

AN ELEGANT AND LEARNED DISCOURSE
OF THE LIGHT OF NATURE

NATURAL LAW AND
ENLIGHTENMENT CLASSICS

Knud Haakonssen
General Editor

NATURAL LAW AND
ENLIGHTENMENT CLASSICS

*An Elegant and Learned
Discourse of
the Light of Nature*
Nathaniel Culverwell

Edited by Robert A. Greene
and Hugh MacCallum
Foreword by Robert A. Greene



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The view of Emmanuel College was published in David Loggan, *Cantabrigia Illustrata* (Cambridge, 1690). Culverwell delivered his *Discourse* in the former chapel of Emmanuel College, identified as “B Bibliotheca” in Loggan’s drawing.

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P R E F A C E

This edition of Culverwell's *Discourse*, edited by Robert A. Greene and Hugh MacCallum, was originally published in 1971 by the University of Toronto Press. The introduction set the work in its historical and philosophical context. This republication substitutes a brief updated foreword by Robert A. Greene for that original introduction. Bracketed page numbers in the text indicate the pagination of the 1971 edition. Bracketed page numbers in the foreword refer to page numbers in this volume. Capitalization of the chapter titles on page 9 and in the text has been modernized. The chapter numbers in the text have been made arabic to be consistent with those on page 9. The following acknowledgments are repeated from the 1971 edition.

The editors wish to express their gratitude to the institutions and libraries that provided assistance, and to the friends who helped them out of difficulties. Leaves of absence from the University of Toronto afforded the opportunity for research abroad, and the Leverhulme Trust, the Canada Council, and the research fund of the University of Toronto supported the project. The work has been published with the aid of grants from the Humanities Research Council, using funds provided by the Canada Council, and from the Publications Fund of the University of Toronto Press.

We wish to recognize a particular debt to the staffs of the British Library and the Huntington Library, where much of the work was done, and to the Librarian of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, Mr. Frank Stubbings, for his generous guidance and advice, which included drawing to our attention the existence of the pulpit from which Culverwell preached his *Discourse*. The complete list of colleagues and friends who contributed to the

solution of individual problems is too long for inclusion here, but we desire especially to thank N. J. Endicott, David Gallop, Allan Pritchard, John Rist, Niall Rudd, D. I. B. Smith, and Peter Walsh; K. H. Kuhn and J. W. Wevers were kind enough to check the accuracy of the Hebrew passages in the text. John Brown's nineteenth-century edition of the *Discourse* was of indispensable assistance, and in standing on his shoulders we hope we have avoided the pitfall which Culverwell warned of in his account of the printer who "corrects the old *Errata* of the first Edition, and makes some new Errors in [his] owne." Both editors think with affection of the encouragement offered by the late A. S. P. Woodhouse, and with respect (not unmixed with penitence) of the assistance offered by their wives, Barbara and Mary.

R. A. G.

H. M.

FOREWORD

Emmanuel College and the Cambridge Platonists

Nathaniel Culverwell died at the age of thirty-one in 1651. He had spent eighteen years of his brief life as a student and fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, “that zealous house,” as John Evelyn called it. Emmanuel had been established as a Puritan foundation in 1584, and by midcentury its Calvinist ethos had led to its flourishing as the second-largest college in the university. Its influence peaked during the political disruptions of the mid-1640s, when over half the fellows in the university, Emmanuel excepted, were ejected by Parliament for their failure to subscribe to the Solemn League and Covenant, and eleven heads of colleges were removed from their positions. Seven of their replacements came from Emmanuel.

It was during these same years, however, that the Presbyterian Calvinism that had characterized Emmanuel and led to its prominence was beginning to erode, challenged by the new ideas in the preaching and writing of three of Culverwell’s contemporaries at the college: Benjamin Whichcote, Ralph Cudworth, and John Smith. Culverwell spent ten, twelve, and eight years, respectively, with them at Emmanuel, and he served as fellow with Whichcote and Cudworth in the early 1640s. Thus he matured intellectually in the collegial company of three of the four major members of that loose federation, the so-called Cambridge Platonists. Henry More of Christ’s College was the fourth.

There is no evidence to confirm that Whichcote tutored Culverwell, although their common reliance on scholastic sources and the privileged

position in their writings of the biblical verse “The understanding of a man is the candle of the Lord,” from Proverbs 20:27, may suggest that possibility. Culverwell is no longer considered a Cambridge Platonist, but his views are strongly linked to Whichcote’s, and he clearly shared with the Platonists their new emphasis on the central importance of reason in religious thinking. In any event, he directly experienced this transition in emphasis and intellectual focus at Emmanuel, and his writings reflect it. His first sermons, or commonplaces, in the early 1640s focus on typical Calvinist themes: the necessity of assurance, the nature of justification, man’s dependence upon God’s free grace. These give way in the later *Discourse of the Light of Nature* to an overriding concern with the emerging and more secular preoccupations of midcentury: the dangers in the ideas of radical sects and enthusiasts, the legitimate and necessary place of reason in religion, the natural law debate.

