

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bib-sacra\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php)

## ARTICLE III.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CAMBRIDGE  
PLATONISTS.

BY THE REV. F. J. POWICKE, D. D.

ENGLAND was never more intensely alive than in the middle of the seventeenth century. Englishmen have always been politicians; but then they were politicians and theologians as well. Moreover, it was their theology which shaped their politics. It was the conviction that the king had a divine right to rule in church and state which engaged the Royalists for what is now seen to have been an unjust cause. It was the conviction that God's will must be done; that God's will meant the welfare of the people, and in a special sense the welfare of their souls; that God's will could not be done so long as any man, even though a king, stood in the way, claiming to interpret but often perverting its dictates,—it was this conviction which kindled in the Puritans so stern a passion of resistance. God was the supreme element. At that time, if at any time in our history, God seemed to men a living God. We need not say, as Carlyle would seem to say, that he was a living God only to the Puritans. A faith in God which craved to know what it was right to believe about him, and in what way it was right to worship him; a faith which charged all actions of the present life with momentous issues for the life to come,—was not confined to Puritans. It was a possession diffused, more or less, through all parties and ranks. It was as real in Falkland as in Cromwell, in Laud as in Owen, in George Herbert as in Colonel Hutcheson.

Here, in fact, is the truest key to the multiplicity of sects and the fierceness of their conflict. Men do not become zealous for things about which they feel no great concern. When there sprang up swarms of "Antiscripturists, Familists, Antinomians, Antitrinitarians, Arians, Anabaptists," it might be natural for Puritan and Prelatist alike to ban them as "the very dregs and spawn of old accursed heresies which had been already condemned, dead, buried, and rotten in their graves long ago." Nevertheless, the sudden uprising, the rapid growth, the fervent zeal of such sects bear sure witness to the dominant interest of the age. They tell of the universal craving for acquaintance with God and God's will as the secret of satisfaction and peace. In this view, the tumult and contention which to men like Baxter appeared so utterly deplorable, may be seen to deserve something more than denunciation. We are to God not what we seem, but what we mean. And there was scarcely a sect in those earnest days which did not mean or intend the truth.

Still, even as the contrast between the strife and chatter of the agora and the seclusion of the Academic grove where Plato walked and talked, so seems to our imagination the contrast between the tumult of the outside ecclesiastical world and that little circle of choice spirits at Cambridge who "studied to propagate better thoughts, to take men off from being in parties, or from narrow notions, from superstitious conceits and a fierceness about opinions." What impresses one at once in these men is not so much the articles of their creed—whether political or theological—as their temper. It is the temper of the Christian philosopher met with unexpectedly, and so the more welcome. They are not recluses. They are men of affairs. They are men who give free and large expression to their thoughts in speech and writing. They can give and take in controversy. Their views are definite, are deeply rooted

in principle, are never lightly changed or abandoned. But, withal, their temper—as represented especially by Whichcote, Smith, Cudworth, and More—is the perfection of “sweet reasonableness.” Bitter personalities and animosities—the generally accredited weapons of theological combatants—were abhorrent to them.

“Universal charity is a thing final in religion;”<sup>1</sup> “the truly zealous serve religion in a religious temper; in zeal there is nothing tending to provocation or exasperation. Zeal for God and truth appears to others in fair persuasion and strength of argument,”<sup>2</sup>—these are words descriptive of religion as they both conceived and practised it.

It did actually affect their whole manhood. “In the understanding it was knowledge; in the life it was obedience; in the affections it was delight in God; in their carriage and behavior it was modesty, calmness, gentleness, quietness, candour, ingenuity; in their dealings it was uprightness, integrity, correspondence with the rule of righteousness.”<sup>3</sup> One who values spiritual culture cannot but be drawn to the study of men like these—even though, as is certainly not the case, they could do little for the intellect. They were remarkable for learning even in that learned age. They abound in passages of “that glorious eloquence, so rich in varied and majestic harmonies,” of which Milton and Hooker are the greatest masters. They contain numberless examples of noble thought, so clearly and tersely expressed as to make their writings a rich mine of aphoristic wisdom. But their chief claim to live, and their chief use, lies in the fact that the reader who puts himself under their influence soon comes to feel, as Plato said, that the soul is a winged creature whose proper home is not the flats and mists of earth, but the pure and open heavens; is not the perishable things of

<sup>1</sup> Whichcote's Aphorisms, No. 679.    <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 425.    <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 956.

sense, but the eternal truths, the unfading hopes and ideals and possessions of a divinely nurtured life.

The purpose of this paper is to describe general characteristics of the Cambridge men. Biographical details, therefore, need not be given. These can be found in Principal Tulloch's admirable work "Rational Theology in England in the Seventeenth Century." Yet it is necessary to say so much about the men as will suffice for historical background.

Whichcote (1610-1683), son of an old Shropshire family, entered Emmanuel College, Cambridge, in 1626, at the age of sixteen. Emmanuel College had the reputation of being Puritan—which in this connection means, not Calvinist, but opposed more or less to the ritual and articles of the established church.

In the sense of Calvinist all the colleges were professedly Puritan. Thus, Mr. Joseph Mede—who on some accounts might almost be called the day-star of the Cambridge movement—wrote to a friend on the 6th of July, 1622, in a tone of amazement, that "on Sunday, in the face of the whole 'commencement assembled,' Mr. Lucie," lately made a B.D., "preached a sermon totally for Arminianism. . . . 'Yesterday," he goes on, "a combination gathered in the town, and went to the vice-chancellor to have him censured." But by some backstairs influence he escaped.<sup>1</sup>

Emmanuel, then, was Calvinist in common with the rest of the University: it was only singular in being Puritan, i.e., in favoring a further reformation of the church. Hence Whichcote might afterwards, as he did, retain office under Parliament and Cromwell without departing from his early principles. He was always for the church, but he was also for the movement which aimed at purging away gross errors and simplifying forms of worship, i.e., for the

<sup>1</sup>See his letter in *Cambridge Transactions*, Vol. ii. p. 309.

early Puritan ideal, if not for the whole Puritan performance. In his undergraduate days his tutor noted him as "studious and pious"; "in 1636 he was ordained both deacon and priest by Williams, Bishop of Lincoln. During the eventful years which followed, he appears to have employed himself with pupils at the University till 1643," when he removed to the college living of North Cadbury, Somersetshire. The next year he is back at the University as provost in King's College, and there remained till the Restoration.

