and after the Reformation these tendencies tended to flourish in the Protestant context.

One may say that the rejection by Rome was based upon a critique of their pantheism, but *pace* McFarland, I don't think this is true. My supposition is that the powerful emphasis upon authority in the Roman Tradition tends to stifle the accent upon reason and religious experience so central to Christian Neoplatonists. A system of thought which places so much emphasis upon the intellectual intuition of the Divine and the immediate data of conscience fits uneasily into the strict and forensic theology of the Roman Church, its casuistical ethics, and its institutional-priestly mediations.

Coleridge's Liberalism

Coleridge was the founder of 19th Anglican Theological Liberalism or Broad Church party, or what was known as the Broad Church Movement, which include figures such as Maurice, Hort, Wescott, which became the Modern Churchman's Union represented by such figures as Inge, Temple, Rashdall, Raven. Even such a distinguished Anglo-Catholic such as Charles Gore was taught by Wescott and integrated liberal theology into the tractarian heritage.

In Britain this liberal intellectual tradition is not derived from Voltaire but Christian Platonism. Coleridge's 'Platonism' is derived from those seventeenth century thinkers who disliked both the Calvinism of the Puritans and the formalism of the Laudians, and who appealed to indwelling Logos evoked by the Fourth Gospel and the tradition of Alexandria. This is itself a tradition which goes back to Renaissance Humanism: 16th century Everard Digby at St

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John's.^[7]

I want to make another point about the 'liberalism' of the Cambridge Platonists; or to be more accurate—their 'latitudinarianism'. There is a common history of ideas which unites both the Radical and Tory in seeing the Enlightenment as the victory of the secular over the religious mind. Yet the Cambridge Platonists show us how false this picture is. Many of the central ideas and images of the Enlightenment were Christian, and the latitudinarian Theology of the Cambridge Platonists helped England to avoid the powerful anticlericalism of say France in the Eighteenth century. Contrary to the view espoused by many that the Enlightenment led to a fragmentation and secularisation, the Cambridge Platonists helped Christianity remain a powerful force within contemporary culture by accommodating contemporary science and politics to a Christian view. In this sense there were the founders of the liberal tradition.

Since Cassirer's work on the English Renaissance, it has been widely thought that the Cambridge Platonists were relics of an antiquated humanism.^[8] In fact it is now clear that they were an influence upon Newton, had figure like Wallis in their school. We know from the sermons of Cudworth that they exerted a political force during the interregnum.

The extent to which the philosophical and political discussions of the age were dominated by theological issues was in part the legacy of the Cambridge Platonists. Cudworth's attempt to defend monotheism and Trinitarianism in relation to the history of religions and the history of the English Church had reverberations through to Hume's *Natural History of Religion* and Priestley's *History of the Corruptions of Christianity*. And not just in England but in Europe, especially the reception of Cudworth on the continent through such distinguished figures as Bayle and Mosheim.

This may be quite confusing because Liberal Protestantism is often associated with Ritschl, Harnack and the idea of the Hellenisation of Christian theology.^[9] But we can see the liberal tradition in Western theology as having a root in the Platonising currents which developed after the Renaissance, and which had strong affinities to the mystical legacy of the Radical Reformation.

Coleridge's Humanism

This brings me to the third point: 'Humanism'. This is a tradition which has its roots in the Renaissance. The emphasis of such humanistic theological tradition is on the continuity between God and man, not the discontinuity. The key is Communion with, or participation in, the Divine rather than the Kierkegaardian infinite qualitative distinction between God and man. This

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emphasis can be confused with or indeed merge into Pantheism, but it really is different. The charioteer of the *Phaedrus* is a good image of the capacity of the soul to know God.[\[10\]](#)

If I speak of a Liberal Humanistic Protestant Tradition, it is 'Liberal' in the sense that it tries to reconcile Christian theology with science, with truth. It wishes to mediate with rather than confront the secular. It is 'humanist' in the sense of having origins in the Renaissance rather than the medieval period, more Patristic than scholastic. This tradition is Protestant in the rather loose sense, of being equally averse to a strident *sola scriptura* as to an authoritarian ecclesiasticism.

