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REFORMING THE "REFORMED" OBJECTION TO NATURAL THEOLOGY

John Beversluis

In this paper I offer a critique of Alvin Plantinga's well known and widely accepted contention that his "Reformed" objection to natural theology can plausibly be said to derive from the writings of John Calvin and traditional Reformed theologians generally. I argue that although there is indeed a traditional Reformed objection to natural theology, Plantinga's own objection is very different from and, in fact, incompatible with, it. I conclude that whatever the merits of Plantinga's own position, it should not be confounded with that of Calvin or the Reformed tradition.

Let natural theology be defined as the attempt to prove or demonstrate the existence of God. For the past several decades Alvin Plantinga has conducted a tireless campaign against this enterprise. In his earlier work,¹ he proceeded by means of a detailed examination of the proofs and concluded that, with the possible exception of a modal version of the Ontological Argument,² they are unsuccessful. In recent years, he has launched a more radical critique of natural theology: he now claims not only that the proofs are all individually defective, but also that the very attempt to provide proofs is mistaken in principle.³ It depends on a misunderstanding of the epistemic status of religious belief—a misunderstanding rooted in a demonstrably false meta-epistemology, namely, "classical foundationalism," according to which a person is rationally justified in believing any proposition *p* only if it is either a "properly basic" proposition—i.e., a proposition which is self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses—or a non-basic proposition which stands in an evidential relation to other propositions which are properly basic. Classical foundationalists mistakenly think that belief in God is not properly basic and that, to be rational, it must either follow from or be probable with respect to what *is* properly basic. In a word, they mistakenly think that, to be rational, belief in God must be based on evidence.

Rejecting this "evidentialist" objection⁴ to belief in God together with the foundationalist criteria of proper basicity on which it is based,⁵ Plantinga argues for a "Reformed epistemology"⁶ according to which belief in God⁷ *is* properly basic.⁸ There is, in short, a "Reformed" objection to natural theology, i.e., an objection implicit in the writings of traditional Reformed theologians such as Herman Bavinck, Abraham Kuyper, Karl Barth, and, above all, John Calvin. Plantinga thinks this objection "is best understood as an

implicit rejection of classical foundationalism in favor of the view that belief in God is properly basic."⁹ Although their formulations of the objection were "for the most part unclear, ill-focused, and unduly inexplicit" ("R&BG," 16), what these theologians "meant to hold" is that "it is entirely right, rational, reasonable, and proper to believe in God without any evidence or argument at all..." ("R&BG," 17).

At the same time, Plantinga denies that this entails that belief in God is based on faith and that the Reformed epistemologist is necessarily a fideist;¹⁰ on the contrary, he claims that many of the central truths of Christianity "are among the deliverances of reason," e.g. that there is such a person as God and that human beings are responsible to him ("R&BG," 89). Accordingly, these (and other) properly basic religious beliefs may be held without evidence or argument because they are part of the foundation of the believer's noetic structure. This claim needs to be understood in light of Plantinga's more fundamental contention that the "deliverances of reason," i.e., the class of propositions knowable by reason, is neither co-extensive with nor exhausted by self-evident truths and propositions which follow from them by self-evidently valid arguments, but also includes "basic perceptual truths (propositions 'evident to the senses'), incorrigible propositions, certain memory propositions, certain propositions about other minds, and certain moral or ethical propositions" ("R&BG," 89).

In this paper, I will argue that there is indeed a traditional Reformed objection to natural theology, but it is very different from—and, in fact, incompatible with—Plantinga's. Hence whatever the merits of his own position, he is quite mistaken in claiming that his objection is a clearer formulation of the "for the most part unclear, ill-focused, and unduly inexplicit" but essentially identical objection found in the writings of the Reformed theologians to whom he appeals and whose tradition he claims to represent.¹¹

I. *Plantinga's Exposition of Calvin on Natural Theology*

That Plantinga's "Reformed" objection to natural theology differs from the traditional Reformed objection may be seen by comparing his rather selective and (sometimes) highly imaginative summary of Calvin's apparent position with his actual position as set forth in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Plantinga begins by rightly observing that, according to Calvin, God created human beings with "an innate tendency, or nusus, or disposition to believe in him" ("R&BG," 65). In support of this contention, he cites the following passages:

'There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity.' This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. Ever renewing its memory,

he repeatedly sheds fresh drops. Since, therefore, men one and all perceive that there is a God and that he is their Maker, they are condemned by their own testimony because they have failed to honor him and to consecrate their lives to his will. If ignorance of God is to be looked for anywhere, surely one is most likely to find an example of it among the more backward folk and those more remote from civilization. Yet there is, as the eminent pagan says, no nation so barbarous, no people so savage, that they have not a deep-seated conviction that there is a God. So deeply does the common conception occupy the minds of all, so tenaciously does it inhere in the hearts of all! Therefore, since from the beginning of the world there has been no region, no city, in short, no household, that could do without religion, there lies in this a tacit confession of a sense of deity inscribed in the hearts of all.