Whichcote was a preacher. Preaching came natural to him. He was never so happy as in the pulpit. He wrote nothing for publication. All his literary remains are four volumes of sermons compiled from notes taken mostly by admiring hearers; and a Book of Aphorisms mostly culled from the sermons. But they are quite enough, when added to the rare beauty of his character, to explain how he became the founder of a new school. Maurice<sup>1</sup> is reluctant to call the movement which started with Whichcote a school. And certainly Whichcote did not seek to found a school in the sense of getting a man to adopt and echo his opinions. But, like Maurice himself, his influence was magnetic. From the time he set up his afternoon lectureship—1644—he became, like Maurice, a center of attraction or repulsion. To stern and unbending Calvinists such as his former tutor Tuckney, he was a source of mental perplexity and sorrow of heart. To the young Masters of Arts, on the other hand, he was a fountain of "new light and "heart's ease."

One of these latter was John Smith (1616–1652), a farmer's son from Achurch, Northamptonshire; poor in purse, but rich in genius; so remarkable a scholar that, though he died at the age of thirty-six, he was considered 'a living library' and 'a walking study'; so clear a thinker that

<sup>1</sup> Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy, Vol. ii. p. 349.

his "learning lay not as idle notions in his head," but all "concocted" for use; so sweet a personality, that the friends who "had a more inward converse" with him knew him to be one of those "of whom the world is not worthy," one of the "excellent ones of the earth"; so eloquent that "his mouth could drop finished sentences as easily as an ordinary man's could speak sense." He was one of Whichcote's favorite pupils. Whichcote eased him of care, in his straitened circumstances, with money freely and delicately given. Smith on his part did ever express not merely "a great and singular regard" for his tutor, but used to say that mentally and spiritually he "lived on Dr. Whichcote." None more certain to be among the Trinity Chapel audience than he; none more diligent in taking notes; none more quick to see and assimilate the preacher's thought; none better able to reflect it, exalted and enlarged, in "Select Discourses" of his own—discourses which, for richness of style, depth and breadth of grasp, and elevation of feeling, are second to none in the English language.

Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688), too—another student of Emmanuel, son of a clergyman at Aller in Somerset; who graduated M.A. at the age of twenty-two "with great applause"; who distinguished himself later as tutor of his college and Master of Christ's, and still more as author of an "Intellectual System of the Universe," which is at least a miracle of learning—also followed Whichcote, not slavishly, but yet with a fullness of sympathy which made him receptive of his leader's most characteristic thoughts and aims.

A third adherent was Henry More (1614-1687), son of a squire at Grantham, in Lincolnshire; a student not of Emmanuel, but of Christ Church; one who almost equals Cudworth in the vastness and variety of his learning; one who deserved to be called, if any man ever did, a "spiritual

splendor"—“the most Platonical of the Platonic sect, and at the same time the most genial, natural, and perfect man of them all.”

These were the men with whom the Cambridge movement began. And when we consider what they were in position, in attainments, in ability, and in character, it is not surprising that the youth of the University should have been at once attracted to them, and that in a few years the numbers inoculated with their principles should have so increased as to create a wide-spread anxiety among the orthodox, and to put their “name in every man’s mouth.”

We may now raise the question, what mainly the men of the New School would learn from its leaders. There can be no doubt as to the answer; for the word oftenest on the lips of Whichcote was “reason.” His free and bold use of it was the special fault charged against him by Tuckney and others. These wished “faith to have been advanced, rather than reason cried up: which is yet so frequently done that it proves nauseous.”<sup>1</sup> Whichcote of course did not begin the use of the term. It had already become a sort of watchword among men inside and outside the universities who claimed to be men of light and leading. But he imparted to it a significance and sacredness which soon made it a distinguishing badge. Locke in his essay opens the chapter on Reason with the remark, that “the word Reason in the English language has different significations; sometimes it is taken for true and clear principles; sometimes for clear and fair deductions from those principles; and sometimes for the cause and particularly the final cause. But the consideration I shall have of it here is in a signification different from all these; and that is, as it stands for a faculty in man.” So with the Cambridge men, reason—though they not seldom employ

<sup>1</sup>Second letter of Dr. Antony Tuckney to Whichcote, written in 1641.

it in one or the other of the senses mentioned by Locke— is a faculty. As such, their conception of it was Platonic.

According to Plato, there is nothing higher in man than reason; because it answers to what is highest in God. The Divine Reason, or *νοῦς*, is conversant with ideas only, i. e., with the pure truth of things, the essential “forms” which shape and sustain all phenomena of sense and spirit. Human reason is capable of doing the same. Man’s grandest privilege and most serious duty is to escape the mere shows of life; is to rise by means of discriminating intellectual effort and purifying moral discipline, from the confused to the clear, from that which seems to that which *is*. *Truth* is that which *is*; is a *κόσμος*—a steady, steadfast system of ideas and their relations. To know the truth in all fullness belongs to God. To know it in some measure—a measure which may be ever growing in range and distinctness—was God’s gift to man, when by communicating reason he communicated to him the most genuine token of his own image. So taught Plato.