Culverwell delivered the lectures that constitute his *Discourse* in the college chapel during the academic year 1645–46. They were published posthumously in 1652 by William Dillingham, who dedicated them to the then master, Anthony Tuckney, and the fellows of the college. In his preface to the work, Dillingham asserts that it was written “*on the one hand to vindicate the use of Reason in matters of Religion from the aspersions and prejudices of some weaker ones in those times*” [3], a remark which indicates that the *Discourse* is in part a topical treatise with roots in the furious controversies of its day. The removal of licensing control over printing in 1641 resulted in a surge of religious and political tracts and manifestoes, succinctly described and condemned in the title of a contemporary pamphlet as *Hell Broke Loose*. On August 9, 1644, the Westminster Assembly sent a message to the House of Lords, complaining of the “great Growth and Increase of Anabaptists and Antinomians and other sects”; and in the year in which Culverwell wrote and delivered his *Discourse*, Thomas Edwards was composing his *Gangraena* (1646), the most famous and thorough of the English catalogues of heresy.

It is no surprise, then, to find Culverwell deploring “those black and prodigious Errors, that cover and bespot the face of these times” [125] in the midst of the English civil war, including those on both ends of the spectrum of religious argument. At one extreme, there was the “blunder-

ing *Antinomian*” who transformed the traditional Calvinist assertion of man’s utter depravity into the conviction that redemption of the elect by God’s free grace released them from conventional moral obligations and justified scandalously licentious behavior. At the opposite pole, Culverwell criticizes the Arminianism that “pleads for it self under the specious notion of God’s love to mankind” [14], a reference to Samuel Hoard’s *God’s Love to Mankind* (1633), an Arminian rejection of Calvinist predestination. The legitimate claims of reason in religious matters should not be suspect, Culverwell argues, because they can be misused and distorted by such extremists. Culverwell’s plan for the *Discourse* was to develop a moderate and judicious defense of reason and natural law “standing in the midst between two adversaries of extreme persuasions,” in Dillingham’s words [4]. Had he lived to complete the work, he would have argued that “all the Moral Law is founded in natural and common light, in the light of *Reason*” and that “there’s nothing in the mysteries of the Gospel contrary to the light of *Reason*; nothing repugnant to this light that shines from *the Candle of the Lord*” [16].

In addition to resisting antinomian libertinism on one side and liberalizing Arminianism on the other, Culverwell clearly intended to respond to Francis Bacon’s call for “a temperate and careful treatise . . . which as a kind of divine logic, should lay down proper precepts touching the use of human reason in theology.” In the first sentence of the *Discourse*, he echoes Bacon’s *Advancement of Learning* in declaring that distinguishing the provenances of faith and reason is the task that he has set himself: “to give unto *Reason* the things that are *Reasons*, and unto *Faith* the things that are *Faiths*” [10]. Although, unlike the Cambridge Platonists, he quotes or refers to Bacon’s writings frequently enough to indicate considerable knowledge and approval of the Baconian gospel, the spirit of the *Discourse* is basically at odds with Bacon’s plan for man’s intellectual progress. In his emphasis upon scholastic psychology and his indebtedness to Aristotle, Aquinas, and Suarez, as well as in his flourishing rhetoric and richly metaphorical style, Culverwell does not forward the Great Instauration. Accordingly, although the seed for Culverwell’s *Discourse* may have been sown by Bacon’s call for new works to fill the gaps in human knowledge, the result might well have dismayed him.

The Argument of the Discourse

Delivered as a series of separate sermonlike lectures to students on a specific biblical text, Proverbs 20:27, the *Discourse* nevertheless presents a continuous and progressive argument. This style of lecturing to students was practiced generally in Cambridge at the time and is exemplified by John Sherman's *A Greek in the Temple: Some Common-places delivered in Trinity College Chapel upon Acts XVII, part of the 28 verse* (Cambridge, 1641). The more rhetorical and poetic passages in the *Discourse* reflect the additional influence of the commonplace and declamation. Unfortunately, Culverwell followed the tradition of the ostentatious declamation in quoting generously from Latin and Greek sources, a habit that has dismayed the student and daunted the scholar.