Indeed, the perversity of the impious, who though they struggle furiously are unable to extricate themselves from the fear of God, is abundant testimony that this conviction, namely, that *there is some God*, is naturally inborn in all, and is fixed deep within, as it were in the very marrow.... From this we conclude *that it is not a doctrine that must first be learned in school*, but one of which each of us is master from his mother's womb and which nature itself permits no one to forget.¹²

According to Plantinga's interpretation of Calvin, the awareness of divinity (*sensus divinitatis*) with which human beings were originally created has been "in part overlaid or suppressed by sin" ("R&BG," 66). Were it not for sin, human beings would believe in God "to the same degree and with the same natural spontaneity that [they] believe in the existence of other persons, an external world, or the past" ("R&BG," 66). This way of putting it may strike some students of the *Institutes* as a somewhat tendentious paraphrase which tells us more about Plantinga's "Reformed" epistemology than it does about Calvin's¹³—a suspicion which is confirmed beyond all doubt as he proceeds to declare: "The fact is, *Calvin thinks*, one who does not believe in God is in an epistemically substandard position—rather like a man who does not believe that his wife exists, or thinks she is like a cleverly constructed robot and has no thoughts, feelings, or consciousness" ("R&BG," 66, my emphasis).

Plantinga continues his exposition of Calvin by declaring that although the "innate tendency, or nusus, or disposition" to believe in God with which human beings were originally created has been "in part" suppressed by sin, it is "nonetheless universally present." And it is "triggered or actuated" by a "widely realized condition" ("R&BG," 66), namely, the revelation of God in Nature. In an effort to establish this, Plantinga again invokes Calvin:

Lest anyone, then, be excluded from access to happiness, [God] not only sowed in men's minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken, but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him.¹⁴

It is unfortunate that, in glossing these passages, Plantinga employs such singularly unhelpful verbs like “triggered” and “actuated.”¹⁵ What, exactly, does he mean?

In claiming that the revelation of God in Nature “triggers” or “actuates” the “innate tendency, or *nisus*, or disposition to believe” in God, Plantinga seems to be advancing a causal (or quasi-causal) claim which is perhaps best understood by means of analogies. Just as insults “trigger or actuate” the dispositional tendency of people to become angry and just as gifts “trigger or actuate” the dispositional tendency of people to be grateful, so also the contemplation of a tiny flower or of the immensity of the universe “triggers or actuates” the dispositional tendency of people “to believe propositions of the sort *this flower was created by God* or *this vast and intricate universe was created by God*” (“R&BG,” 80).¹⁶ People who form such beliefs “accede” to their “innate tendency” to believe in God (“R&BG,” 67).

From these remarks it is plain that, according to Plantinga’s exposition of Calvin, belief in God is not inferential. Human beings do not *first* perceive God’s observable effects in Nature and *then* infer that God exists. In addition to sounding too much like Thomistic “evidentialism,”¹⁷ this claim is incompatible with Plantinga’s thesis that belief in God is properly basic. On Plantinga’s interpretation, Calvin thinks that human beings believe in God, i.e., believe that there is a God, because they are *directly and immediately* confronted with him in Nature, just as they are directly and immediately confronted with physical objects by means of sense perception.¹⁸

On the basis of these passages, Plantinga formulates Calvin’s alleged view of belief in God as “properly basic” together with his alleged objection to natural theology:

Calvin’s claim is that one who accedes to this tendency [to believe in God] and in these circumstances accepts the belief that God has created the world—perhaps upon beholding the starry heavens, or the splendid majesty of the mountains, or the intricate, articulate beauty of a tiny flower—is entirely within his epistemic rights in so doing. It is not that such a person is justified or rational in so believing by virtue of having an implicit argument—some version of the teleological argument, say. No; he does not need any argument for justification or rationality. His belief need not be based on any other propositions at all; under these conditions he is perfectly rational in accepting belief in God in the utter absence of an argument, deductive or inductive (“R&BG,” 67).

Plantinga, in fact, goes further. According to his interpretation, Calvin not only claims that believers do not *need* arguments such as those provided by natural theology to justify their beliefs; he also claims that they *ought* not to believe in God on the basis of arguments. If they do, their faith is “likely to be ‘unstable and wavering,’ the ‘subject of perpetual doubt’” (“R&BG,” 67).¹⁹ In a word, natural theology is not only superfluous, it is also dangerous. Having set forth Plantinga’s exposition of Calvin, I turn next to Calvin.

II. Calvin on Natural Theology

Regrettably, in trying to reconstruct Calvin's views about human knowledge of God and his objection to natural theology, Plantinga confines himself to the opening chapters of Book I of the *Institutes*. But Calvin's views cannot be extracted from these early chapters alone.

For one thing, in the passages cited by Plantinga, Calvin is not discussing natural theology. Calvin seldom alludes—either explicitly or implicitly—to natural theology; and when he does, his objections are not those ascribed to him by Plantinga. Moreover, in the passages cited by Plantinga, it is not even accurate to say that Calvin is discussing human knowledge of God—unless one adds the important qualification that it is the knowledge of God which human beings enjoyed in their original state, i.e., *before* their fall into sin. The early chapters of the *Institutes* are indeed the *locus classicus* of Calvin's views on *that* subject; however, in the overall context of Book I his remarks about *pre-fallen* human knowledge of God are a mere preliminary to his theologically more fundamental thesis—to which many subsequent chapters are devoted and about which Plantinga is almost completely silent—that *fallen* human beings lack both the direct and immediate knowledge of God with which they were originally created and the capacity to achieve it. In Plantinga's language, the "innate tendency, or *nisus*, or disposition" to believe in God with which human beings were originally created is no longer operative in fallen humanity.