And the interpretation which the Cambridge men put on the words they were so fond of quoting is of itself proof enough that they agreed with Plato. To them the “candle of the Lord” was not so much the *light* as the eye of the soul, an organ of intellectual apprehension, derived from God, and godlike. The light was the truth, evidenced to the eye of reason, as the sun’s light to the eye of the body, by its very nature. Their love for that particular phrase may have arisen, certainly not from the feeling that it was their only scriptural support, but from the humility which always led them to confess that the glory of knowing the truth is coupled with the fact that man’s knowledge, and power to know, do not, at least on earth, amount to very much; is comparatively a feeble light, a mere beam in the darkness. All the same, its divine origin and character confer upon it a divine au-

thority, so far as it goes. "A man has as much right to use his own understanding in judging of truth as he has a right to use his own eyes to see his way."<sup>1</sup> "To go against reason is to go against God; it is the self-same to do that which the reason of the case doth require, and that which God himself doth appoint. Reason is the Divine Governor of man's life; it is the very voice of God."<sup>2</sup> In fact the distinction and the offense of the Cambridge men was, not that they exercised or even commended reason more than others, but only that they made it the ultimate authority.

It has often been said that a result of scholasticism was utterly to suppress and eclipse reason. In a sense, no doubt, the statement is correct—in the sense, viz., that when once doctrines were established they were forced upon the mind's acceptance without option of criticism. But it should be remembered that the process which led up to the formulating of a doctrine was a strict exercise of reason, and such an exercise as trained it to a subtilty and power that have never been surpassed. Reason was indeed the handmaid of faith—faith supplied its premises—to expound and confirm these was its assigned and only legitimate task. But in doing this it disciplined itself—"Men learned in reasoning freely to reason well." At the same time they learned, gradually, to doubt and question—to question the assumptions imposed upon them by Aristotle and the church—to doubt whether it was really the sin it was declared to be to put these authorities to the test. Thus by the use of reason came at length the emancipation of reason. Amid the debates—theological, political, philosophical—which fill the closing years of the sixteenth and the opening years of the seventeenth century, reason developed, more and more, a habit of self-reliance. In the case of the Cambridge men it not simply claimed to be

<sup>1</sup> Aphorisms, No. 40.    <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

free: it boldly exhibited the credentials of freedom. It ought to be free because it is divine, is "the first participation from God," is the medium, though not the source, of all the light of truth. On this broad ground—ground truly philosophical—they thought and acted consistently.

They held out a welcome hand to the new philosophy, as it became the fashion to style the Cartesian and Baconian method. Bacon's appeal to the plain facts of sensible experience from the abstractions which, in Aristotle's name, had long stood for explanations of physical phenomena, was an entirely reasonable principle; so, too, was Descartes's principle that the universe might be accounted for mechanically, as the result of the necessary interplay of matter and the circular motion "impressed by the Supreme Agent on the particles of extended substance."<sup>1</sup> How far the first awakening of Whichcote to the independent rights of reason may have been due to Bacon and Descartes it is hard to say. Certainly what we are told of their precursor, Joseph Mede, that he was an enthusiastic botanist and practical anatomist, and that he turned from the "troublesome labyrinths of metaphysical inquiry to physics as a reassuring study," shows that the influence of the new philosophy was in the air. Anyhow, they were among the first to hear and heed its summons to clear the mind of idols, and look facts in the face. The one "distinct" thing which an Oxford man who wrote to a Cambridge friend for light on the new Cambridge sect could "meet with," was that they are "Followers for the most part of the New Philosophy wherewith they have so poisoned that Fountain [i.e., Cambridge], that there are like to issue out very unwholesome streams throughout the whole kingdom." This is true, replies his Cambridge friend. "Aristotle and the Schoolmen are indeed out of request with them." The former's "*ipse dixit* is an argu-

<sup>1</sup> Berkeley's Lives, § 232.

ment much out of fashion." "They embrace a method of Philosophy which they think was as much ancients than Aristotle as you conceive Oxford was before Cambridge." This philosophy is new and free; and proves itself true by actually discovering to them the way to use and control the great "clock" of the universe. If therefore the church is wise she will heartily encourage it, since "true Philosophy can never hurt sound Divinity."<sup>1</sup>

Yet, while Whichcote and his sympathizers were sure to be on the side of a philosophy whose method was frankly reasonable, their main interest did not lie in the physical, but in the theological sphere, and here it was that their reason found most congenial exercise. Into this sphere the new philosophy, as represented at least by Bacon, did not penetrate. Bacon honored theology as the Jews honored the Holy of holies. He thought it too sacred to enter. On this point he is a Protestant scholastic. When the Articles of Religion have been 'posited,' reason may then be allowed to draw inferences—"as to play a game of chess according to the rules; but the 'placets' of God are removed from question." We may sail with philosophy round the world of the sciences, but theology is not a science. Coming to it, we must "step out of the barque of human Reason, and enter into the ship of the Church, which is only able by the divine compass to direct its course. Neither will the Stars of Philosophy, which have hitherto so nobly shone upon us, any longer supply their light; so that on this theme silence is golden." "Sacred Theology ought to be derived from the oracles of God, and not from the light of nature." "Therefore, attend his will as Himself openeth it, and give unto Faith that which unto Faith belongeth." It has sometimes been said that Descartes divorced theology and philosophy in a similar way.

<sup>1</sup> Brief account of the new sect of Latitude-men in 'Phoenix' Tracts, Vol. i.

But this is more than doubtful. He did, indeed, make his bow to the church on all occasions,—professing readiness to accept her ruling in matters of divinity. But his construction of philosophy *ab initio* took up, and was bound to take up, theology on the way. “I have always thought,” he says in the dedication of his “Meditations” to the Sorbonne, “that the two questions of the existence of God and the nature of the soul were the chief of those which ought to be demonstrated rather by Philosophy than by Theology.” Faith on the dictate of the church may suffice for the faithful, but faith on the distinct evidence of natural reason is necessary for the inquirer, and was to himself, whatever he might seem to think, the only faith worth much.

