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THE PROSPECTS FOR ‘MEDIATE’ NATURAL THEOLOGY IN JOHN CALVIN

One of the perennial questions in the history of Reformed theology, and which continues to be discussed in contemporary Calvin scholarship and philosophy of religion, involves the question of whether Calvin’s discussion of the natural knowledge of God in the opening chapters of *the Institutes of the Christian Religion* can be taken as a presentation of *arguments* for the existence of God. How shall we construe the mode of man’s natural knowledge of God in Calvin? More precisely, is man’s natural knowledge of God mediated by reasons (other beliefs or knowledge), or is it something in some sense innate or immediate? In the present paper I would like to consider the plausibility of a *mediate* natural theology in Calvin. Drawing on recent developments in epistemology and philosophical theology, I want to argue that, though Calvin does not explicitly endorse a traditional natural theology based on theistic arguments and makes several apparently negative statements regarding such a project, there are nonetheless good grounds for holding that mediate natural theology can be construed in such a way as to be either implicit in or compatible with the salient and relevant features of Calvin’s theology to be canvassed in this paper.

I. THE NATURAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

According to Calvin, ‘There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity.... God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty’ (I. iii. 1).¹ In addition to this internal *sensus divinitatis* inscribed or engraved on the hearts of all people, Calvin draws attention to another source of man’s natural knowledge of God: ‘The knowledge of God shines forth in the fashioning of the universe and the continuing governing of it’ (I. v. 1). ‘Not only,’ writes Calvin has God, ‘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’ (I. v. 1). These passages suggest two apparently distinct modes (or sources) of man’s natural knowledge of God. In book 1,

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. Ford Lewis Battles, in *the Library of Christian Classics*, vol. XX–XXI (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960).

chapter 3 of *the Institutes*, Calvin establishes that the knowledge of God has been naturally implanted in the human mind. In the next chapter, he argues that this (naturally implanted) knowledge of God has been smothered and corrupted. Then, in book 1, chapter 5 Calvin goes on to say that, not only has God sowed the seed of religion in the minds of men, but he reveals Himself daily by means of the unmistakable marks of His glory which He has placed on his individual works. Subsequent to Calvin (beginning in the *Abridgements to the Institutes* and in the various commentaries on the Heidelberg Catechism) it became commonplace in Reformed circles to capture Calvin's distinction here in terms of a distinction between an internal and external witness or revelation.² There are two distinct modes by which man has a natural knowledge of God, one internal, innate and *a priori* and another external, in the work of creation and *a posteriori*.

Whether we view Calvin as maintaining a natural knowledge of God by way of reasons or arguments will depend heavily on how we take Calvin's apparent distinction (or – to beg no questions – whether there *is* a distinction) between the knowledge of God 'implanted in the mind' and that knowledge 'set forth in creation'. This century Edward Dowey (following B. B. Warfield) has suggested that experience provides the raw material, as it were, out of which man draws conclusions about God. Hence the knowledge is inferential and based upon empirical observation. Dowey speaks of the 'highly inductive character' of Calvin's 'natural arguments,'³ and asserts that, according to Calvin, 'man infers certain attributes of God from nature.' T. H. L. Parker, on the other hand, argues that 'Neither chapter 1 nor chapter 5 of book I ought to be interpreted as supplying the Calvinian equivalent to St. Thomas' demonstrations.'⁴ Parker does not think that Calvin should be viewed as in any way presenting or sanctioning inferential knowledge of God. Most recently, Alvin Plantinga has added a contribution to this debate by maintaining that we have been created with certain innate dispositions to form belief in God in the appropriate circumstances, where these circumstances at least include widely realized experiential conditions, such as observing the starry night sky or some other aspect of the created order.⁵ This recent interpretation seems to avoid the difficulty of two-mode theories by reducing the mode to one consisting of (at least) two conditions, one of which is internal and the other which is external to the individual.

Briefly sketched, then, these are the basic contours of the debate to be addressed here. How should we construe Calvin's understanding of the

² See John Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism: The Arguments for the Existence of God in Dutch Theology, 1575–1650* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1982), especially chapters 3–6, and 8.

³ Edward Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), p. 77.

⁴ T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), pp. 7–9.

⁵ Alvin Plantinga, 'Reason and Belief in God' in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 65–67.

natural knowledge of God? Can it legitimately be construed as inferential or mediated by reasons?

II. THE NEGATIVE ASSESSMENT OF MEDIATE NATURAL THEOLOGY

From the beginning it must be admitted that Calvin makes several (apparently) disparaging comments in the way of man's natural knowledge of God, especially as based on arguments.