Calvin does, of course, acknowledge that fallen human beings continue to be confronted by the divine handiwork as manifested in "this very splendid theater" of Nature (I.vi.1). Both the existence and the moral perfection of the Creator are so ubiquitously present in the structure of the world (I.ii.1) that human beings cannot open their eyes without being constrained to behold him:

[W]ithersoever you turn your eyes, there is not an atom of the world in which you cannot behold some brilliant sparks at least of his glory [and] you cannot at one view take a survey of this most ample and beautiful machine in all its vast extent, without being completely overwhelmed with its infinite splendour (I.v.1).

Like the *sensus divinitatis*, with which human beings were originally created and which cannot be eradicated from their nature, the revelation of God in Nature cannot be avoided, no matter how diligently human beings try to "suppress" and to "smother" it (I.v.4).

And suppress and smother it they do. Unlike Plantinga, who advances the comparatively weak claim that the "innate tendency, or *nisus*, or disposition" to believe in God with which human beings were originally created has been "*in part* overlaid or suppressed by sin" ("R&BG," 66, my emphasis), Calvin

advances the much stronger claim that this tendency has been "*extinguished or corrupted*" by ignorance and wickedness (I.iv.1, my emphasis). Indeed, fallen human beings are so thoroughly sinful that the foregoing description of their *pre-fallen* epistemic capacities, tendencies, and dispositions is no longer applicable. Hence while ostensibly following in Calvin's footsteps—rendering more perspicuous his "for the most part unclear, ill-focused, and unduly inexplicit" view of belief in God as "properly basic"—Plantinga is, in fact, relying on Calvin's view of the *pre-fallen* human "tendency" or "disposition" to believe in God and reformulating his view of the *fallen* human tendency to suppress that belief in a way which deprives his thesis of both its force and of its momentous epistemological implications.

Given his bleak diagnosis of the radical epistemic consequences of sin, Calvin is not nearly so optimistic as Plantinga about the capacity of fallen human beings to "accede" to their "innate tendency, or nisis, or disposition" to believe in God upon beholding the beauty of the tiny flower or the immensity of the universe. What Calvin actually says is this:

While experience testifies that the seeds of religion are sown by God in every heart, we scarcely find one man in a hundred who cherishes what he has received, and not one in whom they grow to maturity.... Some perhaps grow vain in their own superstitions, while others revolt from God with intentional wickedness; but all degenerate from the true knowledge of him (I.iv.1).

Hence:

[T]hey involve themselves in such a vast accumulation of errors, that those sparks which enable them to discover the glory of God are smothered, and at last extinguished by the criminal darkness of iniquity. That seed, which it is impossible to eradicate, a sense of the existence of a Deity, yet remains; but so corrupted as to produce only the worst of fruits (I.iv.4).

In short,

[N]otwithstanding the clear representations given by God in the mirror of his works, both of himself and of his everlasting dominions, such is our stupidity, that, always inattentive to these obvious testimonies, we derive no advantage from them (I.v.11).

Vain, therefore, is the light afforded us in the formation of the world to illustrate the glory of its Author, which, though its rays be diffused all around us, is insufficient to conduct us into the right way (I.v.14).

Although Calvin is perfectly aware of the Pauline thesis that "the invisible things of [God] from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made,"²⁰ he does not exploit this apostolic utterance for any Plantinga-like epistemological (or meta-epistemological) purposes. On the contrary, he unambiguously asserts that, in their present fallen condition, human beings have no eyes to discern the revelation of God in Nature. Even the writings of the philosophers contain so

many "monstrous falsehoods" that it is safe to say that, on the subject of God, "the wisest of mankind" are "blind as moles" and lack all true knowledge of God (II.ii.18).²¹

This having been said, it is important to add that Calvin does not think that the universally present but (for fallen human beings) epistemically inefficacious revelation of God in Nature is wholly useless. Although incapable of "triggering" or "actuating" some allegedly "innate tendency, or nusus, or disposition" to believe in God, it continues to serve an important—albeit very different—purpose:

[W]hatever deficiency of natural ability prevents us from attaining the pure and clear knowledge of God, yet, since that deficiency arises from our own fault, we are left without any excuse. Nor indeed can we set up any pretence of ignorance, that will prevent our own consciences from perpetually accusing us of indolence and ingratitude (I.v.15).²²

Not only does Calvin not say what Plantinga claims he says; he explicitly denies it. According to Calvin, it is emphatically not the case that there is in *fallen* human beings "a disposition to believe propositions of the sort *this flower was created by God* or *this vast and intricate universe was created by God* when we contemplate the flower or behold the starry heavens or think about the vast reaches of the universe" ("R&BG," 80). Far from "triggering or actuating" some alleged "innate tendency, or nusus, or disposition" to believe in God, the revelation of God in Nature stands as a permanent condemnation of fallen human beings and renders unbelievers inexcusable in their unbelief.²³

Hence in spite of the universally present but epistemically inefficacious revelation of God in Nature and in spite of the ineradicable but epistemically blinded *sensus divinitatis* in human nature, the *pre-fallen* "innate tendency, or nusus, or disposition" to believe in God with human beings were originally created is now "suppressed" and "smothered" by ignorance and wickedness. These passages (and, again, the *Institutes* abound with them) reveal that Calvin's view of the epistemically incapacitating consequences of sin have much more serious and far-reaching implications than Plantinga's summary suggests.