The Cambridge men could not fail to differ from Bacon and agree with Descartes. Their very conception of reason as a “partial likeness of the Eternal Reason,” a faculty in man akin to God’s own power of apprehending truth, committed them to a philosophical treatment of theology. There could be for them no question of any necessary disharmony between reason and faith. These could not even belong to different provinces. They dwelt on the same ground—they had reference to the same objects. Faith was the mind’s assent to the evidence, intuitional or inferential, which reason brought forward. Such assent, when the object was intellectual, might be hindered by prejudice, or, when it was moral, might be hindered by a reluctance of the will. But the yielding it was a purely voluntary act, as much so as the admission of light by the eye or of sound by the ear. To speak of blind faith, therefore, could only mean a faith which had nothing to say for itself. And this, so far from being meritorious, was neither more nor less than self-betrayal. We can see then how justly their position entitles the Cambridge men to the name of philosophical divines. Philosophers simply—in

the sense of mere searchers after truth in general—they were not. Their chief concern was the highest truth, truth religious and moral; and *that* was not a mere *quasitum*—it was something given, something already within reach. But they were philosophic divines above any who had gone before them, or any of their own time, inasmuch as they maintained that religious truth can never contradict other truth, can never contradict itself—can, in short, never be other than rational in its source, its nature, its relations, its results. We have here the key to their whole theory and practice.

(1) It accounts for their view of the 'natural' and the 'revealed.' What the regnant theology made of this distinction is well known. By the Fall, it said, man ceased to be in any living relation to God. God withdrew himself. Man was left to his own devices. Darkness and corruption became his natural element, unrelieved by any power of self-redemption or self-enlightenment. Whatever fragment of spiritual truth he possessed was traditional—fading gleams of the glory which was his in Paradise. His intellect might converse with words and things; might extract from them a use and meaning; might frame arts and sciences; might lead him on to wealth and power and civilization. But he was without God, and so without hope in the world. How utterly this was supposed to be the case is apparent from the strenuous endeavors of orthodoxy to prove, that, if men like Plato and Aristotle did not get the truth in their writings from Adam, then it must have come to them somehow from the Hebrew Scriptures. Theophilus Gale, e.g., a rather famous Puritan and Independent of the seventeenth century,<sup>1</sup> was really attracted by Plato: his Puritan soul was often thrilled with admiration and delight by the noble heathen's truth and love of truth. He would fain have owned some direct operation of God

<sup>1</sup> 1628–1678.

in Plato, some inspiration of the Spirit. But his theology stepped in. Plato was not a Jew; therefore, outside the sphere of God's personal action: so there was nothing for it but to show that he must have 'borrowed' from that sphere by roundabout ways: which Gale tried to do in two bulky volumes<sup>1</sup> whereon he spent the best years of his life.

There was, then, according to the current belief, no such thing as 'natural' light, i.e., truth communicated to man through the medium of his natural faculties of reason or conscience. Revelation was the only source of light, and revelation was another name for the Scriptures. The Scriptures did not contain the Word of God: they *were* the Word of God: genuine, authoritative, true in every jot and tittle. All Scripture, said the Calvinist, was written under the direct dictation of the Holy Spirit, and was to be read by the church as a living voice from heaven. So given to men, it could not possibly contain discrepancy or contradiction: to question its genuineness was simple rebellion against God. It was the one and sole rule of faith. Reason might be employed to make clear the sense—to fit text to text and deduce doctrines; but must not presume to speak or judge in its own right. Some things in Scripture—in the Old Testament particularly—might inflict a shock on the reader's sense of the right and true. This, however, did not matter. Things in Scripture were right and true, not so far as approved by reason and conscience, but simply by being there.

Now the Cambridge men differed from this entirely. They believed in 'natural light,' because they believed that God had not cast men off; that the vital links between him and them had never been quite severed. True, the Fall had drawn down reason with it. It was now "but an old MS. with some broken periods, some letters worn out; it was a picture which had lost its gloss and beauty, the

<sup>1</sup> His Commentary of the Gentiles.

oriency of its colors, the elegancy of its lineaments, the comeliness of its proportions—it was like Leah, blear-eyed.” But though the ‘eye of reason is weakened,’ it is not destroyed. It can still see the light; and God on his part has given light to every man in the measure of his receptiveness. God is the ocean of light wherein all human spirits move and live. He shines in all. He shines in all continually. So far, therefore, as they *can* see him and his truth, they *may* see. Moreover, there are some truths to which reason has borne witness always, and in every man. If a man has failed to exercise his reason, or has gathered around it a “dark, filthy mist” of sin, these truths have been dark to him. But in nobler men like Plato they have been marvelously clear, and have filled “the whole horizon of the soul with a mild and gentle light.” These are the truths, which Whichcote led the way in calling “the truths of first inscription.” They are what a due reverence for the rule “Know thyself” must bring first and most plainly to view. They are the common, i.e., universal, notions of God and virtue,—that God is; that he is, like our own souls, intelligent and spiritual; that he is all-wise, all-good, all-holy; that we are bound to revere, and serve, and submit to him; that “we are under obligations to good self-government”; that “in our converse one with another we ought to maintain brotherly love, and to act with all calmness and gentleness, to do according to the measures and rules of right and equity.” These notions God has folded up in the soul of man. They are the Master light of all his seeing, “the foundation of all religion,” the sure guide to God and heaven. He who knows them, though a heathen, is truly wise; he who knows and follows them will never miss the goal. “If,” says Henry More, “thou wilt be faithful to thine inward guide, and deal uprightly in the Holy Covenant, thou wilt want no monitor—thy way shall be made so plain before thee that

thou shalt not err, nor stumble, but arrive at last to the desired scope of all thy travels and endeavors." There might be saints, then, as well as sages among the heathen—ancient and modern. Plato was one, and many others. Their Teacher and Redeemer was not Moses, but the living Father of Spirits. Moses may have been their original in some matters of fact relating to the history of man and the world; but in matters of spiritual life and truth the 'inspiration of the Almighty had given them understanding.'