(1) *The principle of epistemic deficiency and the noetic effects of sin*

The natural knowledge of God of which Calvin speaks is that 'primal and simple knowledge to which the very order of nature would have led us *if Adam had remained upright*' (I. ii. 1). 'It is therefore in vain that so many burning lamps shine for us in the workmanship of the universe to show forth the glory of its Author. Although they bathe us wholly in their radiance, yet they can of themselves in no way lead us into the right path. Surely they strike some sparks, but before their fuller light shines forth these are smothered' (I. v. 14). Despite the inner and outer witness of God, man falls into superstition and fails to worship God. 'We grow increasingly dull toward so manifest testimonies, and they flow away without profiting us' (I. v. ii). The natural knowledge of God, though, is limited in two ways. First, it is only a knowledge of God as creator; but an adequate knowledge of God is a knowledge of Him as creator and redeemer. Secondly, and quite important, man's natural knowledge of God is limited by the *subjective conditions of man's sinful state*. Calvin's discussion of the two modes of man's natural knowledge of God as creator is heavily qualified by his insistence that this knowledge is corrupted by the fall of man and the presence of sin in the human personality. The knowledge he has in view is 'the primal and simple knowledge to which the very order of nature would have led us if Adam had remained upright' (I. ii. 1). The last phrase, *si integer stetisset Adam*, indicates that the fall introduces a restriction on how far man can go in terms of knowledge of God based upon natural reason. Calvin recognizes that for post-lapsarian man the natural knowledge of God is corrupted, incomplete and untrustworthy. 'If men were taught only by nature, they would hold to nothing certain or solid or clear-cut, but would be so tied to confused principles as to worship an unknown god' (I. v. 12). Calvin tells us that the evidence of God in creation does not profit man, because his mind has been darkened. Notice that God's revelation in nature is not inherently obscure; it is rendered unclear by virtue of what we can call man's *epistemic blindness*. The human personality is vitiated by sin, so that the human race is either prevented from 'seeing' the wonderful marks of God or perverts the witness of God in creation. We therefore 'lack the natural ability to mount up unto the pure and clear knowledge of God' (I. v. 15).

(2) *The principle of moral inexcusability*

Since the fall the role of man's natural knowledge of God is to render man morally inexcusable before God. Calvin sees Romans chapter one as laying down an important principle governing the natural knowledge of God: 'Where Paul teaches that what is to be known of God is made plain from the creation of the world [Romans 1:19], he does not signify such a manifestation as men's discernment can comprehend; but, rather, shows it not to go farther than to render men inexcusable' (I. v. 14). God gives men a 'slight taste of his divinity' so that they 'might not hide their impiety under a cloak of ignorance' (II. ii. 18). Although the original (pre-lapsarian) purpose of the witness of God implanted in the mind and revealed in the natural order was to stir the human race to an adoration and worship of God, as well as to encourage man in the hope of the future life, sin has twisted this natural knowledge so that man now sits by idly in contemplation of the works of God without regard to the Maker and his providential care over the world. But despite man's inability to achieve a pure and clear knowledge of God, 'all excuse is cut off because the fault of dullness is within us' (I. v. 15).

(3) *The principle of the evident nature of the external witness*

If the purpose of man's natural knowledge of God is to render him inexcusable before his Maker, then there is a *prima facie* reason for God's self-revelation of himself to be quite evident. But arguments involve a making of something evident which is not itself evident. But the external witness is something quite evident. Calvin's account emphasizes how *evident* the existence and nature of God is from the created world. God presents himself with 'very great clarity' and 'so manifest testimonies.'

We see that no long or toilsome proof [*demonstratio*] is needed to elicit evidences [*testimonia*] that serve to illuminate and affirm the divine majesty; since the few we have sampled at random, withersoever you turn, it is clear that they are very manifest and obvious that they can easily be observed with the eyes and pointed out with the finger (I. v. 9).

In this crucial passage Calvin cites as a reason for not constructing convoluted syllogisms the fact that there is no *need* to do so. The manifestation of God in creation is perspicuous, so there is no need to make evident what is in fact already evident. And Calvin has good reason for holding this, because – as just seen above – he believes that the function of the natural knowledge of God for fallen man is to render him without excuse before God. This would be compromised if men had to reason through cumbersome syllogisms and scholastic distinctions to arrive at even a knowledge of God's existence. In his Commentary on Acts, Calvin makes an important distinction between 'philosophical argumentation' and the simplicity, for instance, with which Paul and Barnabas treated the evidence of God's providence in nature to the Gentiles at Lystra.

I do not understand this to mean that they offered a closely reasoned discourse in the philosophical manner about the secrets of nature, for they were addressing uninstructed, ordinary people. And so they had to set forth in simple words what was known by all the uneducated. Nevertheless, they assume this principle that in the order of nature there is a certain and clear manifestation of God.⁶

III. THE PROSPECTS FOR MEDIATE NATURAL THEOLOGY IN CALVIN: THE NATURE OF INFERENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