How, then, can fallen human beings attain true knowledge of God? Calvin's answer is uncompromising: left to themselves, they cannot. His diagnosis of the radical epistemic consequences of sin convinced him that fallen human beings "need another and better assistance, properly to direct [them] to the Creator of this world" (I.vi.1). Hence God "hath not unnecessarily" added to the revelation of himself in Nature

the light of his word, to make himself known unto salvation, and hath honoured with this privilege those whom he intended to unite in a more close and familiar connection with himself (I.vi.1).²⁴

For fallen humanity, then, the revelation of God in Scripture is a necessary condition for perceiving the revelation of God in Nature. Indeed, according to Calvin, it is the *sole* means by which the revelation of God in Nature can be rendered perspicuous and thereby serve the purpose for which it was originally intended:

For, as persons who are old, or whose eyes are...become dim, if you show them the most beautiful book, though they perceive something written, but can scarcely read two words together, yet, by the assistance of spectacles, will begin to read distinctly,—so the Scripture, collecting in our minds the otherwise confused notions of Deity, dispels the darkness, and gives us a clear view of the true God (I.vi.1).

Again:

Since it is evident, therefore, that God foreseeing the inefficacy of his manifestation of himself in the exquisite structure of the world, hath afforded the assistance of his word to all those to whom he determined to make his instructions effectual... (I.vi.3).

In short, the revelation of God in Nature yields true knowledge of God to those and only those who, having been equipped with “the spectacles of the Scripture,” are able to appropriate it.²⁵

But Calvin’s “Reformed epistemology” is more radical still. Just as fallen human beings cannot appropriate the revelation of God in Nature unless they have been equipped with “the spectacles of Scripture,” so also they cannot appropriate the Scriptures as the Word of God, unless they have been “indubitably persuaded that God is its Author” (I.vii.4):

Wherefore the Scripture will then only be effectual to produce the saving knowledge of God, when the certainty of it shall be founded on the internal persuasion of the Holy Spirit (I.viii.13).

That is to say, if fallen human beings are ever to attain true knowledge of God, they must be “illuminated through faith by an internal revelation of God” (I.v.14):

[Their] mind must be illuminated, and [their] heart established by some exterior power, that the word of God may obtain full credit with [them] (III.ii.7).

This illumination Calvin calls faith, which he defines as:

a steady and certain knowledge of the Divine benevolence towards us, which, being founded on the truth of the gratuitous promise in Christ, is both revealed to our minds and confirmed to our hearts, by the Holy Spirit (III.ii.7).

Moreover, faith is an unmerited gift of God to the elect²⁶ who, apart from the internal illumination of the Holy Spirit, are not capable—much less, innately disposed—to form the belief that God exists upon contemplating the beauty or the grandeur of Nature:

Wherefore the Apostle...says, "By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God;" thus intimating, that the invisible Deity was represented by such visible objects, yet that we have no eyes to discern him, unless they be illuminated through faith by an internal revelation of God (I.v.15).²⁷

Unlike pre-fallen human beings, who did possess an "innate tendency, or *nisus*, or disposition" to believe in God, fallen human beings do not. On the contrary, they have a tendency to *suppress* that tendency. They can believe in God only insofar as the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit enables them to do so. Belief in God, in the only sense that matters to Calvin, is not something that fallen human beings "have a tendency to do." It is something that is wrought in their hearts—the consequence of a causal activity which is initiated and carried to completion by divine agency.

According to Calvin, this internal conviction is "superior to," i.e., productive of a more permanent and greater degree of certainty than any merely rational proof:

For as God alone is a sufficient witness of himself in his own word, so also the word will never gain credit in the hearts of men, till it be confirmed by the internal testimony of the Spirit. It is necessary, therefore, that the same Spirit, who spake by the mouths of the prophets, should penetrate into our hearts.... [T]hey who have been inwardly taught by the Spirit, feel an entire acquiescence in the scripture, and that it is self-authenticated, carrying with it its own evidence, and ought not to be made the subject of demonstration and arguments from reason...(I.vii.4-5).²⁸

It is in this context—that of becoming persuaded that the Bible is the Word of God—rather than the very different context of becoming persuaded that there is a God that Calvin presents his objection to rational demonstrations and arguments:

We seek not arguments and probabilities to support our judgment, but submit our judgements and understandings as to a thing concerning which it is impossible for us to judge...because we feel the firmest conviction that we hold an invincible truth.... It is such a persuasion, therefore, as requires no reasons [and] cannot be produced but by a revelation from heaven (I.vii.5).

However, it is important to emphasize that Calvin nowhere objects to rational demonstrations and arguments as such. On the contrary, he is delighted to report that, in addition to the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, there are "other reasons, and those neither few or weak," by which the divine authorship of the Bible is "not only maintained in the minds of the pious, but also completely vindicated against the subtleties of calumniators..." (I.viii.13). That is to say, his objection to rational demonstrations and arguments is contextual: they cannot convince unbelievers or produce faith in the divine authorship of the Bible unless the Holy Spirit "places its authority beyond all controversy" (I.viii.13). At the same time, he is perfectly willing—indeed,

eager—to grant that human testimonies in the form of rational demonstrations and arguments are not useless “if they follow that first and principal proof, as secondary aids to our imbecility” (I.viii.13). In short, while not the *source* of the believer’s confidence in the divine authorship of the Bible, they may nevertheless serve as *confirmations* of it. Although they cannot produce faith independently of the necessarily efficacious agency of the Holy Spirit, in conjunction with it they can make important contributions and are by no means to be disparaged as superfluous.

Plantinga acknowledges that, in the passages he cites, Calvin is not talking about belief in God’s existence but about belief in God as the author of the Bible; but he assures us that “it is clear...that Calvin would say the same thing about belief in God’s existence” (“R&BG,” 67). But he is mistaken. Calvin does not “say the same thing.”

