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Should Christians do Natural Theology?

Andrew Moore
Regent's Park College, University of Oxford, Oxford OX1 2LB, UK
andrew.moore@theology.ox.ac.uk

Abstract

Natural theology is enjoying something of a resurgence at present but this article seeks to question its place in Christian philosophy and theology. Antecedent natural theology accepts that it is necessary for Christian beliefs to be rationally warranted. Romans 1:18ff. is often cited in favour of natural theology. However, examination of this text shows that Paul argues here on the basis of a prior revelation. Not only does he not endorse natural theology but what he does say implies that arguments for a God's existence are not likely to lead to the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Such arguments are in any case tainted by the noetic effects of sin. It is therefore not clear that these arguments lead to the God of Christian belief who calls us to simple discipleship. Consequent natural theology holds that Christians are under an epistemological obligation to their surrounding culture to show that they are reflectively rational. But the arguments put up for this by Michael Sudduth ignore theological arguments which should bear on Christian epistemology. Apart from God's self-revelation we find ourselves sceptics, and natural theology is unable to overcome this. Historical research has shown the damaging effects that arguing from nature has had on Christian theology. So, for both theological and historical reasons, Christians need not accept the epistemological obligations imposed on them by unbelievers which lead them to do natural theology.

Natural theology: antecedent and consequent

Until the latter part of 2004, Professor Antony Flew was amongst the best-known philosophical advocates of atheism. But with a blaze of publicity – especially in some Christian circles – it was announced that the aged advocate of the presumption of atheism had changed his mind and come to accept the existence of a God. Flew was persuaded to change his mind by some arguments of natural theology, particularly those developed by advocates of intelligent design.[1] Natural theology is undergoing something of a resurgence at present and one particularly sophisticated defence of it can be found in a series of articles by the American philosopher Michael Sudduth,

[1] For the story of Flew's conversion, see Antony Flew with Roy Abraham Varghese, *There is a God* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).

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who argues that natural theology is a proper, even obligatory, project for Christians.[2] It is with this question of the propriety of natural theology that this article is concerned.

What is natural theology? John Macquarrie's definition accurately captures the consensus: there is a knowledge of God 'accessible to all rational beings without recourse to any special or supposedly supernatural revelation'.[3] That is, natural theology proposes that we can come to know God by means of our own powers, unaided by revelation. Typically (and therefore in this article, I shall take it that) natural theology seeks to arrive at a knowledge of God by the accumulation of evidence from the natural world and/or rational argument.[4] A classic example of this is Paley's famous version of the argument to God from the design of the world.[5]

Natural theology has been put to several different uses in the modern period. The first is its use as what (following Sudduth's helpful typology) can be designated an *antecedent* rational basis for coming to believe in a God.[6] Professor Richard Swinburne puts the need for this as follows: 'what has worried ordinary people down the centuries is whether the evidence of human experience shows that the claim [that there is a God] is true or that it is false'.[7] Proponents of the antecedent use of natural theology think that belief in God should be accepted if it is rational and that it is rational only if it has been shown to be true – or, as in Swinburne's case, more probably

[2] Sudduth's arguments take up issues of particular concern to Protestants, especially those influenced by Reformed Epistemology. This article does not consider the often substantially different case for natural theology presented by Catholics, but references to some of the relevant literature are contained in the notes; some of my arguments are, I think, applicable to that case.

[3] In Alister McGrath (ed.), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 402.

[4] This view predominates in analytic philosophy of religion and it is the principal subject of this article; however, natural theology (under more or less different definitions) can also be approached as a properly theological project. It is the varying assumptions between these two which underlie many of the differences and misunderstandings between Protestants and Catholics on the topic. For important, if controversial, discussions of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth respectively, see: Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004) and Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2002).

[5] The most frequently cited portion of Paley's argument might better be read not so much as for God but as a *reductio ad absurdum* to the conclusion that to deny a cosmic designer is to advocate atheism – which, Paley believes, any right-thinking person should wish to eschew.