I should begin by stating at once that the prospects for establishing any explicit commitment to theistic arguments in Calvin is quite bleak. Recent Calvin scholarship has shown quite conclusively that the explicit endorsement of arguments for the existence (and attributes) of God is something which formally entered into Protestantism through the development of Protestant scholasticism in the second half of the 16th century under Reformed theologians such as Theodore Beza, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Zacharias Ursinus and Girolamo Zanchi.⁷ The significant methodological shifts that took place between Calvin and the calvinists suggest an explicit distinction between the Christocentric *biblical* theology of Calvin and the theocentric *philosophical* theology of his followers. Consequently, where the philosophical theologian is interested in a knowledge of God's existence (and attributes) by natural reason, Calvin has a different goal in mind. He aims to develop a knowledge of God (not simply of His existence), but *a knowledge which affects and moves to worship* – a knowledge, we might say, that has an existential and ethical dimension.⁸ Edward Dowey points out that it is difficult to pin down an exact definition to Calvin's use of the word 'knowledge,' though he suggests that 'existential' best describes the affecting awareness at which Calvin is aiming.⁹ So, bearing in mind these distinctions, any attempt at treating theistic arguments or mediate natural theology in Calvin will have to rest content with rather modest goals and cautious claims.

Crucial to the case for a mediate natural theology is the meaning of *inferential* knowledge, for the possibility of the former depends on what we understand by the latter. To this end, it will be needful to do some epistemology and clarify the notion of *grounds* of belief and what it means for a belief to be *based* on other beliefs. If we think of beliefs as the output of various cognitive processes or mechanisms, we can think of the ground of a belief as the psychological input to the relevant cognitive mechanism, and where this input may be either beliefs or experiences (in the broad sense). The based-

⁶ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: The Acts of the Apostles 14–28*, tr. John W. Fraser and ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1966), p. 13.

⁷ See John Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*; John Patrick Donnelly, 'Italian influences on the Development of Calvinistic Scholasticism,' *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, VII:81–101 (April, 1976), 'Calvinistic Thomism,' *Viator*, 7:441–5 (1976); Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1987), chapter 8.

⁸ It is this sort of knowledge which is often under consideration when Calvin draws attention to the limitations of man's natural knowledge of God.

⁹ Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), pp. 24–27.

on relation will then be spelled out in terms of the processes taking account of the appropriate features of the ground and the belief being formed – as it were – in the light of these features. Hence a ground will not be the total input to a belief-forming mechanism, but those features of the input that are taken account of in the actual formation of the belief.¹⁰ We can now draw a distinction between two quite different ways one may believe or know something where this belief or knowledge is mediated by reasons. There is one sense in which a person can possess knowledge mediated by reasons, even though S has not gone through any conscious process of inferring p from q. Grounds may be possessed implicitly and their being utilized in the formation of a belief need not be something the subject is aware is happening. As long as other propositional attitudes are the features of the input taken account of, S may believe p on the basis of some other belief, even though S is not conscious of the fact that she is believing on the grounds of some other beliefs she possesses. This can be contrasted with a mediate knowledge that is the result of the subject inferring some proposition p from some other proposition q which constitutes an adequate reason for p. The latter type of mediate knowledge can be called argumentative; the former nonargumentative. What has often confused matters is that both have been referred to as cases of inferential knowledge, and applied to theistic belief both could be classified as instances of mediate natural theology. In both cases knowledge is formed on the basis of other things a person believes or knows. But we should not confuse a belief's being based on other beliefs (and thereby being mediated by them) with the *activity* of inferring a belief from other beliefs.¹¹

The distinction between these two types of believing for a reason has been treated at length by the epistemologist Robert Audi, and his distinction is quite helpful. Audi distinguishes between 'structurally inferential' beliefs and 'episodically inferential' beliefs.¹² S may believe that the Jones's are home for the reason that their living-room lights are on. S does not believe that the Jones's are home because he has gone through a process of inferring this as a conclusion from a premise (or set of premises). S takes note of the fact that the lights are turned on in the Jones's living-room and, already possessing the belief that when the Jones's living-room lights are turned on in the evening the Jones's are home, the belief that they are home is formed. S's belief that when the Jones's living room lights are turned on the Jones's are home is taken account of (along with the belief that the lights are now turned on) in the formation of the belief the Jones's are home. What we have here is a belief due to a reason (or reasons), but not due to a reasoning process.

¹⁰ This account is taken from William Alston, 'An Internalist Externalism' in *Epistemic Justification* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 228–231.

¹¹ See William Alston, 'Concepts of Epistemic Justification' and 'An Internalist Externalism' in Alston, *Epistemic Justification* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 99–101, 227–229.

¹² See Robert Audi, *The Structure of Justification* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 237–239.

According to Audi, there is an argument that underlies this case, in the sense of 'an abstract argumental structure', and one that is probably enthymematic, from the grounding reason (or reasons) *r* to the target belief *b*. Believing for a reason in such an instance is *structurally* inferential. On the other hand, *b* may arise from a tokening or internal recitation of that structure by actually *inferring* *b* from *r*. Such a belief would be *episodically* inferential. Although every belief for a reason that is episodically inferential is structurally inferential, the converse does not hold.