Calvin’s quarrel with natural theology is based on very different considerations. He objects: *not* because natural theologians err in failing to recognize that “God exists” is not an inference drawn from other propositions to which it stands in an evidential relation but is itself a “properly basic” belief neither having nor requiring evidence, but because they involve themselves in “cold and frivolous...speculation about the essence of God, when it would be more interesting to us to become acquainted with his character, and to know what is agreeable to his nature” (I.ii.1).

Calvin is very explicit about what he means, and does not mean, by knowledge of God:

By the knowledge of God, I intend not merely a notion that there is such a Being, but also an acquaintance with whatever we ought to know concerning Him, conducing to his glory and our benefit. For we cannot with propriety say, there is any knowledge of God where there is no religion or piety (I.ii.1).

Again:

[W]e are invited to a knowledge of God; not such as, content with empty speculation, merely floats in the brain, but such as will be solid and fruitful, if rightly received and rooted in our hearts.... Whence we conclude this to be the right way, and the best method of seeking God; not with presumptuous curiosity to attempt an examination of his essence, which is rather to be adored than too curiously investigated; but to contemplate him in his works, in which he approaches and familiarizes, and, in some measure, communicates himself to us (I.v.9).

As is plain from these passages, Calvin is not interested in the bare assertion that “God exists” or “There is such a person as God.” His concern is not with certain alleged “deliverances of reason” in the form of “properly basic” beliefs. For him, knowledge of God is not theoretical knowledge *about* God, but a personal relationship *to* God which manifests itself in obedience and which leads to the piety and morally upright conduct which he regards as the

fruit of true religion. Knowing God involves loving God. The trouble with natural theology is not that it is "foundationalist" and bases belief in God on argument and evidence, but rather that the knowledge of God which it yields is purely theoretical—highly abstract, grievously incomplete, emotionally sterile, and behaviorally inefficacious. Such knowledge cannot touch the heart. Nor can it elicit repentance and love.

Plantinga's claim that natural theology is unnecessary because "it is entirely right, rational, reasonable, and proper to believe in God without any evidence or argument at all" is a normative claim about what human beings may justifiably believe without their belief falling into the category of the irrational.²⁹ Calvin makes no such claim. The question of whether religious belief is *rational*—much less, what it *means* for a belief (or a person holding the belief) to be rational—never enters his head. His is the very different claim that natural theology is unnecessary: not because human beings have "an innate tendency, or nusus, or disposition" to believe in God which is "triggered or actuated" by the revelation of God in Nature, but because they *already* believe in God. This is not a normative claim about what human beings may justifiably believe; it is an empirical claim about what they, in fact, do believe. It is also a claim which entails that there are no atheists—a view which, presumably, Plantinga does not share. According to Calvin and traditional Reformed theologians generally, the problem of unbelief is not a problem of the intellect, i.e., a theoretical problem centering upon questions of proof and/or evidence; it is a problem of the will signaling a refusal to acknowledge what one believes—indeed, cannot help believing—but wickedly suppresses.

To my knowledge, Calvin nowhere objects to proofs for God's existence as such.³⁰ Like his objection to employing rational arguments to establish the divine authorship of the Bible, his objection to natural theology is contextual. The fact that one should not base one's faith on rational demonstrations and arguments does not preclude their having other uses. Just as they can perform the important function of confirming the Christian's belief (based on the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit) that God is the author of the Bible, so also they can confirm the Christian's belief (based on faith) that there is a God. Of course, Calvin also thinks that rational arguments are potentially dangerous, that Christians ought not to base their religious beliefs on them, and that those who do are likely to find their beliefs "unstable and wavering, the subject of perpetual doubt."³¹ But this does not show that he thinks that belief in God is "properly basic"; it shows only that he thinks that salvation is by grace and that the proper response to God is the response of faith. These epistemically innocuous claims have nothing to do with natural theology. Much less do they constitute an *objection* to it.

III. Conclusion

Calvin and traditional Reformed theologians generally neither assert nor imply that "it is entirely right, rational, reasonable, and proper to believe in God without any evidence or argument at all." Calvin has no interest in and says nothing about whether it is rational for a person to believe in God. He is not a covert epistemologist urging believers to avail themselves of their epistemic rights. Nor is he a covert meta-epistemologist arguing—or, at least, "meaning" to argue—that belief in God is not an inferential affair, but "properly basic." He is a fideist through and through—a theologian who believes that, so far as fallen human beings are concerned, knowledge of God is the result of the internal illumination of the Holy Spirit and hence a gift of God to the elect.

The contrast in Calvin is not between a "properly basic" belief that God exists as opposed to a non-basic belief inferred from other beliefs which are "properly basic" and which constitute the evidence that renders belief in God rational, but rather between a belief which is achievable only by faith and beliefs which are arrived at by reasoning. Yet while taking a dim view of reason's capacity to discover anything religiously relevant or psychologically efficacious, Calvin's only explicit objection to natural theology is put forth obliquely in the context of his objection to attempting to persuade unbelievers of the divine authorship of the Bible by means of rational arguments and is designed to show that the only kind of knowledge of God that matters—"saving" or religiously redemptive knowledge—can only be achieved through the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit.