From Cambridge to Tübingen

I have been discussing very broadly a strand of thought which I have called 'Liberal Protestant Humanism' as a context which provided much intellectual common ground between the young Coleridge and Schelling. We can find proof of the influence of Cambridge upon Tübingen in a document written by the young Schelling as a sketch of a *History of Gnosticism*. It is Manuscript 28 of the Schelling Nachlass in Zentrales Akademie Archiv of the Akademie der Wissenschaften in Berlin. It is a card bound notebook and the cover has the title '15 or 5 Vorstellungsarten aus alten Welt', and possesses 358 pages and was written between 1792 and 1801. The section on History of Gnosticism is dated by Edward Booth[\[11\]](#) to June/ July 1795. The headings of the *Geschichte* are from page 166 to 306: these consist largely of bibliographies and he began to think out what Edward Booth calls a 'speculative interpretation of the historical data'. These headings show that he was developing a critical theory of Gnosticism. Gnosticism constitutes a system of thought and Schelling is comparing it to other systems in late antiquity. Edward Booth notes:

'The MS bibliographical references in this outline show that Schelling was aware of Cudworth's thought from the beginning of his career; and an attentive reading of this book will show immediately that it was for him a congenial speculative work from which he learnt much (for there are so many points of contact with his later thought), as well as a source and a guide into the literature.'

The text starts:

The old Gnosticism is so obscure because it is composed of so many different systems and bits of different religions and philosophies. These must be divided. One distinguishes primarily the different

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intellectual systems out of which Gnosticism emerged.

- I. The pure oriental that the sensual world is an image of the intellectual.
- II. The philosophical deduction of the same (notion); see the works about the schematism of the translated works.

Cudworth's Intellectual System[\[12\]](#) (My translation).

The language of 'intellectual systems' is redolent of Cudworth's great work *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London, 1678). The text includes a quotation in Greek which is cited without the name of the author or the work. It is from the first century Platonist Plutarch (AD 50-120) and his important treatise *de Iside et Osiride* 369B-E. There are significant divergences

from the known texts—except the one given in Mosheim’s Latin translation of Cudworth. The Plutarch text was employed by Cudworth extensively.

The text lying behind Schelling’s notes is the translation by Lorenz von Mosheim, *Systema Intellectuale huius Universi* (2 vols Jena 1733 2nd ed. Hague 1773). Cudworth’s work is a piece of speculative historiography trying to show that most of the more refined philosophers and sects of the ancient world accepted some version of the Godhead as tri-une. Two figures popularised the work in Germany: Jablonski with his *Pantheon Aegyptiorum sive de Diis eorum, Commentariis cum Prolegomenis de Religione et Theologia Aegyptiorum* 3 vols Frankfurt am Oder 1750-2. And J.L.von Mosheim translated the work as the *Systema Intellectuale huius Universi* with a preface and a dissertation and footnotes. Mosheim’s work is very precise and scholarly; he is a philologist commenting upon Cudworth the philosopher, a scholar upon a speculative spirit. Mosheim treats Cudworth’s work as a scholarly exposition of the ancient texts rather than as speculative inquiry, and is overtly critical about Cudworth’s inferences. Schelling studied this work as a student of theology at Tübingen.

“For this” saith he, in his book De Iside et Osiride “is a most ancient opinion, that hath been delivered down from theologers and law-makers, all along to poets and philosophers; and through the first author thereof be unknown, yet hath it been so firmly believed every where, that the footsteps of it have been imprinted upon the sacrifices and mysteries or religious rites, both of barbarians and Greeks; namely, that the world is neither wholly ungoverned by any mind or reason, as if all things floated in the streams of chance and fortune, nor yet that

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there is any one principle steering and guiding all, without resistance and control; because there is a confused mixture of good and evil in every thing, and nothing is produced by nature sincere. Wherefore it is not only dispenser of things, who as it were out of several vessels distributeth those several liquors of good and evil, mingling them together, and dashing them as he pleaseth; but there are two distinct and contrary powers or principles in the world, one of them always leading as it were to the right hand, but the other tugging a contrary way. Insomuch that our whole life, and the whole world is a certain mixture and confusion of these two: at least this terrestrial world below the moon is such, all being every where full of irregularity and disorder. For if nothing can be made without a cause, and that which is good cannot be the cause of evil, there must needs be a distinct principle in nature, for the production of evil as well as good. And this hath been the opinion of the most and wisest men... there are two gods as it were of contrary crafts and trades, one whereof is the maker of all good, and the other of all evil; but others calling the good principle only a God, and the evil principle a demon, as Zoroaster the magician.”[\[13\]](#)