But such being the doctrine of the Cambridge school as to so-called "natural light," what was its doctrine as to Scripture? Not certainly that the latter is more divine than the former; for God, the Father of lights, is equally the Fountain of both. But what Scripture does is (*a*) to confirm natural truth. "The written word of God," says Whichcote, "is not the first or only discovery of the duty of man. It doth gather and repeat and reinforce and charge upon us the scattered principles of God's creation." "Therefore, these things have a double sanction from God. They are the principles of his creation discoverable and knowable by natural light. They are again declared and included in the terms of the covenant of grace." (*b*) Next, it clears, and makes sure, things which philosophy could do no more than anticipate. Thus Plato argued about the soul's immortality, about judgment to come, about heaven and hell, about the nature of God, but could reach no definite certainty. On these and other mysteries Christ lifts the veil. (*c*) Scripture reveals the surpassing love of God. "It gives a man assurance that God is placable and reconcilable; and also declares to us in what way, and upon what terms, we may be confident that God will pardon sin and receive a sinner to mercy, viz., upon his repentance and faith and returning to God."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sermons, Vol. i. p. 389.

Here Scripture opens up a region of truth fairer than man's best dreams; the fuller light of nature is here lost in a splendor such as "eye had not seen, nor ear heard, nor heart of man conceived." Whichcote and his followers, as we have seen, did full justice to those who in their day were called "mere naturalists." But they were far from being 'mere naturalists' themselves. They would not blame these—they would admit that some of them "will be the condemning of many Christians at the day of Judgment." Still their own glory was in the grace of God in Christ. They preached about nothing so much: they preached about nothing so eloquently. They loved to show how perfectly it accorded with the worthiest conception of God: how fully it meets the deepest and sorest needs of man. To use Whichcote's phrase, all their thoughts of God were steeped in "the perfume of the angel of the Covenant."

But it should be carefully noted that they ever insisted on the end to which even the grace of God is a means. Christ was the efficient means to the final end of restoring man to a state of moral integrity. "The Grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world." This was one of Whichcote's favorite texts: he called it a summary of all necessary divinity. A saved state, he says, is a morally sound state. All that Christ did for us is with a view to implanting a new life within us which shall bear fruit in the good works for which we were created. "The great design and plot of the gospel," says Smith, "is to open and unfold to us the true way of recourse to God; a contrivance for uniting the souls of men to him, and deriving a participation of God to man, to bring in everlasting righteousness." "The great mystery of the gospel," says Cudworth, "doth not lie only in Christ without us

(though we must know also what he hath done for us), but the very pith and kernel of it consists in Christ inwardly formed in our hearts. Nothing is truly ours, but what lives in our spirits. Salvation itself cannot save us so long as it is only without us; no more than health can cure us and make us sound when it is not within us, but somewhere at a distance from us."

Accordingly, for the Cambridge men, the moral element in Scripture was supreme. On no plea could that element be justly set aside or lowered. However texts might be quoted and examples adduced, from the Old Testament especially, in support of some morally questionable doctrine, or practice, they were of no account. Clear principles of truth and right—affirmed by the natural reason and confirmed by the law and purpose of the gospel—were above all particular examples and texts of Scripture. "The *moral* part of religion never alters. Moral Laws are Laws of *themselves* without sanction by will; and the necessity of them arises from the things themselves. All other things in Religion are in order to these. The moral part of religion does sanctify the soul; and is Final both to what is Instrumental and Instituted."<sup>1</sup> One can see how practical in its bearing this view was at a time when Joshua's extermination of the Canaanites, and Jael's treachery, and David's cruel treatment of enemies were accepted and acted upon as divine precedents. The Cambridge men knew nothing of historic criticism. In theory they held the common faith that the Rule of Faith embraced the whole of Scripture, and that every part of it was available for the construction of doctrine or the conduct of life. But in practice they acted as if they stood where *we* stand, and saw the books of the Bible along a line of true historical perspective. It has needed generations to persuade men that in Scripture the true Word of God is Christ; and that

<sup>1</sup> Aphorisms, No. 221.

other voices there are only true so far as they blend harmoniously with his: nay, with many the process of persuasion has yet to do its work. But the Cambridge men may be said to have advanced instinctively to this position—mainly as the result of their unswerving fidelity to that “candle of the Lord,” that natural light, which was, and is, indeed, the word within; and, therefore, could not fail to lead them past all lesser lights to close and rest in the teachings of the “Word made flesh.”

Two other consequences of their application of reason to religion are even more obvious. One is the antagonism it aroused in them toward one of the dogmas of Calvinism—predestination: *decretum absolutum*. Calvinism was, as already remarked, the ruling creed in Cambridge. Arminius had a few open advocates and possibly a few secret sympathizers. But they were not popular. They were classed with Socinians as enemies of the faith; and it was a thrust which hurt Whichcote keenly when his friend Tuckney charged him with being “too well versed in Socinian and Arminian works”—particularly in the Remonstrant’s “Apologie.”<sup>1</sup> He hastened to deny the charge almost angrily, and to declare that, as to the “Apologie,” he had “never even seen or heard of the Book before, much less read a tittle of it.” His views were Arminian, in their general character, nevertheless. There is not one of the ‘five points’ in which he does not agree with Arminius more nearly than with Calvin. No doubt this was why John Goodwin dedicated, chiefly to him, his “Redemption Redeemed.” The arch-Arminian saw, if Whichcote himself did not see, the whereabouts of his theological position and tendencies. But still Whichcote’s Arminianism—and that too of his followers—was come to independently. Assenting as they did to the sacredness of reason and conscience, they could not come to anything else. The sheet-

<sup>1</sup> Letters, p. 27.

anchor of the *decretum absolutum*, e.g., was the supposed teaching of Scripture. Given that teaching, then it *must* be true, and its supposed effect in darkening the divine character must be endured. On the contrary, to the Cambridge men the absolute goodness of God was to their faith as the 'apple of their eye.' Plato had said that God and the good were identical; that Eternal Goodness, delighting to communicate its own perfections, was the author of creation; that the same goodness has spread its beams upon all things great and small, and has focused its radiance in the soul of man. They had learnt from the gospel that Plato was right, that God is light,—in whom is no darkness at all,—and that Christ in his fullness of grace and truth is the mirror of God. The divine goodness—that God "must needs be good as good can be"; "that all the amiable qualities that we see in good men are but so many emanations from those that are in God"; "that he is that unstained beauty and supreme good to which our wills are perpetually aspiring, and wheresoever we find true beauty, love, and goodness, we may say, here or there is God"; "that the only glory he seeks through man is to behold him perfectly fashioned after his own likeness,"—this was to them an axiom of faith. To force upon them a doctrine which virtually denied it was a staggering insult to their spiritual reason. It seemed to them not simply *absolutum*, but *horribile decretum*. They resented and rejected and denounced it with their whole soul and strength. It might have been said of them, as it was said of the 'most judicious and pious Mr. Joseph Mede,' that, "if at any time his spirit was stirred in him, it was when he observed some to contend with an immeasurable confidence and bitter zeal for the Black doctrine of absolute Reprobation." In their case, too, as in his, the sentiment of holy indignation was intensified by the evidently pernicious effects of the doctrine on many of its adherents. For, as