Although it is open to anyone to disagree with Calvin (and other Reformed theologians) about any or all of this, there is nothing "unclear," "ill-focused," or "unduly inexplicit" about their objection to natural theology. We need resort to these unflattering adjectives only if we endorse Plantinga's claim that—differences in sophistication, subtlety, and clarity aside—the traditional Reformed objection to natural theology and his own objection are identical. In this paper, I have argued that they are not.³²

Butler University

NOTES

1. Notably, *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).
2. *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 213-14.
3. See "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Philosophy: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 16-93 (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as "R&BG"); "Is Belief in God Rational?," in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. C. F. Delaney (Notre Dame:

University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 7-27; "The Reformed objection to natural theology," *Christian Scholar's Review* XI (1982), 187-198 (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as "The Reformed objection"; "The Reformed Objection Revisited," *Christian Scholar's Review* XII (1983), 57-61—a response to "The Reformed objection to natural theology: a Catholic perspective," by Joseph Boyle, Jr., J. Hubbard, and Thomas D. Sullivan, *Christian Scholar's Review* XI (1982), 199-211; and "Coherentism and the Evidentialist Objection to Belief in God," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 109-138 (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as "Coherentism").

4. For the classic statement of the objection see W. K. Clifford according to whom "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" ("The Ethics of Belief," in *Lectures and Essays* [London: Macmillan, 1879], 345-346). This objection has been endorsed—explicitly or implicitly—by philosophers as diverse as Michael Scriven, *Primary Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 87; Brand Blanshard, *Reason and Belief* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974), 400; and C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 123, and "On Obstinacy in Belief," in *The World's Last Night and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1952), 17. Dissenter Kenneth Konyndyk has usefully distinguished various forms of evidentialism other than Cliffordian—including Lockean Evidentialism, Communal Evidentialism, and Sensible Evidentialism—as well as normative and structural versions of each ("Faith and Evidentialism," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, 82-108).

5. Plantinga rejects classical foundationalism on the ground that it is both false and self-referentially incoherent ("R&BG," 17). Although he acknowledges that the evidentialist objection need not be based on foundationalism—classical or otherwise—and that it is often based on some form of coherentism, he argues that these versions fare no better ("Coherentism," 123-138).

6. Not all Calvinist philosophers are happy with the term. See, e.g. Nicholas Wolterstorff, who thinks it infelicitous ("Introduction," *Faith and Philosophy*, 7). On the other hand, Dewey J. Houtenga, Jr. judges the term "quite well founded and altogether correct," and claims that historical precedents for "Reformed epistemology" can be traced all the way back to Plato (*Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga: An Introduction to Reformed Epistemology* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991], ix, xiv).

7. By "belief in God" Plantinga means belief *that* God exists—"that there *is* such a person as God." Belief *in* God presupposes belief *that* God exists: "To believe that God exists is simply to accept as true a certain proposition.... According to the book of James, the devils do that, and they tremble. The devils do not believe *in* God, however.... Belief in God means *trusting* God, accepting God, accepting his purposes, committing one's life to him and living in his presence" ("R&BG," 18).

8. Plantinga, in fact, hedges on this point. Although he typically claims that belief in God is properly basic, he sometimes implies that this is not the case and that belief in God, although not itself properly basic, is self-evidently entailed by other propositions which in the right circumstances *are* properly basic, e.g. "God is speaking to me," "God created all this," "God disapproves of what I have done," "God forgives me," and "God is to be thanked and praised" ("R&BG," 80-81). For a probing discussion of Plantinga's vacilla-

tion on this point, see George I. Mavrodes, "Jerusalem and Athens Revisited," in *Faith and Philosophy*, 202-4.

9. More precisely, an implicit rejection of *strong* foundationalism. Neither Plantinga nor (as he interprets them) traditional Reformed theologians reject *weak* foundationalism—the view that every rational noetic structure has a foundation and that in a rational noetic structure a person's assent to any non-basic belief should be proportional to the evidence provided by the properly basic beliefs included in the foundation. Strong foundationalism affirms the same theses, but adds specific conditions for proper basicity ("The Reformed objection," 193-95). According to Plantinga, ancient and medieval foundationalists, such as Aristotle and Aquinas, "tended to hold" that a proposition is properly basic only if it is either self-evident or evident to the senses whereas modern foundationalists, such as Descartes, Locke, and Leibniz, "tended to hold" that a proposition is properly basic only if it is either self-evident or incorrigible ("R&BG," 58-59).

10. Plantinga distinguishes—and rejects—two forms of fideism: moderate fideism, "according to which we must rely on faith rather than reason in religious matters," and extreme fideism, "which disparages and denigrates reason" ("R&BG," 87-91).

11. In discussing the traditional Reformed objection to natural theology, I will focus primarily on Calvin and cite the other Reformed theologians mentioned by Plantinga incidentally and in endnotes.

12. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. John Allen (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949), I.iii.1-3. Subsequent quotations will be cited parenthetically in the text.

13. In fairness, it should be added that Herman Bavinck advances a similar claim (*The Doctrine of God*, tr. William Hendriksen—originally published in 1895 in four volumes under the title *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*—[Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977], 78-79).

