

Why Thomas Taylor is not the author of *A New System of Religion*

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It has been suggested (originally by J M Rigg in the *Dictionary of National Biography* XIX, 1921-2, p. 469) that Thomas Taylor was the anonymous author of *A New System of Religion* published with a fictitious imprint of Amsterdam 1790. A pdf of this work can be accessed here:

<https://archive.org/details/newssystemofrelig00amstia>

Those of us who are long time readers of the writings of Thomas Taylor will immediately notice a significant difference of style between this work and those writings known to be Taylor's – one of which, *A Dissertation on the Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries* was indeed published anonymously with a fictitious imprint of Amsterdam.¹ But there are any number of specific assertions in *A New System of Religion* which run counter to those in Taylor's writings: here are a few -

Page 4 "Consider, ye of the human race, the various systems of religion, which have been recommended to your reverence by the tradition of your fathers. Does not one, and the same, radical error pervade them? Have not their founders taught us pride, instead of humility?" This quote is from a long section upon the lack of humility in humankind: but in general, Taylor was scornful of humility, as a rather too Christian "virtue" – thus he writes, concerning the godlike nature of Plotinus, "This I know will pass for great arrogance and presumption among the philosophers of the present day, who consider meekness and humility as the highest ornaments of their nature, and the truest characteristics of genuine worth. But surely a sublime and godlike soul can never think meanly of its nature, or willingly suppress and extinguish the inevitable consciousness of its own dignity and elevation. Humiliating conceptions flourish no where but in the breasts of the servile, or the base; and are the ornaments of no characters, but those of the impotent and the mean. Their influence is baneful to the advancement of science, and destructive of all genuine excellence and worth. They damp the glowing ardour of true theology, curb the celestial flight of philosophy, and blast the vigorous blossoms of genius. Let it, however, be remembered, that while we banish meekness, we are by no means the advocates of arrogance and conceit; but are alone desirous of vindicating the proper dignity of the worthy soul, and of rescuing its generous and ardent confidence from the frigid embraces of humiliating opinion." (*History of the Restoration of Platonic Theology*, Thomas Taylor Series volume VII, p. 145)

Page 7 "The intentions of the Creator cannot be known . . ." If by Creator the writer means the creator of the manifested universe (who is not, according the Platonic tradition the First God) then this assertion opposes that of the Platonic teaching in the *Timaeus*,² so crucial to the traditions understanding of creation: "Hence, as he [the Creator] was entirely void of envy, he was willing to produce all things as much as possible similar to himself. . . For, as the Divinity was willing that all things should be good, and that as much as possible nothing should be evil . . ." (*Timaeus* 30a)

Page 7 "Before the telescope laid open the wonders of the sky, it was thought that the stars were but ornaments to our dome, and sparks to illumine our darkness." Taylor was pretty dismissive of the "wonders" of modern science, and especially the new pronouncements of astronomers of the era immediately preceding his own: ". . . all the information that can be obtained through the assistance of

¹ This was not uncommon: "The relative tolerance in religious and other matters that prevailed in Holland and the technical competence of Dutch engravers, compositors, and printers lent the small country a special position in European publishing in the 17th and 18th centuries. Many a book that could not be printed elsewhere bears an Amsterdam imprint (and many a book printed in Paris and elsewhere bears a fictitious Amsterdam imprint!)" – *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*: Volume 23 (1978), Kent, Lancour and Daily, p. 424

² Taylor produced his first published translation of the *Timaeus* in 1793, and would undoubtedly be most familiar with such a pivotal dialogue well before the date of the publication of *A New System*.

telescopes respecting these [celestial] bodies, must be very dubious, and therefore can never become the basis of any scientific conclusions." (*Dissertation on the Philosophy of Aristotle*, Thomas Taylor Series XXVIII, p. 299) But more importantly, he was an devoted adherent of the ancient view of the stars which far from thinking that they were mere "ornaments of our dome" considered them rather as the stable bodies of Celestial divinities.

Page 14 "Of the Deity man can form no idea . . ." A great deal of ancient philosophy centred on exactly this – the discussion of the nature of Deity. Thomas Taylor was particularly attached to Proclus, the head of the Athenian Academy in its last century – he named one of his sons Thomas Proclus Taylor – and translated almost all of the extant texts from this great philosopher. The crowning glory of Proclus was his *Theology of Plato*, which even in its surviving truncated state runs to over 400 pages of detailed examination of Deity (Thomas Taylor Series volume VIII).

Page 17 "He [Deity] is the supreme opposite of matter, of chaos. As the purest of spirits he must have had his opposite, in the grossest of matter, from all eternity." Apart from the fact that Taylor would never have described any God as a spirit, let alone the First God, the unphilosophical assertion that Deity has an opposite would never have flowed from the pen of Taylor. Since the First God is called by the Platonic tradition The One in order to indicate that this God of Gods is before all duality, and is the starting point of all reality, it is clear that it cannot have an opposite: where opposites truly exist, there must be some greater principle which co-ordinates the two opposites.

Page 18 ". . . if we grant the eternity of matter, the origin of evil is accounted for . . ." The Platonic tradition does not account matter as the *origin* of evil, since it is entirely passive and cannot originate anything. As Proclus argues in his treatise *On the Subsistence of Evil* (Thomas Taylor Series XVIII, p.120-1), "For in the *Timaeus*, indeed, when he [Plato] calls matter the mother and nurse of generation, and a concause of the fabrication of the world, it is manifest to everyone that he admits matter to be good. . . That evil, however, is not from matter, nor from bodies, is evident from what has been said. For matter is not the same with that which is moved in a disorderly manner. But that matter must not be considered to be primarily evil, Socrates, I think, sufficiently shows in the *Philebus* [27a], in which Dialogue he generates infinity from God. If, however, it must be said that matter is infinite itself, matter, or that which is primarily infinite, is from God."