The consequences of this for assessing the plausibility of possessing an inferential or mediate knowledge of God should be noted. Although Calvin, in the passages we have looked at, expresses a rather low view of arguments for the existence of God, this does not entail a low view (or no view for that matter) of mediate natural theology. There is implicit in what Calvin says in book 1, chapter 5 of *the Institutes* a structurally inferential form of natural theology that involves a knowledge of God based on other (justified) beliefs or knowledge of the person. Perhaps *S* takes notice of the order in nature, and believes in God for the reason that *S* takes such things as indications (evidences) of a Designer. And Calvin seems to think that there are many such instances which present themselves to us:

There are innumerable evidences both in heaven and on earth that declare his wonderful wisdom; not only those more recondite matters for the closer observation of which astronomy, medicine, and all natural science are intended, but also those that thrust themselves upon the sight of even the most untutored and ignorant persons, so that they cannot open their eyes without being compelled to witness them.... To be sure, there is need of art and of more exacting toil in order to investigate the motion of the stars, to determine their assigned stations, to measure their intervals, to note their properties. As God's providence shows itself more explicitly when one observes these, so the mind must rise to a somewhat higher level to look upon his glory. Even the common folk and the most untutored, who have been taught only by the aid of the eyes, cannot be unaware of the excellence of divine art, for it reveals itself in this innumerable and yet distinct and well-ordered variety of the heavenly host.... Likewise, in regard to the structure of the human body... the human body shows itself to be a composition so ingenious that its Artificer is rightly judged a wonder-worker (I. v. 1, 2).

It might be argued, though, that what we have here are merely descriptions of widely realized circumstances in which belief in God is formed. As already mentioned, Plantinga (drawing on the Scottish commonsense philosopher Thomas Reid) has argued that Calvin can be read as holding that we are designed in such a way that we have an innate disposition (the *sensus divinitatis*) to form beliefs about God under certain circumstances, such as those laid out by Calvin in the above passage. But then belief in God is based on the grounds of experience, not other beliefs or reasons, and hence the belief is immediate not mediate. However, I would argue in response to this increasingly prevalent interpretation of Calvin that, despite its philosophical

plausibility, it is – as an interpretation of Calvin – somewhat misleading. Calvin means to distinguish, not merely two elements involved in a single mode of theistic belief formation, but two distinct modes in which man possesses a natural knowledge of God. Note the contrast Calvin makes: ‘He [God] has not only [*non solum*] sowed in men’s minds that seed of religion...but [*sed*] revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe’ (I. v. 1). Moreover, Calvin is quite emphatic about the ‘sense of divinity...engraved upon men’s minds’ (I. iii. 3) as constituting knowledge of God. The *sensus divinitatis* is not a mere disposition or belief-forming mechanism that is innate, but the knowledge itself is innate.¹³

This, of course, suggests that the innumerable external evidences are not merely experiential conditions which trigger the *sensus divinitatis* (as a theistic belief-forming mechanism) and yield a theistic belief, but function as an experiential basis for the formation of beliefs which in turn become reasons for believing the relevant theistic proposition. It might be thought, though, that even if the *sensus divinitatis* refers to an innate knowledge of God, the mode currently under consideration may be taken in a Reidian sense. We account for theistic belief solely in terms of the experiential conditions, without adding the step of the believer’s forming a belief that is then used as the ground for theistic belief. So really Calvin has in view *two* immediate modes, one innate and the other based on experiential conditions.¹⁴ This obviously depends on how one takes Calvin’s claims in chapter 5, and the history of debate on the interpretation of that chapter shows that this is no easy matter to decide. However, I would favour the view that Calvin is not merely saying that there are experiential indications of God on the basis of which people believe, but that people believe in God having taken into account (entertaining the belief) that these things presented to them in sensory experience are in fact indications of God’s existence. Much of Calvin’s discussion does introduce the idea that people do in fact recognize the evidences in question to be signs or indications of God’s existence and nature. ‘They are compelled to know – whether they will or not – that these are the signs of divinity...’ (I. v. 4). Elsewhere, after adducing various evidences of God’s providential control in the world, Calvin speaks of such evidences as a common way of seeking God if we but ‘trace the outlines that above and below sketch a living likeness of him’ (I. v. 6). Moreover, many of Calvin’s examples of symmetry and order in the world refer to facts uncovered through scientific means, which are then used as evidences for the existence of a Designer. In all these cases, I suggest that it is most plausible to take Calvin to be emphasizing the fact that many things we come to believe

¹³ For a discussion on the early controversy over innate natural knowledge of God, see John Platt, *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*.

¹⁴ I am indebted to Nicholas Wolterstorff for pointing out this possibility to me.

about the world (that are evident to the senses or uncovered through more careful observation or some degree of reasoning) play a role in grounding theistic belief. And if we recall the distinction between episodically and structurally inferential beliefs, we need not show that Calvin has actual arguments in mind, only that people come to believe things about God based on other things they believe about the world and the fact that they take such things to be evidence of God (in however an unsophisticated sense).