14. Traditional Reformed theologians draw a sharp distinction between general revelation—the revelation of God in Nature—and special revelation—the revelation of God in Scripture. They have often been interpreted as holding that *all* knowledge of God presupposes revelation of one kind or the other, i.e., as holding that if God had not revealed himself in Nature or in Scripture, human beings would have no knowledge of him at all. But this is not Calvin's view. According to Calvin, even if God had not revealed himself in Nature or in Scripture, human beings would still have some knowledge of him. For they possess an innate awareness of God—an awareness "naturally engraved on [their] hearts" (I.iv.4) which vouchsafes a knowledge of God which is independent of both general and special revelation (I.iv.2). It is precisely for this reason that Calvin declares that knowledge of God and knowledge of self are so intimately connected that it is impossible to discover which precedes and which produces the other (I.i.1). Cf. Abraham Kuyper: "Adam possessed in himself, apart from the cosmos, everything that was necessary to have *knowledge of God*.... [This] knowledge....coincided with man's own self-knowledge....[and] was given *eo ipso*....as the immediate content of self-consciousness.... Calvin calls this the seed of religion...by which he indicated that this innate knowledge of God is an eradicable property of human nature..." (*Principles of Sacred Theology*, tr. J. Hendrik De Vries—originally published in 1894 under the title *Encyclopaedie der Heilige Godgeleerheid*—[Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980], 264-65).

15. Cf. Wolterstorff: "Calvin's thought...is that God has planted in every human being a disposition to believe in the existence of a divine Creator, and that this disposition is triggered, or activated, by our awareness of the richly complex design of the cosmos and of ourselves" ("Is reason enough?" *The Reformed Journal* XXXI [1981], 22).

16. Plantinga adds that Calvin recognizes "at least implicitly" that other conditions may "trigger" or "actuate" this disposition to believe in God, e.g. a person reading the Bible may become convinced that God is speaking to him, a person in grave danger may turn to God for help, and a person who has done something "cheap, wrong, or wicked" may ask God for forgiveness ("R&BG," 80).

17. Interestingly, whereas Plantinga thinks that Aquinas is a "foundationalist" and an "evidentialist" ("R&BG," 47), Wolterstorff denies both claims ("Can Belief in God be Rational?" in *Faith and Philosophy*, 140-41).

18. Cf. Wolterstorff: "It was not Calvin's thought that we *inferred* the existence of a divine Creator from perceptual knowledge of the existence of design. It was rather his thought that the awareness of the design immediately causes the belief—just as having certain sensations immediately convinces us that we are in the presence of another human person" ("Is reason enough?" 22).

19. Somewhat flippantly perhaps, Plantinga quips: "If my belief in God is based on argument, then if I am to be properly rational, epistemically responsible, I shall have to keep checking the philosophical journals to see whether, say, Anthony (*sic*) Flew has finally come up with a good objection to my favorite argument. This could be bothersome and time-consuming..." ("R&BG," 67).

20. Romans I.20 (quoted at *Institutes*, I.v.1).

21. Hoitenga tries to mitigate the force of these contentions by arguing that, by "true" knowledge of God, Calvin does not mean *theoretical* knowledge, i.e., knowledge that God exists, but "knowledge of *piety*" (*Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga*, 154, 164-165). Although his contention has a surface plausibility, it must, I think, be rejected. It is true that Calvin defines pure and genuine religion as "faith, united with a serious fear of God, comprehending a voluntary reverence, and producing legitimate worship agreeable to the injunctions of law" (I.ii.2). The fact remains, however, that his habitual remarks about human beings and their knowledge of God are hardly flattering: all "degenerate from true knowledge of God" (I.iv.1); those who say that there is no God "extinguish the light of nature," "shut their eyes" to the revelation of God in Nature, "willfully stupefy" themselves (I.iv.2) and "suppress" and "pervert" knowledge of God (I.v.40); moreover, their ignorance does not excuse them from guilt because their blindness is the result of pride, vanity, contumacy, and carnal stupidity (I.iv.1). Such passages—and the *Institutes* abound with them—make it abundantly clear that, by "true" knowledge of God, Calvin means both theoretical knowledge and knowledge of piety.

22. Calvin's view is not entirely clear here. On the one hand, he seems to think that there is plenty of empirical evidence for believing in God; indeed, he thinks that the evidence is so abundant that unbelievers are "without any excuse" and that God is just in punishing them for not believing. On the other hand, he also holds that, in their present fallen condition, human beings *cannot* believe. These claims are problematic. To say that the manifestation of God in Nature is so perspicuous and unavoidable that it is sufficient to render unbelievers inexcusable implies that they *ought* to believe in God on the basis

of the evidence it affords and that they are culpable for not believing. And to say that they ought to believe in God on the basis of this evidence presupposes that they *can* believe and thereby escape the (according to Calvin) just punishment awaiting them if they do not. But if, because of sin, they *cannot* believe, how can Calvin consistently claim that they *ought* to believe—much less that they are justly punished for not having done so?

23. For these reasons, I find Wolterstorff's account of the traditional Reformed objection to natural theology much truer to Calvin than Plantinga's: "What the Reformed person would suspect as operative in...cases of unbelief is not so much insufficient awareness of the evidence, as it is *resistance* to the available evidence. Calvin's thought...is that God has planted in every human being a disposition to believe in the existence of a divine Creator.... It is possible, though, said Calvin, to resist the workings of this disposition. And one of the characteristic effects of sin is that we do resist. The sinner prefers *not* to acknowledge the existence of a divine Creator. Thus Calvin's picture of the unbeliever is of one who characteristically resists acknowledging what he really knows, not of course because he has any evidence for its falsehood, rather because he does not *like* to believe it ("Is reason enough?" 22).

