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The Religious Philosophy of John Smith.

IN common with the Cambridge Platonists in general, John Smith (1618-1652) has suffered a neglect at the hands of later generations which he has not deserved. It is good that on account of the modern interest in Mysticism, recent years have witnessed a worthier recognition of the Cambridge Platonists. This deeper interest has been largely due to the advocacy of the Dean of St. Paul's, and we cannot be too grateful to him for his repeated reminders of the significance of this notable group of seventeenth century divines. The school is entitled to our respect and attention on a variety of grounds. Its members made a characteristic contribution to personal religion, they lent their weight to the development of the idea of toleration in an intolerant age, and they developed a Christian philosophy and view of morality which are of perennial interest. Children of the Renaissance, they revived the study of Platonism and found in it a means of religious and philosophical expression and a weapon with which to attack current atheistical tendencies.

In the Cambridge School John Smith has a distinctive place. Whilst Benjamin Whichcote enunciated the main principles of the movement, and Ralph Cudworth and Henry More used them in attacking certain tendencies in Hobbes and Descartes that threatened to undermine religion and morality, John Smith founded on them a constructive scheme of religious philosophy. Thus not only does he belong, with the rest of the school, to the history of Platonic thought in England, but he also belongs to the history of theism. Unfortunately, his contribution to theism has been but slightly regarded, in spite of the fact that, as we shall see, he anticipated certain modern tendencies in the philosophy of religion and thus has a living and not merely a historical interest for the present time. This essay will concentrate more particularly on the modern features of his philosophy.

Before describing these features it will be useful to say something in the first place concerning the general position of the school as a whole. The main source of its inspiration was Platonism. Whilst well versed in the whole field of classical literature, and enthusiastic students of the original Scriptures, they gave central attention to the writings of Plato and to the whole body of literature belonging to the Platonic tradition. To be accurate, they were disciples of Plotinus rather than of Plato. Contemporary literature held much less sway over them, although they displayed some interest in the new science and in Cartesian-

ism. The Copernican astronomy appeared to give added sanction to some of their ideas, and so did certain features of the new philosophy, but their appreciation of the latter was marked by reservations. In Platonism they found a satisfying and stimulating philosophy, which they used to give expression to their Christian faith and experience. But their study of Platonism was not a critical study in the modern sense. They read its literature as a devout man reads his Bible, more as those who seek first of all food and drink for the spirit than as exact students. As Campagnac says, they "appropriated Plato's teaching in what if a choice must be made, may, after all, be the better way, by meditation rather than by a minutely critical study, and they coloured what they borrowed in the rich and mystical light of their own imagination." [1] The same is no less true of their studies of other Platonic writers. In fairness to them it must be remembered that these were the days of pre-Bentleyan criticism.

Platonism provided the Cambridge School with their general doctrine, the doctrine of Reason. This doctrine was sovereign in all their thought. It was the guiding star of all their intellectual activity, providing them with a means of interpreting their gospel and also with an instrument in their philosophical and theological discussions. But it was also made to serve more practical purposes. It was a fundamental idea in their religious and moral practice. In particular, it gave them that toleration and comprehensiveness of view that characterized their attitude to the dissensions of the time. Their appropriation of this doctrine is of high significance. When Puritans and Prelatists were alike making their appeals to external authorities—Scripture, Creed or Church, the Cambridge Platonists were venturing to appeal to the inner authority of Reason.

It fell to Smith to erect on the basis of this principle of Reason a Christian philosophy or Theism. Whichcote had first enunciated the principle, as "the pathbreaker of the movement," but did not seek to express it in a systematic way. This was undertaken by Smith and forms a worthy memorial to a worthy teacher on behalf of a devoted and enthusiastic pupil. There is no indication of a practical motive underlying his attempt. Current problems such as were raised by writers like Descartes or Hobbes are apparently not in mind. Even when he comes to deal with Atheism, he seems to betray no consciousness of contemporary influences working in that direction. His entire concern is with the philosophies of Democritus, Epicurus and Lucretius. It may have been, as has been suggested, that his pre-occupation with ancient Atheism was not due to blindness to the thought of the time, but to a desire to deal with the problem

[1] The Cambridge Platonists, xif.

at its source. His work is collected into Ten Discourses, six of which are part of an unfinished scheme for the vindication of the "main heads and principles of religion." The remaining four were selected by Worthington from the residue of Smith's miscellaneous writings to illustrate how the work was intended to be completed.[2]

One of the most striking things in Smith's religious philosophy is what we should to-day term his psychology of religion. For him, as for the rest of the Cambridge school, reason is the fundamental characteristic of the soul. As we should expect in one who was a professed disciple of Plotinus, reason is not to be understood as equivalent to intellect. It is given a wider meaning than the pure logical faculty. The Platonic distinction is made between *dianoia* and *nous*, the former referring to the discursive faculty, the latter to what we may call "the logic of the whole personality." This Platonic reason is for Smith the organ of the soul, the instrument of religious knowledge and the divine principle in men whereby they are able to have intercourse with God. It will be noticed that this religious psychology is in accord with the general findings of modern religious psychology to-day. It is generally agreed that religious apprehension does not repose in any one mental element nor in any one group of mental elements, but in the whole mind. When man behaves in a religious way, he brings to focus in one direction all the powers of his mental organism. But though spiritual reason is possessed by every man as man, Smith is careful to show that it can achieve full exercise only under certain moral conditions. Thus the proper exercise of reason belongs not merely to man as man, but to man as living the holy life. Our author has a very fine passage on this head:

"Were I indeed to define divinity, I should rather call it a divine life, than a divine science. . . To seek our divinity in books and writings is to seek the living among the dead. . . seek for God in thine own soul. . . If we would indeed have our knowledge thrive and flourish, we must water the tender plants of it with holiness. . . Divinity is not so well perceived by a subtile wit, 'as by the purified sense,'—as Plotinus phraseth it."[3]

The sphere and significance of spiritual reason is well brought out by Smith in a passage[4] in which he seeks to classify the different types of men. Setting aside "the Epicurean herd of brutish men, who have drowned all their sober reason in the deepest Lethe of sensuality," he proceeds to divide the rest into four classes or "ranks." The first type of man is "that complex

[2] Tulloch, *Rational Theology in the Seventeenth Century*, Vol. II. pp. 138f.
[3] Select Discourses (Camb. 1859), pp. 1ff.
[4] Ibid, pp. 17ff.

and multifarious man that is made up of soul and body." He confounds sense and reason and is in the chains of custom and common opinion. The second type is the rationalist "that thinks not fit to view his own face in any other glass but that of reason and understanding." The third type is in some measure a mystic; he has an "inward sense of virtue and moral goodness. . . far transcendant of all mere speculations of it," but his soul has "too much heave and swell with the sense of his own virtue and knowledge." The fourth type is "the true metaphysical and contemplative man. . . who, running and shooting up above his own logical or self-rational life, pierceth into the highest life." It is the last type that alone possesses in the fullest sense true religious knowledge. Religious apprehension is achieved neither by sense nor reason in the intellectual sense, nor further by any second-hand method which custom might afford. The path of religious knowledge is reason in the wider Platonic sense—reason as the harmonious activity of all man's powers as purified by religion and directed towards God. God, says Smith, "is best discerned, as Plotinus phraseth it, by an intellectual touch of Him. . . the soul itself hath its sense as well as the body." [5]

Whilst Smith agrees with modern psychology in finding the seat of man's spiritual faculty in his whole personality, he does so on different grounds. He is working with Platonic categories and in particular with the doctrine of Ideas. He quotes Plotinus to the effect that he who reflects upon himself, reflects upon his own original, and adds that such a one "finds the clearest impression of some eternal nature and perfect being stamped upon his own soul." With Plato he exhorts men to look into their own souls, "God having so copied forth himself into the whole life and energy of man's soul, as that the lovely characters of Divinity may be most easily seen and read of all men within themselves. . . And if we would know what the *impress* of souls is, it is nothing but God Himself, who could not write His own name so that it might be read, except in rational natures." [6] Divine knowledge is therefore discovered by the soul's reflection upon herself; and if men do not know God, it is due to the fact that their innate notions of divine truth "are too often smothered or tainted with the deep dye of men's filthy lusts." [7]

Smith's doctrine of "reflection" is worth dwelling on for a moment, since it throws light upon his theory of religious knowledge. There are two kinds of "reflection." The one is concerned with material, the other with spiritual things:

"The souls of men exercising themselves first of all . . .

[5] Select Discourses, p. 3.
[6] Ibid, pp. 127f.
[7] Ibid, p. 6.

merely by 'a progressive kind of motion' spending themselves about bodily and material acts, and conversing only with sensible things; they are apt to acquire such deep stamps of material phantasms to themselves. . . indeed, it is not possible well to know what our souls are, but by their 'circular and reflex motions.'. . . When we turn our eyes upon it (the soul), it will soon tell us its own royal pedigree and noble extraction, by those sacred hieroglyphics which it bears upon itself." [8]

The significance of Smith's use of the doctrine of innate ideas which the soul thus discovers and makes explicit by its "circular and reflex motions" is not difficult to discern. Implicit in those ideas is the Reason of God, with which man has affinity, because of the fact that he himself is endowed with reason. Reason is thus a mediating principle between God and man, and through it man has fellowship with God and is able to learn His Truth. Further, "reflection," far from being a subjective process merely, is one which enables man to occupy himself, not with his private fancies, but with the very thoughts of God. Reason is that divinely given faculty which gives man his kinship with God. "Divinity indeed is a true efflux from the eternal light, which, like the sunbeams, does not only enlighten, but heat and enliven. . . And as the eye cannot behold the sun, unless it be sunlike, and hath the form and resemblance of the sun drawn in it; so neither can the soul of man behold God, unless it be God-like, hath God formed in it, and be made partaker of the Divine nature." [9]