[6] See Michael Czapkay Sudduth, 'The Prospects for "Mediate" Natural Theology in John Calvin', *Religious Studies* 31 (1995), pp. 53–68, esp. p. 64.

[7] Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: OUP, 2004, 2nd edn), p. 1.

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true than not – by evidence and argument. Since the time of John Locke, philosophers of religion have also frequently argued that beliefs held on the basis of (putatively) divine revelation ought only to be held as such if they are in accordance with reason.[8] Thus, 'natural theology should not be regarded as a substitute for any particular revelation but as the necessary rational underpinning for the acceptance of any'.[9]

Second, Sudduth suggests that natural theology has been used to provide *consequent* rational warrant for belief in God. In this case the believer wants to show that the belief she already holds by faith is rationally warranted. On many contemporary philosophical readings of their work, this is what Anselm (in his Ontological Argument) and Aquinas (by means of his Five Ways) wanted to achieve.[10] Related to this, there is a third and less self-consciously philosophical use of natural theology and that is by Christians, who use its arguments as a means of trying to overcome their doubts and in order to become more confident in their faith. This article argues against the first two uses of natural theology. Since a Christian's confidence in their faith ought not to be grounded in a flawed theological strategy, the third use logically requires that there be no good theological reasons to reject the first two uses. But given that, as we shall see, there are good theological reasons for rejecting the first two uses, the third falls with them.

The language of obligation has been used quite a bit so far. There are two senses in which we might speak of obligation in connection with natural theology. First, there is the sense implied by the antecedent use of natural theology. Humans are, it is held, under an obligation to accept for belief only that which has rational warrant. As W. K. Clifford's frequently quoted dictum has it, 'it is always wrong, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence'.[11] Thus, non-believers argue that one ought only to believe in God if one has good evidence and argument for the belief; without them Christian belief is irrational. But, they go on, there is neither good evidence nor sound argument for belief in God, therefore (the quest for) belief should be abandoned. This is the challenge to which natural theology rises.

[8] For Locke's discussion, see his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, IV, xviii.

[9] Roger Trigg, *Rationality and Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 182.

[10] See, respectively, *Proslogion*, preface–ch. 4; *Summa Theologiae* 1a, 2, 3, but see also Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

[11] 'The Ethics of Belief', in his *Lectures and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1879), p. 186, quoted by Alvin Plantinga in Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (eds), *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 25.

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The second sense in which we might speak of an obligation can be illustrated by referring to a conversation with a friend and sparring partner of mine. 'I can't see why Christians should do natural theology', I said; he answered bluntly: 'Because it's biblical'. (A Catholic might have answered by quoting the *certo cognosci posse* asserted of natural knowledge of God by the First Vatican Council.) If the first sense of obligation has to do with the ethics of belief-in-general, the second is more distinctly theological. There is, the claim goes, not just an external obligation towards unbelievers to do natural theology, there is also an internal theological imperative. Both these will feature in the following discussion.

The God of the gospel and of the call to discipleship

The text most frequently quoted in biblical favour of doing natural theology is Romans 1:18ff. and quite often it is the only one cited from the canon as received by Protestants.[12] For example, the leading practitioner of natural theology, Richard Swinburne, admits that the Bible 'does not contain much in the way of arguments for the existence of God' (which, he believes, is because most of those for whom it was written already believed in God), but he does refer to this passage.[13] So, to examine the credentials of antecedent natural theology, let's look at Romans 1.

There are a number of points here. First, notice that Paul's thought about the possibility of a natural knowledge of God begins at v. 16 – not at v. 18, as Swinburne and other defenders of natural theology often suppose. If we read from v. 16, it is evident that whatever Paul claims about this possibility is predicated on the basis of what is *revealed* in the gospel, namely 'the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith' (v. 17).[14] Likewise, on the basis of the revelation of God's 'wrath' (v. 18), in the next verses Paul claims that a knowledge of God is available to human beings. So, even if Paul is reckoned to be arguing here for natural theology, it should be acknowledged that he is doing so on the basis of what he holds to be an antecedent revelation.[15] But this immediately puts in question the view that in these verses Paul positively endorses antecedent natural theology. Nor

[12] For a Catholic discussion of the biblical material, see Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1984), pp. 65–79.