24. Cf. Kuyper: "[Because of sin there] must occur a modification in revelation as will make it correspond to the modification which took place in man. The nature of the change worked in man by sin governs the change which must follow in revelation" (*Principles*, 278). So, too, Benjamin B. Warfield: "A very brief abstract will probably suffice...to bring before us...the elements of Calvin's thought. These include the postulation of an innate knowledge of God in man, quickened and developed by a very rich manifestation of God in nature and providence, which, however, fails of its proper effect because of man's corruption in sin; so that an objective revelation of God, embodied in the Scriptures, was rendered necessary, and, as well, a subjective operation of the Spirit of God on the heart enabling sinful man to receive this revelation—by which conjoint action, objective and subjective, a true knowledge of God is communicated to the human soul" (*Calvin and Augustine*, ed. Samuel G. Craig [Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1965], 31; cf. 32, 43-44, 47).

25. Cf. Kuyper: "Although we are not deprived by sin of the power of thought, and though our law of thought is not broken, the pivot of our thought has become displaced, and thereby our activity of thought, applied to divine things, has a wrong effect" (*Principles*, 288).

26. *Institutes* I.vi and I.vii contain the first explicit references to Calvin's Doctrine of Election which is discussed fully in III, xxi-xxiv and already alluded to at the very outset in the General Syllabus: "Therefore, that to those, whom it is God's will to bring to an intimate and saving knowledge of himself, he gives his written word." Cf. Warfield: "God is not known by those who choose to know him, but by those by whom he chooses to be known.... Therefore none know him save those to whom He efficaciously imparts, by His Word and Spirit, the knowledge of Himself" (*Calvin and Augustine*, 83). Warfield calls the Doctrine of Election "The Calvinism of Calvin's doctrine of religious knowledge" (*ibid.*).

27. So, too, Kuyper: "Faith indeed is in our human consciousness the deepest fundamental law that governs every form of distinction, by which alone all higher 'Differentiation' becomes established in our consciousness.... [F]aith originates primordially from

the fact that our ego places God over against itself as the eternal and infinite Being.... Since we did not manufacture this faith ourselves, but God created it in our human nature, this faith is but the opening of our spiritual eye and the consequent perception of another Being, excelling us in everything, *that manifests itself in our own being*.... By faith we perceive that an eternal Being manifests Himself in us.... Thus there is a revelation of God *about* us and *within* us, and the latter culminates in the personal knowledge of God.... He who understands it differently from this separates Revelation *from religion*, and degrades it to an intellectualistic communication of certain facts or statutes" (*Principles*, 266-268). Cf. Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, 78-79.

28. Cf. Bavinck: "[A] distinct natural theology, obtained apart from any revelation, merely through observation and study of the universe in which man lives, does not exist. The knowledge of God called 'natural theology' is not a product of human reasoning.... [Natural theology] presupposes: (1) God's revelation in his handiwork... (2) a sanctified mind and an opened eye to see God... in his creatures... and (3) God's own interpretation of his revelation in nature, which interpretation we find in Scripture. (1) and (2) together would not be sufficient. Without (3) even the believer, even the Christian, would not be able to understand God's revelation in nature or to interpret it rightly.... Accordingly, the Christian follows an entirely wrong method if, whenever he treats natural theology, he severs himself... from special revelation in Scripture and from the illumination of the Holy Spirit.... But standing on this solid foundation he looks round about through the spectacles of Holy Writ, and sees in the entire realm of nature a revelation of the same God whom he knows and confesses as... his Father in heaven. Accordingly, it is incorrect to view the innate and acquired knowledge of God as the knowledge which derive from creation apart from God's *special* revelation.... In the light of that *special* revelation we have learned to view nature and the world round about us. To God's *special* revelation in his Word we are all indebted for the knowledge of God derived from the realm of nature. If we had not heard God speaking in the work of grace so that we are now able to discern his voice in the work of nature, we would have been like the heathen for whom nature has nothing but sounds of confusion" (*The Doctrine of God*, 61-62); cf. Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, tr. Harry der Nederlanden—originally published in 1901 under the title *De zekerheid des geloofs*—[Ontario: Paideia Press, 1980], 51-61). For Bavinck, as for Calvin, knowledge of God is the result of faith—a point which is emphasized in Warfield's review of *The Certainty of Faith* (*Princeton Theological Review*, January, 1903, 138-148; reprinted in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1973), Vol. II, 106-123).

29. Contemporary Reformed thinkers like Plantinga and Wolterstorff claim that religious belief does not need to be made rational; it is "*already* rational, just as it stands.... [T]heistic belief has absolutely no need of reasons and evidence in order to be rational... [and] the mature and well-instructed believer will have no reasons for his faith" (Mavrodes, "Jerusalem and Athens," 195).

30. Although most Calvin scholars agree with Plantinga that Calvin rejects all proofs for God's existence, an important exception is Warfield who thinks that Calvin occasionally employs some of the traditional proofs as "evidences" of God's existence (*Calvin and Augustine*, 143).

31. Again Calvin's view is far from clear. As we have seen, he thinks that fallen human beings cannot appropriate the revelation of God in Nature. It now turns out that even if

they could appropriate it, he thinks that belief in God ought *not* to be based on empirical evidence of this kind. But if human beings ought *not* to believe in God on the basis of empirical evidence, why are they not only punished but, according to Calvin, justly punished for not having done so? Calvin seems committed to the incoherent thesis that fallen human beings ought not to believe in God on the basis of the very empirical evidence which justifies God in punishing them for having failed to perceive as overwhelming evidence for his existence.

32. I am indebted to Robert Arrington and Robert Vorsteg for helpful criticism.