So I would say, then that it is quite reasonable to take book 1, chapter 5 of *the Institutes* as referring to external evidences that become reasons for believing, rather than mere experiential conditions which trigger the formation of the belief that God exists (without mediation by reasons). The important point to grasp here is that one need not go whole-hog and characterize Calvin as doing anything remotely like Aquinas in the Five Ways. In this respect Parker is correct. In Calvin we find no *omne quod movetur ab alio movetur* – no calvinian equivalent to Thomas's demonstrations. But, given the distinction above between structurally inferential and episodically inferential beliefs, it doesn't follow that there is no inferential knowledge of God. Although one does not necessarily infer through any syllogistic method *God exists* as a conclusion from a series of premises that state the facts of design and order, one does come to believe in the existence of God (and perhaps some of his attributes) on the basis of certain other beliefs one has about the order of nature and the relation of this fact to the existence of a creator God. We can call such a mediate natural theology *structurally inferential natural theology*, as opposed to an *episodically inferential natural theology*.

But what about an episodically inferential natural theology? Is there such a thing in evidence in Calvin? Well, if we assume the presence of a structurally inferential natural theology, then a person who in the first instance believes for a structurally inferential reason may, upon due reflection, actually go through a discursive process and reason out matters that were originally latent or implicit. And this can obviously take place at various levels of sophistication. Calvin refers to 'long and toilsome proofs,' and 'reasoned discourse in the philosophical manner', but why suppose that this implies that Calvin stands opposed to any form of argument for the existence (or attributes) of God. In fact, Calvin's discussion in book 1, chapter 5 could easily be taken (and in fact has) as a case of such basic forms of argument. Some arguments are simple; others complex. And this itself largely depends on one's audience. And here one should bear in mind Calvin's aim in *the Institutes*. He is presenting a guide to the Scriptures, not a textbook on philosophical theology. He is, to put it quite bluntly, not interested in the type of thing which occupies the mind of the philosophical theologian. Nevertheless, he does recognize the value of carrying on argumentation. Although earlier we saw Calvin disabusing Paul of philosophical discourse before the common people, the complete passage shows that Calvin nonethe-

less considered Paul to be offering an argument of sorts. Although Paul and Barnabas claimed that ‘God was manifested by natural evidences,’ Calvin says:

I do not understand this to mean that they offered a closely reasoned discourse in the philosophical manner about the secrets of nature, for they were addressing uninstructed, ordinary people. And so they had to set forth in simple words what was known by all the uneducated. Nevertheless, they assume this principle that in the order of nature there is a certain and clear manifestation of God. *Because* the earth is watered by rain, because the heat of the sun quickens its growth, because fruits in such great abundance are produced year by year, we may surely gather from these things that there is some God who governs all things. For the heaven and the earth are not moved by their own power, much less even by chance. *Therefore, the conclusion is* that this amazing ingenuity of nature plainly points to the providence of God.... [italics mine]¹⁵

Calvin even recognizes the need to carry on argumentation at a more sophisticated level. This can be seen if we compare the previous account with Calvin’s discussion of Paul at Athens before the Stoics and Epicureans, where he claims that Paul ‘showed by arguments from nature who God is, what he is like, and how He is to be worshipped properly.’¹⁶ And again, ‘Moreover, because he is dealing in debate with profane men, he takes his proof from nature itself, for he would have wasted his time in contending with them by citing Scriptural texts.’¹⁷

Accordingly the blindness of men is all the more shameful and intolerable, when, confronted by such a clear and obvious manifestation, they are not moved by an awareness of the presence of God. Wherever they turn their eyes, upwards or downwards, they are bound to fall on living, and indeed countless, reminders of God’s power, wisdom, and goodness. For God has not given obscure hints of His glory in the handiwork of the world, but has engraved such plain marks everywhere, that they can be known also by touch by the blind. From that we gather that men are not only blind but stupid, when they are helped by such very clear proofs, but derive no benefit from them.¹⁸

I think we can conclude that, in addition to a structurally inferential natural theology at least implicit in what Calvin says in book 1, chapter 5, we have grounds for asserting an episodically inferential natural theology. The possibility seems to be supported, not only by the prospects of rendering explicit what is implicit, but by the positive consideration of Calvin’s comments on some key texts of Scripture which show St. Paul engaging in various types of arguments from natural theology. I take it that the points raised in this section serve primarily to respond to objection 3 in section II, for if the judgments in this section are sound, there can be an inferential natural knowledge of God which does not require argument, and arguments, if given, need not be the convoluted type that Calvin seems to dislike. Moreover, if

¹⁵ *Acts of the Apostles* 14–28, p. 13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 118–119.

the mind of man has been darkened, as Calvin says it has, then it may be that, though the external witness in the natural order is objectively evident (as Calvin emphasizes), it does not follow that it will be evident to every person in every instance. But surely there is a possibility of it being made evident by argument.