[13] Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: OUP, 1981), p. 86.

[14] All quotations from the Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version.

[15] See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, pp. 118–21, and cf. *CD* I/2, pp. 306–7. Cf. Douglas Campbell's 'Natural Theology in Paul? Reading Romans 1.19–20', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1/3 (1999), pp. 231–52. For a Catholic view, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Edward T. Oakes SJ (San Francisco: Ignatius Books, 1992), pp. 311–25.

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does Paul endorse consequent natural theology: there is no evidence here that he thinks the revealed gospel needs to be shown to be rational by appeal to natural theology, nor again does he put up an informal natural theological argument to bolster a position of intellectual insecurity – real or imagined. On this latter point, he gives the reason himself: '*I am not ashamed of the gospel*; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith' (v. 16; emphasis added).

The second thing to note is that Paul's point in this section of his argument is that the gospel reveals that all human beings are the objects of God's wrath because 'by their wickedness [they] suppress the truth' (v. 18). Humans cannot claim that God's condemnation of them is unjust or plead the excuse that they did not know God. On the contrary, Paul holds that there is an objective knowledge of God's existence in creation and that God has revealed it:

> [W]hat can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse, for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. (vv. 19–21)

Even Karl Barth, renowned for his rejection of natural theology, admits that '[i]t is unquestionable that knowledge of God is here ascribed to man in the cosmos, and knowability is ascribed to God'.[16] The problem – and this is crucial against natural theology – is that this knowledge has not been subjectively appropriated in a way that could lead to life rather than to condemnation. That is, Paul holds that on the basis of what is known by revelation to be knowable of God in creation, humanity 'did not honour [God] as God or give thanks to him'. The gospel reveals the radical misdirection of the *sensus divinitatis*. It is not merely that a knowledge of God apart from revelation in Christ is salvifically impotent but that striving to attain such a knowledge harms our appropriation of that salvation which is available to us: it leads into self-deception about ourselves and God.[17] Rather

[16] Barth, *CD* II/1, p. 119, but cf. Hauerwas, *With the Grain*. On the apparent contradiction between Paul's affirmation of an objective natural knowledge of God in Rom. 1:20 and his apparent denial of it at 1 Cor. 1:21, see Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (London: SCM, 1980), p. 42.

[17] Von Balthasar states that to think that a knowledge of God apart from revelation could be appropriated 'would smack of Pelagianism' (*Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 322).

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than being moved to worship God by that knowledge which is ascribed to them, humans 'exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator' (v. 25).

Moreover, human beings show, by their suppression of the truth, that they are in opposition to God or, as Paul puts it in Romans 5:10, at enmity with God.[18] The consequence of this is not just that our orientation towards God has become warped and twisted so that we do not offer him the worship we should; it is, as he says in v. 21, that human thinking has become 'futile' and our 'senseless minds . . . darkened'.[19] Sin has noetic effects; it prevents our faculties of reasoning and cognition from working as God meant them to.

> [H]aving forsaken the truth of God, they turned to the vanity of their own reason, all the acuteness of which is fading and passes away like vapour. And thus their foolish mind, being involved in darkness, could understand nothing aright, but was carried away headlong in various ways, into errors and delusions. Their unrighteousness was this – they quickly choked by their own depravity the seed of right knowledge, before it grew up to ripeness.

Thus thought John Calvin – supposed by some contemporary philosophers of religion to be a defender of natural theology.[20]

It is curious that those who think that Romans 1 offers a biblical warrant for doing natural theology fail to take into consideration Paul's assertion concerning the noetic effects of sin. Had they done so, they might perhaps have been more cautious in their affirmations about the fruits of natural theology, for there remains the question as to *which* God the arguments of natural theology lead us. The arguments might give us reason to believe that *a* God exists, but it follows from Paul's concerns about idolatry that natural theology is an insecure basis on which to attempt to come to a knowledge of, or to be led to worship, the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Take, for example, one of Swinburne's definitions of the God of theism: God is 'a very powerful non-embodied rational agent'. What's the problem with

[18] Cf. Rom. 8:5–8.