The general outline of the argument is clear. The first chapter contains a statement of the theme of the whole work. Reason and faith are distinct lights, yet they are not opposed; they are complementary and harmonious. Reason is the image of God in man, and to deny right reason is to deny our relation to God. Chapter 2 concludes the prologue by analyzing the text from Proverbs, "The understanding of a man is the candle of the Lord," which serves as a touchstone for the whole argument. Culverwell understands the verse to be an endorsement and celebration of the light of nature, that is, reason.

The first of the two major divisions of the work, chapters 3 through 10, now begins. Chapter 3 defines nature in two ways: first, it is God himself, or what the scholastics called *natura naturans*; second, nature is the principle of operation of any entity, whether spiritual or material. In chapters 4 through 7, law is defined as a measure of moral acts which has as its end the common good; it finds its authority in the will of the lawgiver. The eternal law is the fountain of all other laws: its end is to regulate all things, commanding good and forbidding evil. It is founded in God's reason and formalized by God's will, and it is promulgated both by the law of nature and by direct revelation from God. The law of nature applies only to rational beings who are capable of a formal and legal obligation, "for where there is no Liberty, there's no Law" [44]. God thus publishes his law through reason, the inward scripture or candle of the Lord. Chapters 8

through 10 deal with the light of nature and the related question of how the law of nature is discovered. That discovery is made by “that intellectual eye which God has fram’d and made exactly proportionable to this Light” [71] and confirmed by the consent of nations.

The first half of the *Discourse* dealt with “How *The Understanding of a man is the Candle of the Lord*”; the second half, chapters 11 through 18, considers a different question: “What this *Candle of the Lord* discovers” [16]. This question entails an examination of the powers, nature, and limitations of the light of reason.

Chapters 11 through 13, the first of the three subdivisions, emphasize the limitations of reason, which is described as a “derivative” and a “diminutive” light. The soul does not possess innate ideas. It enters the world as a *tabula rasa* and discovers common notions by observing and comparing sense impressions, and thus it discerns the rational order imposed by God on creation. Accordingly, the argument continues in chapters 14 through 16, reason can serve as a guide to truth. Reason may be limited, but it is “certain” and “directive” despite the attacks of ancient and modern skeptics. Far from being extinguished by faith, reason is completed by it. The final section, chapters 17 and 18, confirms this endorsement of reason, calling it a “pleasant” and “ascendant” light.

Suárez

The antinomian and Arminian writers and Francis Bacon form part of the circle of influences surrounding Culverwell’s *Discourse*. Closer to the center lies the *De Legibus, ac Deo Legislatore* (1612) by Francisco Suárez, the Spanish Jesuit. Despite Culverwell’s expressed indignation at the logic-chopping of the scholastics, “their works are like so many raging seas, full of perpetual tossings, and disquietings, and foamings, and sometimes casting up mire and dirt” [15], the *Discourse of the Light of Nature* is essentially a Protestant blossom on the scholastic tree; its fundamental philosophic position and spirit are derived from Suárez and Thomas Aquinas.

Chapters 4 through 7 of the *Discourse* examine the nature of law itself, the eternal law, and the definition and extent of natural law. These chapters contain the philosophic keystone of the work, and they support the

views of the light of reason and its place in the divine economy which form the substance of later sections. Culverwell follows the arguments of Suárez on these questions, while omitting many of his subtleties and distinctions, and accepts his definitions and conclusions virtually without exception. For example, his quotations of Thomistic definitions of law in chapter 4 are repeated from Suárez and then qualified by Suárez's own restatement of them. The notes make this indebtedness clear.

In chapter 6 John Selden's recently published *De Jure Naturali* (1640), and Hugo Grotius's *De Jure Belli ac Pacis* (1625), are mined for appropriate quotations to illustrate or buttress the points at issue and are at times cited in their own right, but the major insights of the chapter are again derived from Suárez. Natural law, Culverwell asserts, is "intrinsic and essential to a rational creature"; only an intellectual creature is "capable of a moral government" [40]. Suárez is quite correct, therefore, in rejecting the distinction which the *Institutes* and *Digest* of Justinian draw between the law of nature, common to man and irrational creatures, and the law of nations, the specific rule of men—a distinction also repudiated by Grotius and Selden. Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Plutarch are all brought forward to endorse the conclusion that "the Law of *Nature* is built upon Reason," to testify to the "harmony that is between *Nature* and *Law*," and to repeat the substance of Culverwell's view that "the Law of *Nature* is a streaming out of Light from *the Candle of the Lord*" [47]. The final pages of chapter 6 are then taken up with a consideration, based almost entirely upon Suárez, of the precedence of the divine intellect or will in the establishment of law.