John Smith says, its effect might be to make men's "brains swim with a strong conceit of God's eternal love" to them; to fill them with 'strong dreams' of being in favor with heaven, of their names being enrolled in the book of life, of the debt-books of heaven being closed, of Christ being theirs—while at the same time the "foul and filthy stains" of sin were still "deeply sunk in their souls."<sup>1</sup> This of course is not a necessary effect of the Calvinistic belief. The conception of an eternal will which begins, continues, and completes the work of salvation in a human soul—the central conception of Calvinism—has nothing to do with Antinomianism so long as 'salvation' is felt to be salvation from sin as the indispensable condition of eternal life. There is indeed a spring of mighty moral energy—to which the Cambridge men did scant justice—in realizing that God is *the* Initiating Agent from first to last in the process of salvation, and that the human part is merely receptive, is an unstinted readiness to let God work. Examples of this were before their eyes even in Cambridge. But what mainly struck them was the prominence given to the negative, rather than the positive, side of Calvinism: to 'reprobation' rather than to election, i.e., to just that side which was most dishonoring to God and at the same time demoralizing to its advocates. Hence their protest in the name of reason and conscience was the more severe and strong!

(2) It was due to their exaltation of reason in religion that they were stigmatized not only as Arminians, but as Latitudinarians,—a name designed to be still more reproachful. "I can come into no company of late but I find the chief discourse to be about a certain new sect, of the men called Latitude men"—so writes the Oxford man who signs himself G. B. to a friend at Cambridge who signs himself S. P. The date is 1662; and S. P. in his

<sup>1</sup> Discourse on Legal and Evangelical Righteousness.

reply tells him how the name (or rather nickname) first came into vogue some years before, how it was "pointed at" certain of "learning and good manners" in the University—meaning Whichcote, etc.; and how it was designed to insinuate a charge of indifference, or laxity, in religious and political faith; how, as matter of fact, the only warrant for it was their opposition to that "hidebound, strait-laced spirit that did then prevail."

Certainly the Cambridge men were not lax in the sense of putting self-interest in the first place and fidelity to principle in the second. They had clear convictions of what seemed to them the truth—as to things theological, ecclesiastical, and political. Nor did they ever, so far as I know, do or say anything inconsistent with those convictions. But what they really did was to respect the convictions of others; to teach that within the husk of every error there was a kernel of truth worth searching for, to plead for "moderation and persuasion toward all opponents." "God applies to our faculties, and deals with us, by reason and argument. Let us learn of God to deal with one another in meekness, calmness, and reason, and so represent God."<sup>1</sup> "Let him that is assured he errs in nothing, take upon him to condemn every man that errs in anything."<sup>2</sup>

Their preference, e.g., on grounds rational and æsthetic, was for Episcopacy. S. P. tells his Oxford friend that most of them had been "ordained by bishops"—a fact which had been a certain bar to their referment if any of them came before the Committee of Triers; that they highly approved the "liturgy, the ceremonies, the government and doctrine of the church." As to the last particularly there is not "any article or doctrine held forth by the church which they can justly be accused to depart from, unless absolute reprobation be one, which they do not think themselves bound to believe." "Nor," he adds, "is

<sup>1</sup> Aphorisms, No. 572.    <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 570.

it credible they should hold any other doctrine than the church, since they derive it from the same fountains, viz., from the sacred writings of the apostles and evangelists, in interpreting whereof they carefully attend to the sense of the ancient church, by which they conceive the modern ought to be guided." In the mind of Laud this preference for the church narrowed itself into a fanaticism. The church, with its liturgy, ceremonies, government, and doctrines, was divine throughout. Unity meant uniformity; schism meant any degree of departure from the one heavenly pattern. On the other hand, most Puritans were just as fanatical about their particular form of a church. Hence each side in its day of power was no less eager than the other to press the state into its service against the nonconformist.

Whichcote and his friends had not the least sympathy with this disposition. Questions touching the constitution of a church could not seem to them of primary importance. If not unimportant, they were secondary. The church was a means, not an end. Its purpose was to make men better Christians, and thereby to carry on more effectually the work of Christ. For themselves, this end seemed best achieved in a church of which the government was Episcopal. But if others held the end best served in a church of another form, why refuse to them the hand of fellowship and communion? Accordingly, when Parliament set up the Presbyterian model at Cambridge, it touched nothing in their beliefs so vital as to compel dissent, although they did dissent, "with the whole force of their intellects and energies, against the narrow, persecuting spirit of Puritanism," when this came to its "highest ascendancy." So, too, although they conformed "with a general readiness" to the ecclesiastical "commands and injunctions" which followed on the "happy restitution of the church" to the pattern they professed; yet they were equally earnest and

energetic against "the narrow, persecuting spirit" which, after 1662, took possession of the bishops and clergy. They were most anxious the church doors should be set wide open, "that mercy and indulgence should be shown towards those whose consciences would not permit them to comply with the will of their governors in some things disputable."