[19] Cf. Eph. 4:17ff.

[20] *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948), pp. 72–3; cf. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, v, 11ff. For the view that Calvin endorses natural theology, see Sudduth, 'Prospects'. See also Paul Helm, 'John Calvin, the *Sensus Divinitatis*, and the Noetic Effects of Sin', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 43 (1998), pp. 87–107, and David C. Steinmetz, 'Calvin and the Natural Knowledge of God', in Heiko Oberman and Frank James (eds), *Via Augustini: Augustine in the Later Middle Ages, Renaissance and Reformation* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), pp. 142–56.

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that? In an important paper on 'Polytheism' George Mavrodes has pointed out that, as is not uncommon of natural theologians' definitions of God, Swinburne's 'makes no mention of goodness or any similar value or virtue' and that '[a] devil would seem to fit [this] description perfectly well'.[21] This is consistent with what Paul says in Romans 1:20: all that could be known from creation is God's 'eternal power and divine nature'. Nothing about the specific personal and moral character of the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ follows from that knowledge which Paul thinks is in principle available but which we do not let lead us to worship him as he is.

This point can be illustrated by two examples from those who spend much time in the natural world. The film *Touching the Void* blends dramatic reconstruction with interviews to tell the true story of the climber Joe Simpson's extraordinary survival of a sequence of accidents on an exceptionally bold and risky mountaineering expedition in the Andes. Simpson says that he was brought up a Catholic but is now an atheist. Nevertheless, speaking of his solitude, pain and suffering as he fought to survive, he acknowledges, 'You do begin to wonder whether there is some malign force out to get you'. The natural theology there is only implicit, but so far as his thought goes, it is fully consistent with Romans. At the least, an additional premise to the effect that, despite appearances to the contrary, the cosmos is ultimately benign and fit for human flourishing is required if natural theology is validly to conclude to a benevolent deity.

Or take the celebrated mountaineering photographer (and former philosophy student) Gordon Stainforth. In a magazine interview, he was asked, 'Can you define your relationship with the natural world?' His reply is interesting: 'I'll try: an inescapable relationship with an omnipotent intelligence; the nearest thing there is to a "god", a god of creation and creativity, and intelligent life: life-providing, life-enriching – often harsh, sometimes cruel – but without which, nothing.'[22] Hume could have agreed. 'You have no reason, on your theory, for ascribing perfection to the deity', Philo argues against Cleanthes' version of the design argument.[23]

[21] George Mavrodes, 'Polytheism' in Thomas Senor (ed.), *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith: Essays in Honor of William P. Alston* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 264. Mavrodes is referring to Swinburne's *The Concept of Miracle* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 50. For a more recent account of his views on the divine attributes, see Swinburne's *The Christian God* (Oxford: OUP, 1994), pp. 150ff.

[22] *The Great Outdoors* (April 2001), p. 136.

[23] David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. M. Bell (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 76. Hume is objecting only to the design argument and this leaves open the possibility that an argument of natural theology to the view that God is necessarily perfectly good might provide the needed assurance that God is not malign. Such

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Paul provides no ground for us to suppose that Christians ought to do antecedent natural theology. Not only does he not endorse it, his claims in Romans 1:18ff. imply that Christians should avoid it.[24] Moreover, although natural theology might lead us to believe *that* a God exists, since there is no *prima facie* reason to think that the God to which natural theology leads is the self-revealing, personal, loving God of the gospel, it is not clear that it will lead to a fiduciary relationship with (belief *in*) that God – which brings us back to Antony Flew. Sophisticated versions of the argument from design have been instrumental in bringing about his 'conversion'. Yet Flew is entirely consistent with that argument when he describes himself as a Jeffersonian deist. 'I'm thinking of a God very different from the God of the Christian', he says: 'there is no room for any supernatural revelation of that God or for any transactions between that God and individual human beings'.[25]