This text is interesting because it deploys the idea of two competing principles. This is particularly significant within a context within which Plato’s own philosophy is interpreted in a Neoplatonic mode as a system of ultimate principles. [\[14\]](#) Furthermore, the relationship between Neoplatonism and Gnosticism remains less than clear.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with some remarks about another ‘Cambridge’ man, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82) who visited Coleridge in Highgate. He claims that the Transcendentalist is an Idealist, who starts with consciousness rather than external facts which are products of the ‘Over-Soul’

which is the joint source of Nature and human spirits.^[15] American thought had Neoplatonic influences through Jonathan Edwards and *The Noetica* of Samuel Johnson, a writer much influenced by the Liberal Anglican tradition of the Cambridge Platonists.^[16] Emerson's knowledge of Neoplatonism was decisively influenced by Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe*.^[17] The Transcendentalist enthusiasm for Neoplatonism fired enthusiasm amongst cognate groups such as the St Louis Hegelians. Jay Bregman observes: "The pervasive influence of Transcendentalism, Hegel and Absolute Idealism in 19th America created a

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favourable atmosphere for Neoplatonism".^[18]

If we know that Coleridge and Schelling were -independently of each other—both deeply influenced by Florentine and Cambridge (Neo)Platonism, it makes much more sense of Coleridge's famous claim in the *Biographia Literaria* that he discovered a 'genial coincidence in Schelling. In the *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge speaks of being 'gossiped about, as devoted to metaphysics, and worse than all to a system incomparably nearer to the visionary flights of Plato, and even to the jargon of the mystics, than to the established tenets of Locke.^[19] For all the vertiginous difficulties of the *Biographia*, the plagiarisms and Coleridge's own defensiveness—we know that Schelling's mind was informed by a strong Platonic component, and I hope to have shown why Coleridge is not being entirely disingenuous in finding spiritual and intellectual aids to reflection in the Schwabian Idealist. As Platonists are wont to say: 'only like can know like'.

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^[1] Quoted from P. Miller ed. *The Transcendentalists*, An Anthology (Cambridge, 1950) p.68.

^[2] Quoted in Anton Braeckman 'Whitehead and German Idealism' in *Process Studies* V14, N 4 (Winter, 1985) pp.265-286.(cf. Charles Hartshorne, *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method* (London,1970) pp.xii-xxi.).

^[3] For the relation between Cudworth and Leibniz see C. Wilson, *Leibniz's Metaphysics* (Manchester, 1989) pp.160ff.

^[4] S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (Princeton, 1983) I pp.144-145.

^[5] The classic work is D.P Walker, *The Ancient Theology: Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1972.)

^[6] See my *Coleridge, Philosophy and Religion, Aids to Reflection and the Mirror of the Spirit* (Cambridge, 2000) pp. 40ff.

^[7] Sears Jayne, *Plato in Renaissance England* (Dordrecht; London,1995).

^[8] The *Platonic Renaissance in England*, translated by James P. Pettegrove (London, 1953). See *The Cambridge Platonists in Philosophical Context, Politics, Metaphysics and Religion* (Dortrecht, 1997) , ed. J. Rogers, J.M. Vienne and Y.C. Zarka

^[9] A.v. Harnack, *Lebrehuch der Dogmengeschichte* (Tübingen, 1990).

^[10] On the interpretation of this Platonic myth see M. Allen, *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino* (California, 1984).

^[11] I'd like to thank Father Edward Booth OP for making available the typescript of the Schelling manuscript and for much assistance.

^[12] Der alte Gnosticismus ist deswegen so dunkel, weil er aus so vielerlei System[en] und den Bru[c]stücken so vieler religion[en] u[nd] Philosophien zusam[m]engesetzt ist. Diese müs[s]ten also geschied[en] werden.

Man unterscheide vorzüg[lich] i[n] verschied[e]ne intellektuale Systeme, aus welch[en] d[er] gnosticism[us] floß.

I das reinere, orientalische, das die sin[n]l[ich]e Welt als Nach-bild frt intellectuelen betrachtet.

Philosophische Deduktion deselb[en]

s[iehe] d[ie] Abh[andlung] über den Scematism[us] der übers[etzen] W[erke]

Cudworthi Systema intellectuale

[13] R. Cudworth, *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London, 1845) II pp.336-337.

[14] See M. Franz, *Schellings Tübinger Platon-Studien* (Göttingen, 1996).

[15] R. W. Emerson, *Selected Essays* ed. L. Ziff (London, 1985) p.239ff.

[16] J. Bregman, 'The Neoplatonic Revival in North America', *Hermathena* 149 (1990) pp.99-119.

[17] K.W. Cameron, *Young Emerson's Transcendental Vision* (Hartford, 1971) p.57.

[18] J. Bregman, 'The Neoplatonic Revival in North America', *Hermathena* 149 (1990) p.102.

[19] *Biographia* II, 240.