This scholastic dilemma, finding popular expression in the conundrum of whether God wills things because they are good or whether things are good because God wills them, appears close to being tautological, but it had already had a long history when Culverwell considered it. The tradition of emphasizing the divine volition as the ultimate determinant of moral good, the voluntarism of William of Ockham, has been traced through his fourteenth-century disciples Pierre d'Ailly and Jean Gerson to both Calvin and Luther, and it is an emphasis encountered frequently in Puritan theologians. The realist position of Thomas Aquinas, which

stressed God's rationality and the inherent rationality and morality of the laws governing the universe, was reexpressed for the Elizabethans in Richard Hooker's *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. "They err, therefore," says Hooker, "who think that of the will of God to do this or that, there is no reason besides his will."

Suárez's subtle solution to this inherited problem was to argue that law is founded in reason and formalized by will, or, in Culverwell's words: "This law of Nature having a firme and unshaken foundation in the necessity and conveniency of its materials, becomes formally valid and vigorous by the minde and command of the Supreme Law-giver; So as that all the strength and nerves, and binding virtue of this Law are rooted and fasten'd partly in the excellency and equity of the commands themselves, but they principally depend upon the Sovereignty and Authority of God himself" [71]. As the immutable essences of things created by divine reason and discoverable by human reason are the foundation for natural obligations incumbent upon men, so the divine will by its command creates moral obligations which bind men in a formal and, technically speaking, legal way.

The clearest understanding of Culverwell's judicious balancing of the divine attributes is provided by the impressive conclusion to chapter II, which rises to a sustained endorsement of reason comparable to the paragraphs of Hooker and traceable, like those, to scholastic sources. Here the subtle distinctions of Suárez are transformed by Culverwell's metaphoric vigor into the humanistic assertion that, "The more men exercise reason, the more they resemble God himself" [117]. Arguing from the premise that "The understanding of God thus being fill'd with light, his Will also must needs be rational" [114], Culverwell concludes that the separation of these attributes is misleading. "Now the understanding of God being so vast and infinite, and his will being so commensurate and proportion'd to it, nay all one with it; all those Decrees of his that are the Eternal product and results of his minde and will, must needs be rational also; For in them his understanding and will met together, his truth and goodnesse kissed each other" [115]. Such emphasis upon the divine reason and reluctance to oppose it to the divine will are thoroughly Thomistic. "All law," Thomas

asserts, “proceeds from the reason and will of the law-giver; the Divine and natural laws from the reasonable will of God; the human law from the will of man, regulated by reason.”

The Candle of the Lord

Another legacy from the Middle Ages is evident in a distinctive feature of the *Discourse* that sets it apart from other classic works on the natural law: Culverwell’s imaginative and literary incorporation into his argument of the metaphor of the candle of the Lord. Proverbs 20:27 has been frequently cited as a kind of shibboleth for the Cambridge Platonists as a group, but the fact is that it was Whichcote and Culverwell alone who wove it into the texture of their thinking and writing on the light and law of nature, and who revived and explored its special medieval significance. Whichcote was clearly the first to make the metaphor a prominent and integral part of his anthropology and theology in his preaching at Trinity Church in the 1630s. In fact, it was so prominent that he and his former tutor at Emmanuel, the Calvinist Anthony Tuckney, engaged in public controversy over it in three successive Cambridge commencement addresses from 1650 to 1652. None of Whichcote’s writings, however, were published until after his death in 1683, and so it was Culverwell’s *Discourse*, published four times from 1652 to 1669, frequently plagiarized and echoed, that established the candle of the Lord as a resonant and popular metaphor for right reason and the light of nature.

Both Whichcote and Culverwell viewed man’s reason as more than a dry Baconian light, more than a discursive faculty to “reckon with” in Hobbes’s words. Ancient Judaic tradition had read the expression “the spirit of man” to mean “the higher region of the soul,” and the light of the candle of the Lord was identified by Dionysius of Richel in the fifteenth century with *synderesis*, that “pure part of conscience” or spark of man’s deiform nature remaining after the Fall that enabled mankind (*contra* Calvin) to recognize and pursue the good and to be repelled by evil. Rhetorically adapting such ancient wisdom to present philosophical and pastoral needs, and echoing Dionysius’ commentary on Proverbs 20:27, Whichcote spoke of reason or the candle of the Lord as *res illuminata, illuminans*,

a thing lighted by God and lighting the way to God, the discoverer of the moral “principles of first inscription,” or the natural law. Culverwell expresses the same idea in concluding that the light of the candle is an ascendant light: “The Candle of the Lord it came from him, and ’twould faine returne to him” [184]. On that humanistic and affirmative note, Culverwell concludes his persuasive and eloquent encomium of reason, delivered at a surprising time in an unexpected place.