Further anecdotal support for my argument emerges from two collections of essays in intellectual autobiography by leading, believing philosophers. By no means do all of the contributors testify to a clear rejection of antecedent natural theology, but a surprising number do. William Alston thinks that there is a place for consequent natural theology but that nevertheless (and

arguments typically understand perfect goodness as 'doing the best thing that one can' (T. J. Mawson, *Belief in God: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), p. 57). But again the problem of creating Gods after one's own imagination arises: who are we to state what, from the deity's point of view, is the best for us? We might think that an unending life of bliss is the best for us and produce arguments to that effect that a God wills this, but perhaps this misrepresents the true (and by our lights, malign) deity whose view is that what is best for us is that we die cruel, lonely deaths.

[24] Compare Barth's fierce 'NO!: Answer to Emil Brunner', in Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1946), p. 75: 'If one occupies oneself with real theology one can pass by so-called natural theology only as one would pass by an abyss into which it is inadvisable to step if one does not want to fall. All one can do is to turn one's back upon it as upon the great temptation and source of error, by having nothing to do with it and by making it clear to oneself and to others from time to time why one acts that way.' This article might be seen as a warning of the presence of an abyss.

[25] The quotations are from an Associated Press news report <http://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory?id=315976> and an interview published in the Winter 2005 issue of *Philosophia Christi* <http://www.biola.edu/antonyflew/flew-interview.pdf>. More recently, Flew seems to have changed his position slightly. Although in *There is a God* he writes as a deist, he concludes, 'Is it possible that there has been or can be divine revelation? . . . [Y]ou cannot limit the possibilities of omnipotence except to produce the logically impossible. Everything else is open to omnipotence' (p. 213; cf. pp. 92–3).

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recalling Anselm),

> when faith is seeking understanding, the faith is already there, and philosophy comes on the scene too late to produce it . . . philosophical reasoning has very important roles to play in the religious life, [but] producing faith where it had been absent is not one of them. Certainly it was not in my case . . . my way back was not by abstract philosophical reasoning but by experience – experience of the love of God and the presence of the Spirit, as found within the community of the faithful. I didn't reason myself into the faith.[26]

The philosopher of science Frederick Suppe is more sceptical about the relationship between philosophy and faith. He and Bas van Fraassen, a fellow Catholic convert, 'agree that philosophy, especially philosophical theology, *is* hazardous to faith'. Of his own conversion, he writes that '[p]hilosophy is a terrible way *to* faith. God called me, and preempted the philosophical/theological issues. I obeyed. I had no choice . . . Philosophy increasingly loomed in my mind as a threat to faith if I allowed faith to be subordinate to it. Finally I said, "This time I buy the whole thing, without reservation or hesitation"'.[27] These are anecdotes, but, coming from distinguished philosophers, they might give pause to those Christian apologists who think that philosophers will be impressed by – perhaps even converted by – their forays into natural theology.

If the pre-emptive love of God is sufficient for philosophers, perhaps it should be given the benefit of the doubt as being sufficient to bring anyone to knowledge of him. There is an important point here. Use of natural theology in apologetics can reinforce the view that what humans most need is epistemic access to God. But in fact the gospel tells us that God has found access to us and that he has done so by slipping beneath the radar of our defences against him and even in defiance of our apologetic strategies. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 1:18ff. (a passage that does not receive much attention from defenders of a biblical case for natural theology), the gospel is folly to the world's wisdom but in God's wisdom it has made folly of that wisdom which believes the word of the cross to be utmost folly. God has come to us in humility; humble acceptance of his self-giving in Christ is the way to enter the kingdom.

[26] William P. Alston, 'A Philosopher's Way Back', in Thomas V. Morris (ed.), *God and the Philosophers: The Reconciliation of Faith and Reason* (Oxford: OUP, 1994), pp. 27–8.

[27] Frederick Suppe, 'Becoming Michael', in Kelly James Clark (ed.), *Philosophers who Believe* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 171, 170.