Page 23 "The polytheism of all ancient nations was founded upon mistaken principles. Their gods were the offspring of human pride, and often but deified men . . ." But Taylor was the great champion of ancient polytheism, and, furthermore, explicitly denies that the Greek Gods were "but deified men." Here he is introducing the *Theology of Plato* having outlined the magnificent teachings of the One God and the Many Gods in the writings of the ancient Platonists: "Ignorance and priestcraft, however, have hitherto conspired to defame those inestimable works, in which this and many other grand and important dogmas can alone be found; and the theology of the Greeks has been attacked with all the insane fury of ecclesiastical zeal, and all the imbecil flashes of mistaken wit, by men whose conceptions on the subject, like those of a man between sleeping and waking, have been turbid and wild, phantastic and confused, preposterous and vain. Indeed, that after the great incomprehensible cause of all, a divine multitude subsists, co-operating with this cause in the production and government of the universe, has always been, and is still admitted by all nations, and all religions, however much they may differ in their opinions respecting the nature of the subordinate deities, and the veneration which is to be paid to them by man . . ." (*The Theology of Plato*, Thomas Taylor Series VIII, p. 3)

A little later he says, ". . . I shall farther observe respecting this theology, that the deification of dead men, and the worshipping men as Gods form no part of it when it is considered according to its genuine purity. . ." (p. 20)

Page 29 "Ancient philosophers, who asserted that every human being has his guardian Genius, might with less absurdity have asserted that every ape has his guardian man. Philosophy is often but the quintessence of human pride." But Taylor has many passages in his writings and translation concerning tutelary (guardian) daemons including notes to treatises on the subject by Maximus Tyrius,

Apuleius, Plotinus and Proclus – all offered to the reader as truthful explorations of this most ancient doctrine. And Taylor, who devoted his entire life to the cause of philosophy, would never have described Philosophy itself as "the quintessence of human pride." Here is the opening lines to his masterful *General Introduction to the Works of Plato*:

"Philosophy,' says Hierocles, 'is the purification and perfection of human life. It is the purification, indeed, from material irrationality, and the mortal body; but the perfection, in consequence of being the resumption of our proper felicity, and a reascent to the divine likeness. To effect these two is the province of Virtue and Truth; the former exterminating the immoderation of the passions; and the latter introducing the divine form to those who are naturally adapted to its reception.'

"Of philosophy thus defined, which may be compared to a luminous pyramid, terminating in Deity, and having for its basis the rational soul of man and its spontaneous unperverted conceptions, - of this philosophy, august, magnificent, and divine, Plato may be justly called the primary leader and hierophant, through whom, like the mystic light in the inmost recesses of some sacred temple, it first shone forth with occult and venerable splendour." (*Works of Plato I*, Thomas Taylor Series volume IX, p. 1)

Page 29 "But of the daemons, whose mind exceeds that of man by only one degree, it is not improbable that some may be bad." But Taylor writes "I only add, that when irrational dæmons are said to be evil, this must not be understood as if they were essentially evil, but that they are noxious only from their employment; that is, from their either calling forth the vices of depraved souls that they may be punished and cured. . ." (Hymn to the Sun, note 6, p. 261 *Hymns and Initiations*, Thomas Taylor Series volume V)

Page 41 "Our regard for the opinion of others therefore does honour to human nature, and to it's Creator." This view does not sit well with the Platonic tradition, where the opinion of others is only considered worthwhile if those others are wise – the opinion of the "ignorant many" are dismissed by Socrates in the *Crito*(47a). Taylor certainly followed the direction of Socrates here, and in his *Answer to Dr Gillies (Against the Christians*, Thomas Taylor Series XXXIII, p. 172) he writes about his translation of Aristotle, ". . . and because I have been more solicitous, by endeavouring to preserve the accurate meaning and manner of the original, to gain the approbation of the wise and worthy, than to do violence to Aristotle in order to please the vulgar, and, in the language of trade, *manufacture* a saleable book."

Page 49 "It is impossible to prove the immortality of the soul; and impossible to prove its mortality." But the immortality of the soul was something that the Platonists did indeed think was possible to prove, and amongst many other writings that Thomas Taylor thought worthwhile translating which deal with this issue was his essay *A Platonic Demonstration of the Immortality of the Soul*. This was almost entirely taken from Hermias' *Commentary on the Phaedrus* on the passage in the dialogue in which Plato himself offers a rational proof of immortality. (See *Oracles and Mysteries*, Thomas Taylor Series volume VII).

This author of the *A New System of Religion*, whoever he or she was, had only a passing knowledge of ancient polytheistic theology – one such as might be gained by a rather hurried reading of a few pages of, say, Psellus, or Plato's *Symposium*. Given the small revival of what was supposed to be the ancient religious and philosophical viewpoint which especially gathered a certain momentum around the anti-Church movement associated with the French revolution there are likely to have been several possible candidates for its possible authorship: Taylor, however, should be entirely discounted. Perhaps someone might raise the possibility that Taylor wrote *A New System* before he had become an adept in the Platonic Tradition, but by the time of its publication he had already published several major works – a treatise on Plotinus, Proclus on Euclid, his *History of the Restoration of the Platonic Theology* (which included extensive extracts from Plotinus, Porphyry and Iamblichus), *The Hymns of Orpheus*, a *Dissertation on Platonic Ideas* and a *Dissertation on the Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries*. All these after having immersed himself in the writings of Plato and Aristotle: even at the relatively early stage of his publishing career, Taylor was far too well versed in the Platonic tradition to have been the author of this unplatonic and frankly childish work.