IV. A STRENGTHENED CASE FOR EPISODICALLY INFERENTIAL NATURAL THEOLOGY: AN INTRA-FAITH FUNCTION FOR NATURAL THEOLOGY

The prospects for an episodically inferential natural theology in Calvin also depend on how we construe the function of natural theology – an often overlooked aspect to the debate. There is I believe an interesting analogy that can be drawn between what Calvin says about the relationship between faith in Scripture and evidence for the credibility of Scripture and the function or role of natural theology.

Interestingly enough, Calvin explicitly introduces the topic of arguments in relation to the knowledge of God as redeemer which comes to us through God's Word – the Holy Scriptures.¹⁹ Calvin notes that 'since for unbelieving men religion seems to stand by opinion alone, they, in order not believe anything foolishly or lightly, both wish and demand rational proof that Moses and the Prophets spoke divinely' (I. vii. 4). But the prophets and apostles, Calvin tells us, 'do not dwell on rational proofs,' and according to Calvin, 'we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit' (I. vii. 4). 'The testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason,' explains Calvin. The basic problem as Calvin sees it is that faith in Scripture as God's Word requires certainty, but no argument or rational proof can establish with certainty that the Scriptures are the very Word of God. 'The certainty it deserves with us, it attains by the testimony of the Spirit' (I. vii. 5). Calvin seems to think of the testimony of the Holy Spirit as an actual source of belief and one that is superior to inference or argument since it produces beliefs with a greater degree of strength or conviction. No argument can produce such a firm conviction; therefore, no one should believe on the basis of argument that Scripture is the Word of God. Consider Calvin's following statement: 'Scripture will ultimately suffice for a saving knowledge of God only when its certainty is founded upon the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit. ... But those who wish to prove to unbelievers that Scripture is the Word of God are acting foolishly, for only by faith can this be known' (I. viii. 13).

¹⁹ Calvin's discussion here could very well shed light on how we are to understand such terms as 'evidence' and 'proofs' in the earlier sections which treated the knowledge of God as creator. In relation to Scripture, the terms 'evidence(s)' and 'proof(s)' are clearly used to indicate 'argument,' especially since the latter term is used in close connection with (perhaps even as an equivalent to) the former terms.

Nevertheless, having said this, Calvin goes on to say that, though the conviction that Scripture is God's Word requires no reason, 'it is a knowledge with which the best reason agrees' (I. vii. 5). And then Calvin goes on to support this in book 1, chapter 8: 'So far as human reason goes, sufficiently firm proofs are at hand to establish the credibility of Scripture.' As Calvin sees matters, 'those who strive to build up faith in Scripture through disputation are actually doing things *backwards*.' This actually suggests that disputation or evidences do have a role that is *subsequent* to faith. This, in fact, is exactly what Calvin says in chapter 8:

Unless this certainty, higher and stronger than any human judgment, be present, it will be in vain to fortify the authority of Scripture by arguments, to establish it by common agreement of the church, or to confirm it with other helps. For unless this foundation is laid, it's authority will always remain in doubt. Conversely, once we have embraced it devoutly as its dignity deserves, and have recognized it to be above the common sort of things, those arguments – not strong enough before to engraft and fix the certainty of Scripture in our minds – become very useful aids. (I. viii. 1)

What emerges from this is an argument that leads to the conclusion that evidences play a role in the life of the believer, a role that is not antecedent but consequent to faith.

- (A) Calvin believed that faith in Scripture requires the testimony of the Holy Spirit, since the certainty which faith requires cannot be generated by argumentation from truths of natural reason.
- (B) Nevertheless, faith in Scripture as God's Word is 'in accord with the best reason' and 'there are sufficiently firm proofs at hand to establish the credibility of Scripture.'
- (C) Calvin sees argumentation and evidences for the credibility of Scripture as relevant for the Christian, as 'confirmations' and 'useful aids.'
- (D) Argumentation is legitimate as an activity posterior to, and carried out within, the framework of faith. (from (A)–(C))

This is a most illuminating argument, as it sheds light on a most plausible role for natural theology which unfortunately has been obscured since the Enlightenment. In the modern period, when theologians and philosophers have thought of natural theology it has usually been natural theology construed as apologetic, and this has been true in the Reformed tradition as well.²⁰ And this has often been conjoined with the assumption that unless one has reasons for belief in God, such a belief is irrational – something which Calvin and the Reformed tradition have consistently denied. But natural theology was not always so narrowly construed. In medieval theology it was often part of an intra-faith project of *faith seeking understanding*. We can call this *consequent natural theology* – a natural theology which presupposes a faith

²⁰ In fact, it was the case very early on. The introduction of theistic arguments as apologetically-oriented among Reformed theologians is carefully brought out by John Platt in *Reformed Thought and Scholasticism*. The interest in employing theistic arguments for the purpose of Christian apologetics begins to emerge in Ursinus and appears explicitly in Daneau by 1583.