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A. J. Ayer once observed that vanity is the single most needful qualification to be a philosopher. Frederick Suppe likewise acknowledges that 'to tackle the big issues – full-blown metaphysical and epistemological systems' seems to require 'one giant ego to fuel the whole process . . . Yet, "if any man wishes to come after me, he must deny himself" (Lk 9:23; Matt 16:24; Mk 8:34). Is anything less than total obliteration of ego and shedding of personality enough? Philosophy thus remains a constant, profound threat to faith and humility for me'.[28] Suppe's observation is consistent both with Paul's understanding of the world's estimation of the rational status of the gospel and with Jesus' own words: 'I thank you, Father, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants' (Matt. 11:25).

Yet recall the sentence of Roger Trigg's quoted earlier: 'natural theology should not be regarded as a substitute for any particular revelation but as the necessary rational underpinning for the acceptance of any'.[29] Natural theology is therefore a necessary condition for the rational acceptance of Jesus' words as revelation. If so, on this view, would a child or a mentally handicapped person be disqualified from accepting the gospel? Not necessarily. They might perhaps be regarded as failing to accept it *rationally*. In which case, perhaps we should simply regard them as substandard models of discipleship and forget those inconvenient words of Jesus that 'unless you change and become like a little child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 18:3).[30]

Reflective rationality and the noetic effects of sin

But perhaps, having once entered the kingdom, there is a place for consequent natural theology. This position has been defended in a series of articles by Michael Sudduth. In an early one he proposed that consequent natural theology might be used to counteract the noetic effects of sin and thereby 'function as a "useful aid" or a "rational confirmation" for what the believer has taken on faith'.[31] He explains the first way in which natural theology might be thus used as follows: 'The noetic effects of sin, rather than present a reason against . . . 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

[28] Ibid., pp. 172, 174.

[29] Trigg explains that '[t]he whole point of an insistence on the role of rationality is that the objective nature of truth is upheld with its universal claim on everyone to believe it' (*Rationality and Religion*, p. 181).

[30] See Joan O'Donovan, 'Man in the Image of God: The Disagreement between Barth and Brunner Reconsidered', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 39/4 (1986), pp. 433–59.

[31] 'Prospects', p. 65.

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(or more evident).'[32] Although he does not develop this proposal in detail, his claim seems to be that natural theological reasoning helps confirm a believer's faith.[33]

There are a couple of points that might be raised here. The first concerns his rhetorical strategy: Sudduth seeks the authority of Calvin for his argument – it appears because he wishes to convince those of a Reformed outlook that they ought to be more accommodating to natural theology. Quite apart from the question as to whether Calvin does argue what Sudduth infers, since Sudduth does not offer any scriptural warrant for this use of natural theology, his appeal to Calvin as an authority in defence of its propriety could appear to favour the very traditionalism and scholasticism that the Reformers rejected.

A second and more substantive problem arises from the fact that, from a Pauline point of view, the mind is always affected by sin; human beings do not cease to be liable to suppress the truth and twist what they know to their own (idolatrous) ends after conversion.[34] Their cognitive apparatus is never so redeemed as to be fully functional in its Edenic state.[35] In defence of natural theology, Sudduth argues that 'if it turned out that the faculty of basic theistic belief formation were damaged such that another faculty or set of faculties causally generated or sustained theistic belief, it is likely that God would have adopted these as part of the design plan' whereby human beings can come to know him. 'This implies that inferential reasoning can easily be construed as at least part of our post-lapsarian design plan.'[36]

There are two problems with this argument. First, despite the concessive 'at least', no attention is given to the way in which God has made himself knowable in Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit. Thus Sudduth ignores the way in which God has met the problems caused by sin's damaging effects on the way in which we form beliefs about him. References to the role of inferential reasoning in the post-lapsarian design plan belong to speculative

[32] Ibid., p. 67.

[33] In his article 'Reformed Epistemology and Christian Apologetics', *Religious Studies* 39 (2003), pp. 299–321, Sudduth has developed this point, but in connection with apologetics in general rather than consequent natural theology; see pp. 314–15.

[34] For Paul, Christian cognitive proficiency consists primarily in a discernment of the will and call of God that leads to faithful witness and undivided worship. Rom. 12:1ff. suggests that this comes about by yielding one's embodied personhood to God, refusing conformity to this world, and being 'transformed by the renewing of [one's] mind'.