Their attitude in relation to differences of religious belief was similar. Amongst all parties alike there was a strong tendency—though it was strongest amongst the Puritans—to lay the chief stress on doctrine. Doctrine, or materials for the construction of doctrine, was apt to be the main thing sought for in a study of the Scriptures. Especially attractive were points of doctrine which verged on the mysterious, or had to do with subjects appealing to "implicit faith"; and especially keen was the zeal of the men who propounded, or propagated, such points against those who doubted or opposed them. Now the Cambridge men were not disposed to deny the truth of doctrines simply because they were mysterious. "Suppose there be a place of Scripture," said Whichcote, "about some notion that doth transcend the reach of human reason, and which is knowable only by divine revelation; and divine revelation is comprehended in a form of words that I cannot fully comprehend; in this case I refer myself to God, and believe that that is true which God intended in those words. This I call an implicit faith." In this his followers were agreed with him. But they deprecated insistence on 'obscure doctrine' as in any degree essential to life or practice. The essentials of religion, said they, are few; are clearly intelligible to all capacities; are such as any honest mind can apprehend; are, indeed, such as all true Christians unite in accepting. To think otherwise would be dishonoring to God himself. "We cannot put a greater abuse upon God than to say he is obscure; that he

expresses himself darkly in that which concerns every man's duty towards him, or happiness by him; so that the man is at a great loss whether he understands God's meaning by his written word or not."<sup>1</sup> Let us then, said they, come together in that which is universally clear; in that which shows itself to be sufficient because it results in a state of faith and love toward God, and in goodness of life. Let the mysteries of Scripture be expressed in the words of Scripture without seeking to explicate them into terms and systems which are sure to evoke controversy. For "determinations beyond Scripture have indeed enlarged faith, but lessened charity, and multiplied divisions."<sup>2</sup> In case of plain, or probable, error, "let a fair allowance of patience be given to those who mean well; be ready to show them, since there is ground of expectation that in a little time they will come out of their error." For "nothing is desperate in the condition of good men: they will not live and die in any dangerous error."<sup>3</sup> Above all, let it be remembered that Christ was "*Magister vitæ,*" not "*scholæ,*" and he is "the best Christian whose heart beats with the truest pulse towards heaven; not he whose head spinneth out the finest cobwebs. He that endeavors really to mortifie his lusts, and to comply with that truth in his life which his conscience is convinced of, is neerer the Christian though he never heard of Christ, than he that believes all the vulgar articles of the Christian faith and plainly denyeth Christ in his life."

If this was the 'Latitude' of the Cambridge men, there is less need to wonder at the resentment it encountered—considering the fierce dogmatism of the times—than at the nobleness and elevation of the spirit which prompted it, and also at the comparatively limited range of its growth and action in the church after the lapse of two hundred years.

<sup>1</sup> Aphorisms, No. 37.    <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 981.

<sup>3</sup> Whichcote, *Discourses*, Vol. ii. p. 20.

(3) Lastly, it was supposed to be an effect of their reverence for reason and the inner light, that they became pre-eminently "moral preachers." Evelyn in his "Memoirs,"<sup>1</sup> bewailing the neglect of moral exhortation in the Presbyterian pulpit during the Commonwealth period, says, "There was now nothing practical preached or that pressed reformation of life, but high and speculative points, and strains that few understood—which left people very ignorant and of no steady principles." Indeed, systematic instruction in the practice of "Christian virtue, obedience, purity, temperance, uprightness, and holiness of will and deed" grated discordantly upon the ear of the ultra-Pauline and Augustinian claimant of irreversible election and faith irrespective of works; and was utterly denounced by the Antinomian of whatever shade as a savor of "mere morality," a "stinted" and legal spirit, Arminianism and "heathenry." That this tendency to slight—or at least this failure to press home—the claims of the moral law came to its nemesis in the scandalous license of the next generation is well known; and it should stand to the honor of the Cambridge divines that, though they never preached "mere morality," they did proclaim with a courage and persistence which have seldom been surpassed that "faith without works is dead." "The righteousness of faith is that powerful attractive which, by a strong and divine sympathy, draws down the virtues of heaven into the souls of men; which strongly and forcibly moves the souls of good men into a conjunction with that divine goodness by which it lives and grows."<sup>2</sup>

One splendid illustration of their teaching in this respect is presented by Cudworth's sermon on the text, "Hereby know we that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know Him, and keepeth not his

<sup>1</sup> November 2, 1656.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, *Discourse on Legal and Evangelical Righteousness.*

commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him." He preached it before the House of Commons on March 31, 1647. That year, it will be remembered, witnessed the climax of Presbyterian influence in Parliament. It was the year when the Westminster Assembly of Divines brought its five years' session to an end; when Presbyterianism had been raised at least to a nominal supremacy throughout the land; when the four ordinances were passed, one of which enjoined the covenant on all the officers of the army, etc.; when, in short, the lights of sound doctrine were at their brightest. And this was the year when Cudworth seized occasion to deliver a discourse of which the scope was, not to contend for this or that opinion, but only to persuade men to the life of Christ as "the pith and kernel of religion." Open it at any place, and only variations of the same pure strain are in your ears. Thus: "If any of you say that you know Christ, and have an interest in him, and yet (as I fear too many do) still nourish ambition, pride, vainglory, within your breasts; harbour malice, revengefulness, and cruell hatred to your neighbours in your hearts; eagerly scramble after this worldly pelfe, and make the strength of your parts and endeavours serve that blind mammon, the god of this world; . . . deceive not yourselves, you have neither seen Christ nor known Him. . . . Let us really declare that we know Christ . . . by our keeping of his commandments; and, amongst the rest, that Commandment especially which our Saviour Christ himself commandeth to His disciples in a peculiar manner: 'This is my Commandment that ye love one another as I have loved you.' . . . Let us endeavour to promote the Gospel of Peace, the dove like Gospel with a dove like spirit. . . . Let us take heed we do not sometimes call that zeal for God and His Gospel which is nothing else but our own temptations and stormy passion. True zeal is a sweet, heavenly, and gentle flame which maketh

us active for God, but always within the spear of love."