The Text

The copy-text is the British Library copy shelf-mark 1113.d.1, with the addition of Richard Culverwell’s letter from E.676.(1). William Dillingham’s corrections (“the most material escapes of the impression”) listed on a prefatory page of the first edition have been incorporated. Dillingham was an experienced editor of considerable reputation among his contemporaries. In 1658 he gave a first edition of the *Discourse* to the library of Emmanuel College, where it remains today, inscribing it “Collegio Emmanuele Dedit G. D.”

Certain typographical alterations have been made silently: modern *s* (for long *s*) and *w* (for *vv*, both capital and lowercase) are used throughout; random italics and wrong-font letters are corrected, and ligature capitals as well as Renaissance Greek contractions have been regularized. All other departures from the copy-text are recorded in the textual notes. Emendations have been made sparingly—in a few cases where the spelling of the 1652 edition is incorrect, eccentric even by seventeenth-century standards, or confusing, that of the second edition of 1654 has been used. Punctuation and syntax have been altered only where the first edition would positively mislead the reader, and all such cases have been recorded. As the textual notes indicate, there are only a few instances, marked “(ed.),” where the second edition of 1654 fails to provide a satisfactory alternative reading.

The second edition, however, has no textual authority. Collation reveals that it was based on the first edition and that no manuscript intervened in its publication. Although some care was taken in the second edition to correct obvious slips made in the first, only half of Dillingham’s corrections

were incorporated ([125] to end), perhaps as the result of employing two printers, Thomas Roycroft and E[dward] M[ottershead?]; the table of contents was reproduced with the page numbers of the first edition. Selective collation of the third (1661) and fourth (1669) editions reveals that they too are without textual authority, the fourth having been set up from the third and the third from the first.

After Culverwell's death, Dillingham first published one of his commonplaces under the title *Spiritual Opticks*, (Cambridge, 1651). The *Discourse* itself was published together with eight such exercises, including *Spiritual Opticks*, in 1652: AN / ELEGANT / And Learned / DISCOURSE / Of the / Light of Nature, / With several other / TREATISES: /

| | | |
|------|---|--|
| Viz. | $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \textit{The Schisme.} \\ \textit{The Act of Oblivion.} \\ \textit{The Childes Returne.} \\ \textit{The Panting Soul.} \end{array} \right\}$ | $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \textit{Mount Ebal.} \\ \textit{The White Stone.} \\ \textit{Spiritual Opticks.} \\ \textit{The Worth of Souls.} \end{array} \right\}$ |
|------|---|--|

[rule] By NATHANIEL CULVERWEL, Master of Arts, and / lately Fellow of EMANUEL *Colledge* in CAMBRIDGE, [rule] *Imprimatur*, EDM. CALAMY. [rule] *London*. Printed by T. R. and E. M. for John Rothwell at the Sun / and Fountain in *Pauls Church-yard*. 1652. Sigs. A4, [a]4, Aa–Ee4, A–X4, Y2, Z4, Aa–Dd4.

Signature “a” appears to have been reserved for further prefatory material, including Richard Culverwell's letter dated eight days after Dillingham's “To the Reader.” Richard's letter is missing in some copies of the first edition and is bound sometimes before, sometimes after, the table of contents, perhaps suggesting that it arrived late at the printer.

This volume was reprinted at London in 1654 and 1661. The copyright was transferred to Thomas Williams, October 30, 1663, and he printed the fourth edition at Oxford [London] in 1669. The *Discourse* has been reprinted twice since the seventeenth century: John Brown edited the text in 1857 and published it at Edinburgh with a prefatory critical essay by John Cairns; E. T. Campagnac reprinted the Oxford edition of 1669, omitting chapters 2, 12, 13, 14, 17, and 18 in *The Cambridge Platonists* (Oxford, 1901).

The principles for translating foreign-language quotations which John Worthington adopted in his edition of John Smith's *Discourses* (London, 1660) have been adhered to in the present work: "It seemed expedient to render the Latine, but especially the Hebrew and Greek, Quotations into English; (except in such places where, the substance and main importance of the Quotations being insinuated in the neighboring words, a Translation was less needful)." Accordingly, all foreign phrases, with the exception of a few obvious Latin tags, have been translated if Culverwell did not himself translate or closely paraphrase them.

Further Reading

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