[35] Cf. Campbell, 'Natural Theology', p. 238. See also Merold Westphal, 'Taking St Paul Seriously: Sin as an Epistemological Category', in Thomas P. Flint (ed.), *Christian Philosophy* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1990), pp. 200–26.

[36] 'Reformed Epistemology', pp. 314–15. Sudduth is using Alvin Plantinga's epistemological terminology; see his *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York and Oxford: OUP, 2000).

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anthropology. Second, the argument rests on the assumption that our faculties of inferential reasoning are untouched by sin. But why should our inferential reasoning faculties be privileged in this way; humans might be rational beings, but why, and on what theological grounds, should we think that we can be as confident in them as a medium of our knowledge of God as Sudduth's argument requires? And why should we think that they are not, at least to some, perhaps vital, degree, incapacitated by sin? This especially given that Paul thinks that sin taints both our cognitive processes and the outputs of those processes. Since there is nothing in the post-lapsarian human state that is exempt from sin's effects it is not clear that inferential reasoning processes can be relied upon either to generate or to sustain theistic belief.

Nor is it only our cognitive faculties that do not function properly. For Paul the whole creation is disordered – 'subjected to futility' is how he puts it; it does not glorify God as it was meant to do.[37] In other words, what occurs on the input side of the cognitive equation does not function as it should either. The scepticism I am hinting at was succinctly expressed by Pascal in his *Pensées*:

> Not only do we only know God through Jesus Christ, but we only know ourselves through Jesus Christ; we only know life and death through Jesus Christ. Apart from Jesus Christ we cannot know the meaning of our life or of our death, of God or of ourselves.
>
> Thus, without Scripture, whose only object is Christ, we know nothing, and can see nothing but obscurity in the nature of God and in nature itself.[38]

Pascal's claim seems to be that we can *know* anything only on the basis of revelation in Christ and scripture's testimony to it.[39] His is not an absolute scepticism; it is scepticism about what we are able to know '[a]part from Jesus Christ'; he does not rule out the view that, aided by revelation, we can know God, ourselves and nature. Although the whole creation and with it human cognitive apparatus has been redeemed in Christ, we still await the consummation of that process. Even then, as now, Christian knowledge of

[37] Rom. 8:20; see further C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), pp. 411–12.

[38] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Books, 1995), §417. Pascal was by no means isolated as an early modern figure in his views of the noetic effects of sin; see Peter Harrison, *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007).

[39] Perhaps 'common grace' could be appealed to as a theological basis for our capacity to form beliefs that are adequate to get by in life – though with what degree of success would still be open to question.

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God and of his creation never ceases to be dependent on what he has revealed in Christ and endowed by the Holy Spirit.[40]

Thus, with respect to Sudduth's argument in favour of consequent natural theology, we may ask: if both the world and human cognitive apparatus is fallen, can Christians have adequate knowledge of the world for *a posteriori* inferences of sufficient security to be made from it which would make evident or more evident what they take on faith? To provide an argument that would increase the warrant of Christian belief Sudduth must presume that Christian knowledge of the world *is* adequate for such an argument to be made. But from the point of view of a reverent, theologically based scepticism, it is unclear how secure this presumption is. Recall the terms in which Sudduth states his case for this use of consequent natural theology: 'What would be evident to the mind unaffected by sin is not always evident to the mind affected by sin.' True, but not of mortals.[41]

But let us grant to Sudduth that a Christian's cognitive faculties *are* sufficiently redeemed for her to make her faith evident or more evident by means of consequent natural theology. The question then arises as to whether Sudduth's proposal doesn't reflect a prejudice against the view that faith is a cognitively adequate basis for an epistemic relationship with God? This is certainly hinted at when he writes of natural theology being a '"useful aid" . . . for what the believer has taken on faith'. But does faith require this kind of assistance in order to be cognitively adequate? The scriptural view seems to be that it does not: 'we walk by faith, not by sight' (2 Cor. 5:7). At best 'we see in a mirror, dimly' and have but partial knowledge; only at *to teleion* – 'the completion' – will we know fully, and even then, that knowledge will pass away in the fullness of love (1 Cor. 13:9ff.).[42] Paul presents no argument to the effect that we ought to seek to make what is known by faith evident or more evident than it is made by the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those whose relationship with God is founded upon love.[43] Indeed, if his treatment (in 1 Cor. 1:18–2:16) of the contrast between God's and the world's wisdom is any guide, Christians ought to be cautious lest, in seeking to make their faith more evident to themselves than God has