On the basis of his religious psychology Smith rears his argument for "the existence and nature of God." He disregards the other arguments, and thus relies solely upon what we to-day commonly call the Moral and Religious Argument. In view of his starting point and the general background of his thinking this is not surprising, although it is somewhat remarkable that he gives no attention at all to the more usual arguments. For since Smith was well acquainted with Cartesianism, and indeed was chiefly responsible for its introduction as a subject of study into Cambridge University,[10] we should have thought it natural for him to have referred to the Ontological Argument which Descartes had borrowed from the schoolmen and incorporated into his own philosophy. Equally curious it is that Smith should have neglected the Argument from Design, since it appears in Cicero, an author whom Smith held in high favour.[11] We can only assume that he felt that these arguments were negligible

[8] Select Discourses, pp. 65f.
[9] Ibid, p. 2.
[10] Stewart, E. R. E., III., p. 170.
[11] Tulloch, op. cit., Vol. II., p. 169

besides his own argument from religious experience. Whilst he admits that God's eternal power and Divine nature may indeed be revealed in external appearances, he yet adds that "it must be something within that must instruct us in all these mysteries, and we shall best understand them when we compare that copy which we find of them within ourselves, with that which we see without us. The schoolmen have well compared sensible and intelligible beings in reference to the Deity, when they tell us that the one do only represent *vestigia Dei*, the other *faciem Dei*." [12]

But this inner testimony, going, as he claims, so far beyond the testimony of Nature, yields more than the bare fact of the existence of God. It gives us in addition the attributes of God. It will be enough to select for illustration the evidence Smith adduces for the divine unity and omniscience. "When," he says, "we reflect upon our own idea of pure reason, we know that our own souls are not it, but only partake of it; and that it is of such a nature that we cannot denominate by it any other thing of the same rank as ourselves; and yet we know certainly that it is, as finding, from an inward sense of it within ourselves, that both we and other things else partake of it; neither do we, or any finite thing, contain the source of it, within ourselves; and because we have a distinct notion of the most perfect mind and understanding, we own our deficiency therein. And as that idea of understanding which we have within us points not out to this, or that particular, but something which is neither this nor that, but, total understanding; so neither will any elevation of it serve every way to fit and answer that idea." [13] Similarly, by the same principle of contingency, Smith passes from human will to Divine Omnipotence and from human love and goodness to Divine. Nothing better summarises Smith's position than this beautiful passage:

"God is not better defined to us by our understandings, than by our wills and affections: He is not only the eternal reason, that Almighty mind and wisdom which our understandings converse with, but he is also that unstained beauty and supreme good to which our wills are perpetually striving; and wheresoever we find true beauty, love and goodness, we may say, here or there is God." [14]

So much for a rapid survey of Smith's theistic argument, as he built it upon the foundation of religious experience. It will be at once clear to all modern students of the philosophy of religion that by virtue of it Smith has an immediate, as well as a

[12] Select Discourses, pp. 130.
[13] Ibid, pp. 130f.
[14] Ibid, p. 141.

historic, interest. Largely due to recent advances in psychological science in the sphere of religious experience and to the revived study of Mysticism, there has been an increasing tendency to find a ground for theistic certainty in religious experience itself. This is not a new procedure in theism, but, whereas its exposition in modern thought is carried back by most writers to Schleiermacher, the study of Smith's religious philosophy seems to warrant us in going a stage further back to the Cambridge Platonists in the seventeenth century. But these thinkers appeared too early for their work to have any directive influence on the main current of theistic thought. Historically the Cambridge movement tended rather to foster Deism,[15] but this could have been only because the connotation of reason as given by that group of Platonists was misinterpreted and misunderstood. It needed Kant's sharp separation of the rational and moral consciousness to prepare the way for a new valuation of religious experience. There is no historic connection between Kant and the Cambridge school, yet it is perhaps worth remarking that the fact that the former found in moral experience an argument for God was no doubt in some measure due to the influence of the German Pietistic movement—a movement which, along with the Cambridge movement, belongs to that general reversion to Mysticism which marks Europe of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

As to the value of Smith's central argument for the existence and nature of God, little can be said here. But the present writer may record his conviction that in its essential features it is one of serious weight. The idea that religious experience can afford any sound argument for the reality and nature of God is indeed still received in some quarters with coldness, but there is little warrant for what must be regarded as little more than a prejudice. We are surely entitled to expect that experience in some sense reflects reality, and it would be strange indeed if an experience so universal and persistent as religious experience did not reflect a corresponding reality. It may be admitted that such an argument does not amount to proof in the strict logical sense, but it surely presents an argument of high probability. This is all that can be said here, and for fuller treatment of the argument readers must be referred to Dr. Waterhouse's *The Philosophy of Religious Experience,* or to Dr. Kenneth Edward's more recent *Religious Experience: its Nature and Truth.* But whether one admits the validity of the argument or otherwise, one must concede that in the religious philosophy of John Smith, we have an interesting anticipation of it expressed in terms of Platonism.

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[15] Joyce, E. R. E., Vol. IV., p. 534.