context. This is quite evident in St. Anselm who wrote both the *Monologion* and *Proslogion*, in which arguments for the existence of God were undertaken, in the context of life in a monastic community. And as Anselm himself made clear, the *Monologion* was an example of 'meditation on the grounds of faith' and in the *Proslogion* Anselm sought a demonstration of the existence of God in order to understand the truth which his heart believed and loved. What one is impressed with here is how the project of reasoning about the existence and nature of God is directed towards Christians. In *Cur Deus Homo?*, Anselm says that the proofs he is about to set forth (for the necessity of the incarnation) are 'not for the sake of attaining to faith by means of reason,' but that believers 'may be gladdened by understanding and meditating on those things which they believe, and that, as far as possible, they may always be ready to convince any one [presumably Jews and Moslems] who demands of them a reason of that hope which is in us' (Book 1, Chapter 1).²¹ Even here, though an apologetic purpose is mentioned,²² one is struck with the emphasis on the intra-faith relevance of arguments and proofs by which what one first believes by faith is then demonstrated by reason, independent of the authority of Scripture.

But if Calvin sees evidences for Scripture (as the means to a saving knowledge of God) as relevant for the Christian who *already* believes that Scripture is the Word of God by the testimony of the Spirit, might not natural theology, construed as episodically inferential, also function as a 'useful aid' or a 'rational confirmation' for what the believer has taken on faith? This appears to me to be a most pertinent question. For once we take natural theology and put it in the context of faith, all three of the earlier objections to a mediate natural theology are removed, for they all assume a non-faith context. The natural knowledge of God is no longer separated from the supernatural knowledge of God communicated in Scripture by the Spirit. Its purpose can now be elevated beyond that of mere inexcusability, perhaps restored to its original place as a means of stirring us to a recognition and worship of God.

But how precisely should we conceive of such arguments, for Scripture or for God, as 'useful aids'? Useful for what? What type of confirmation? Calvin is admittedly vague on the meaning of 'confirmation', though his language is often similar to Anselm's, for instance when Calvin states the purpose of such evidences as a means whereby (a) 'the dignity and majesty of Scripture are affirmed in godly hearts' and (b) Scripture is 'brilliantly vindicated against the whiles of its disparagers'. Although Calvin here suggests an apologetic purpose, I would highlight the intra-faith emphasis

²¹ Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo?* in *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, 2nd ed., tr. S. N. Deane (1962; reprint, La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1964), p. 178.

²² But the apologetic here is in all probability directed towards non-Christians (Jews and Moslems) rather than non-theists, as it is, not the existence of God, but the doctrine of the incarnation that is at stake.

that characterizes his discussion. Calvin also seems taken by the aesthetic aspect of the Scriptures (as well as nature), in much the same way that Anselm spoke of his proofs as 'attractive for the value and beauty of the reasoning.'²³ But Calvin is a little vague about what is actually achieved for the Christian (beyond the aesthetics) by considering such evidences.

Left with the question of the function of natural theology as an intra-faith enterprise, and with no clear statement from Calvin on the matter, we are forced I think to look for possibilities that would at least be compatible with Calvin. And here there are two, closely related, possibilities.

During the last 12 years, Alvin Plantinga has been engaged in developing a Reformed epistemology, the central thesis of which is what he calls the proper basicity of theistic belief – that belief in God can be a rational belief even if it is not based on other beliefs of a person. So arguments or reasons are not needed for a justified belief in God; that is, it is possible for a person to believe in God without having (or there being) reasons for the belief and not be violating any intellectual duties in so believing. Most recently, Plantinga has developed this thesis along the lines of rationality understood as *warrant* (that quantity or quality enough of which is sufficient to transform true belief into knowledge). In 'The Prospects for Natural Theology,' Plantinga maintains that although (mediate) natural theology (construed episodically) is not necessary for a warranted theistic belief, such arguments could *increase* the warrant of a belief in God. Hence, Plantinga says:

perhaps good theistic arguments could play the role of confirming and strengthening my belief in God, and in that way they might increase the degree of warrant belief in God has for me. Indeed, such arguments might increase the degree of warrant of that belief in such a way as to nudge it over the boundary separating knowledge from mere true belief; they might in some cases therefore serve something like the Thomistic project of transforming belief into knowledge.²⁴

Plantinga's suggestion here is quite helpful. On the one hand, we can say that the *immediate* sources of theistic belief (the testimony of the Holy Spirit and the *sensus divinitatis*) are *in general* 'epistemically' superior sources of belief since they produce beliefs with a greater degree of warrant. On the other hand, suppose that a person who believes in God in a basic way has a belief that is – for various possible reasons – weak, intermittent and wavering. If we view theistic belief as produced by theistic cognitive mechanisms (such as the *sensus divinitatis* or the testimony of the Holy Spirit), as happens with other of our cognitive mechanisms things go wrong at times. Belief-forming processes are interfered with and frequently our cognitive equipment does not function as it ought. Moreover, it may also be plausible to hold that immediate and mediate sources could be combined to yield a belief with a degree of warrant which it would not have if it were based on either one of

²³ *Cur Deus Homo?* Book 1, Chapter 1 (p. 179).