Here, again, are some words on what he means by holiness and the law: "I do not mean by holiness the mere performance of outward duties of religion, coldly acted over as a task, nor our habituall prayings, hearings, fastings, multiplied one upon another (though these be all good, as subservient to a higher end), but I mean an inward soul and principle of Divine life that spiriteth all these; that enliveneth and quickeneth the dead carkasse of all our outward performances whatsoever. . . . I do not urge the law written upon tables of stone without us (though there is still a good use of that too), but the law of holiness written within upon the fleshy tables of our hearts. The first, though it work us into some outward conformity to God's commandments, and so have a good effect upon the world; yet we are all this while but like dead instruments of musick, that sound sweetly and harmoniously when they are only struck and played upon from without by the musician's hand, who hath the theory and law of music living within himself. But the second, the living law of the Gospel, the law of the Spirit of life within us, is as if the soul of musick should incorporate itself with the instrument and live in the strings and make them of their own accord—without any touch or impulse from without—dance up and down and warble out their harmonies."

So much, from just one of them, in answer to the reproach that they were moral preachers. The reproach was their glory. For its only warrant lay in the fact that they realized with extraordinary vividness that the supreme value and test of religious truth is its power to awaken in men the vision, and to quicken them with the energies, of a divine life. And let it be noted, in conclusion, that they linked life and truth in another way. It was part of their most emphatic teaching not only that truth must react on

life, but also that life is the path of truth. Reason, to some extent owing to their influence, became more than ever a watchword after their time. It led to great changes for the better.

We can agree with Mr. Lecky, that "the triumphs won by emancipated reason whether we look to the political, the social, the industrial or the theological sphere, have been conspicuous and conspicuously beneficent." We can agree with him further, that one of the things to be most desired is "a love of truth which seriously resolves to spare no prejudice and accord no favour, which prides itself on basing every conclusion on reason or conscience," and in "rejecting every illegitimate influence"<sup>1</sup>: including the influence of "early education." For "the fable of the ancients is still true. The woman even now sits at the portal of life, presenting a cup to all who enter in which diffuses through every vein a poison that will cling to them for ever. The judgment may pierce the clouds of prejudice. In the moment of her strength she may even rejoice and triumph in her liberty, yet the conceptions of childhood will long remain latent in the mind, to reappear in every hour of weakness, when the tension of the reason is relaxed, and the power of old associations is supreme."<sup>2</sup>

This is true: is, at any rate, one side of the truth. But still one feels that there must be some sound justification for the suspicion of reason entertained by so many who have been neither unenlightened nor illiberal. And is it not this? that reason has been identified so often with a private judgment which fancied itself free from prejudice, but was really ensnared by the fatal prejudice of its own intrinsic ability to be an adequate measure of all things? One recalls the Deists of the eighteenth century. Reason was their idol of the cave. Reason could comprehend, demonstrate, or destroy, everything. Mysteries in religion

<sup>1</sup> *Rationalism in Europe*, Vol. ii. p. 98.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

were an absurdity; and mysteries were whatever did not yield to the first touch of logical analysis. The result for religion was a dearth, and even death, of spiritual belief and enthusiasm. The result for the Deists themselves has been that, "if we except these two [Hume and Gibbon], it would be difficult to conceive a more complete eclipse than the English Deists have undergone." "The shadow of the tomb rests upon them all; a deep unbroken silence, the chill of death surrounds them."<sup>1</sup>

The lesson is not that religion can ever dispense with reason, but that reason is more than the logical understanding; that it includes conscience; that the insight of conscience is the medium of the highest truth; and that such insight is directly and continuously dependent upon the culture of the highest religious life. To the Cambridge teachers this fact was cardinal and central. Thus Whichcote: "Nothing is *the true improvement* of our rational faculties, but the exercise of the several virtues of sobriety, modesty, gentleness, humility, obedience to God, and charity to men."

Thus John Smith: "Divine Truth is better understood as it unfolds itself in the purity of men's hearts and lives, than in all those subtle niceties into which curious wits may lay it forth, . . . and therefore our Saviour's main scope was to promote a holy life, as the best and most compendious way to a right belief. He hangs all true acquaintance with divinity upon the doing God's will."

Thus Cudworth: "If we did but heartily comply with the commandments and purge our hearts from all gross and sensual affections, we should not then look about for truth wholly without ourselves and enslave ourselves to the dictates of this and that teacher, and hang upon the lips of men; but we should find the great Eternal God inwardly

<sup>1</sup> Rationalism in Europe, Vol. i. pp. 191-192.

teaching our souls, and continually instructing us more and more in the mysteries of his will."

As to Henry More, it were a small thing to say that he believed the same. Rather, this spiritual side of reason became the keynote of all his teaching. When he went to Cambridge he was at first possessed with a "mighty and almost immoderate thirst after knowledge—he immersed himself 'over head and ears in the study of philosophy.'" The result was a sort of skepticism from which he escaped only when he was led to see "that the knowledge of things—especially the deepest cause of things—was to be acquired not by such an eagerness and intentness in the reading of authors," but rather "by the purgation of the mind from all vices whatsoever." Henceforth his motto was, "Amor Dei lux animæ." Reason, he would say—Reason, "the oracle of God, is not to be heard but in his holy temple—that is to say, in a good and holy man, thoroughly sanctified in spirit, soul, and body."

Here the mystic element of the Cambridge men comes into view, and is seen to be not opposed to reason, but the outcome—fruit and flower—of its noblest activity. "Spiritual things are spiritually discerned," i.e., are discerned by the spiritualized reason for whose normal and efficient development there is needed both logic and life—keen logic, if you will, but also a pure and true life. If thou beest it, thou seest it, said More. In the last resort—was Plato's teaching—being and knowledge are identical. At any rate the remark of a Hibbert Lecturer, suggested by the system of Socinius, is true: "As a system of avowed Rationalism, Socinianism was born prematurely. . . . Rationalism could not have its perfect work till biblical, following in the track of all other literary criticism, had accumulated such a store of indisputable facts as would warrant settled inferences. But even when the knowledge is accumulated, and the inferences are drawn, the rationalists will still have to go to the mystics, if they would learn the whole secret of Christianity."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Beard's *Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, p. 281.