²⁴ Plantinga, 'The Prospects for Natural Theology,' *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991), pp. 311–312.

the sources alone. All of this will of course depend on the particular individual and her situation.

Now Calvin for one emphasizes what theologians have come to call the noetic effects of sin – sin has effects on the human person's cognitive faculties. Perhaps sin causes problems with the *sensus divinitatis* so that it doesn't function properly in some people at certain times and/or under certain conditions, with the result that we form belief in God in a sort of half-hearted way or not at all. It is interesting to note that in book 1 of the *Institutes* Calvin separates his discussions of belief in God on the basis of the *sensus divinitatis* (in chapter 3) and belief in God on the basis of the external evidences in creation (in chapter 5) by a digression on the noetic effects of sin (in chapter 4). Calvin explains how the seed of religion is perverted in different ways and the knowledge of God quickly degenerates. Calvin writes: 'Yet that seed remains which can in no wise be uprooted: that there is a seed of divinity; but this seed is so corrupted that *by itself* it produces only the worst fruits' (I. iv. 4., italics mine). Calvin immediately goes on to a consideration of how God has also revealed himself and daily discloses himself throughout creation, and as already emphasized Calvin sees these evidences as something quite distinct from the *sensus divinitatis*. Could the development in chapters 3–5 indicate a function for mediate natural theology? I think so. The noetic effects of sin, rather than present a reason against mediate natural theology, actually provide a reason for it. What would be evident to the mind unaffected by sin is not always evident to the mind affected by sin. This leaves open the possibility of making it evident (or more evident). So there are grounds in Calvin for holding that one role that might be afforded to an episodically inferential natural theology is that of increasing the warrant of theistic belief, especially if there is some kind of cognitive malfunction in the immediate source(s) of theistic belief.

However, I would like to suggest another, though closely related, way to conceive of the place of episodically inferential natural theology for the believer which introduces a plausible way to understand *fides quaerens intellectum*. The life of faith is governed by many aims. Some of these aims are cognitive. The Christian should not only have such specific aims as increasing in her understanding of Scripture, but more general epistemic aims such as increasing her stock of true beliefs and minimizing false ones. There is also the goal of what I will call *reflective rationality*, which consists in coming to have rational beliefs about the epistemic status of one's beliefs. In the present case, this translates into the desideratum of acquiring rational beliefs about the epistemic status of one's belief in God, that it is justified, warranted or constitutes knowledge. It is generally thought to be a good thing (from a cognitive point of view) to arrive at sound judgments about the epistemic status of our beliefs. By thinking over reasons for believing in God, and evaluating the adequacy of such reasons, the Christian begins to form

rational beliefs, not in God (that can be had without argument), but in the rational status of his belief in God.²⁵ Here faith moves toward an understanding of the rational grounds for theistic belief – toward the higher-level proposition that *belief in God is rational*. Such beliefs would be good confirmations of a faith Christians have received immediately from God.²⁶ So it seems that another function of an episodically inferential natural theology could be that of a consequent natural theology in which Christians mediate on the grounds for belief in the rationality of theistic belief. This higher-level, intra-faith function of theistic arguments seems quite compatible with Calvin's position on the immediate knowledge of God.

V. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have made an attempt to canvass two important considerations which bear on the plausibility of a mediate natural theology in John Calvin: (a) the nature of inferential knowledge and (b) the intra-faith function of natural theology. I have argued that there are good grounds for holding that there is at least implicit in Calvin a structurally inferential natural theology, and that even an episodically inferential natural theology would be compatible with salient features of the reformer's theology. Moreover, the latter contention is supported by Calvin's commitment (even if tepid) to evidences as 'confirmations' for the believer. This, I believe, provides an apt context for developing a function for natural theology within the context of faith, a calvinistic conception of faith seeking understanding. Perhaps arguments for the existence of God can strengthen the warrant of theistic belief for some people, or maybe such arguments can make a significant contribution toward satisfying the cognitive goal of reflective rationality with respect to belief in God.²⁷

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²⁵ This is not incompatible with believing in God in a basic way, such that it is formed and justified immediately. Believing that belief in God has some positive epistemic status is a reason for believing in God, and if a person has this belief she will clearly have a reason to believe in God. But having a reason to believe that *p* is compatible with either not believing that *p* or believing that *p* but doing so on some other ground. So a Christian can still possess a properly basic theistic belief, even if she believes that it is a rational belief because of reasons.

²⁶ I develop this line of reasoning in considerable detail in my 'Alstonian Foundationalism and Higher-Level Theistic Evidentialism' (forthcoming in *the International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*), and it is applied to Reformed Apologetics in my 'Bi-Level Evidentialism and Reformed Apologetics' (forthcoming in *Faith and Philosophy*).

²⁷ I would like to thank Robert Audi, Alister McGrath, Richard Swinburne and Nicholas Wolterstorff for commenting on earlier drafts of this paper.