[40] See e.g. Rom. 12:1ff.; 1 Cor. 1:18–2:5; 2 Cor. 10:5; Eph. 1:3–14, 4:17–24; Col. 1:21ff., 2:6ff., 3:1ff.

[41] Cf. Paul Moser's argument that 'we do well to take the skeptical challenge seriously, in order to identify the limits of human reasoning. An important result will be increased wisdom and epistemic humility as well' ('Realism, Objectivity, and Skepticism', in John Greco and Ernest Sosa (eds), *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 90).

[42] Cf. Gal. 2:20.

[43] Cf. e.g. 1 Cor. 2:9–16.

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already made it through the weakness and folly of the gospel, they become over-confident in themselves and their own (intellectual) powers and fall into that perilous state described as 'boasting'.[44] This is not to say that Christians should not expect, and indeed seek, confirmation and strengthening of their faith – they should,[45] but the testimony of scripture is that it comes not by natural theology but as a result of the work of the Spirit and because they heed the Pauline writer's injunction to '[s]et your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth' (Col. 3:2). It seems therefore that Sudduth's first proposal for consequent natural theology is theologically otiose: it rests on a mistaken view of the creation, of human cognitive faculties, and of their output.

The basic problem with Sudduth's argument here, as elsewhere in his discussion of consequent natural theology, is that it is insufficiently informed by and coordinated with the specifically theological view of faith as a positive cognitive state produced in human beings by God. It seems to be coordinated with a generic epistemology that holds that any claim based on faith (in the specifically theological sense of that word) is *eo ipso* untrustworthy rather than with an epistemology specific to that community in which God is confessed, worshipped and proclaimed – the Church. This impression will be confirmed as we examine his second argument for consequent natural theology.

Sudduth claims that consequent natural theology enables Christians to achieve the goal of what he calls 'reflective rationality, which consists in coming to have rational beliefs about the epistemic status of one's beliefs'.[46] He summarises his main point as follows: 'Being [epistemically] justified is not merely a matter of the believing subject being in a certain good cognitive state vis-à-vis some proposition, but of the subject being aware that he actually is in that good cognitive state.'[47] Natural theology comes in here because it enables a believer to *show* that he is rational in believing what he does. Simply *being* rational in holding a belief is not enough.[48] Why? Because, since 'our idea of [epistemic] justification has developed within the social context of answering objections to beliefs, the ability to answer questions about the grounds of our beliefs and their adequacy will become quite important'.[49] Giving evidence and argument for our beliefs, even if we

[44] 1 Cor. 1:26–31.
[45] See 1 Cor. 14:20, Eph. 4:11–14, Phil. 3:15.
[46] 'Prospects', p. 67 (italics removed).
[47] 'Alstonian Foundationalism and Higher-Level Theistic Evidentialism', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 37 (1995), p. 37.
[48] For this contrast, see Sudduth, 'Reformed Epistemology and Christian Apologetics', pp. 311–12.
[49] 'Alstonian Foundationalism', pp. 37–8.

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are rational in holding them, is thus a way of showing to those who doubt them that they are indeed rational and of attaining for ourselves the state of being reflectively rational.

An initial concern with this argument has to do with the scope of the demand that Christians be reflectively rational.[50] To whom does it apply; does it include infants, the mentally handicapped, and unreflective believers, for example? Sudduth argues that such people can be said to hold their beliefs rationally but not in a *reflectively* rational way.[51] But this implies the view, which we have already seen to be theologically problematic, that these people's beliefs are in some way substandard or defective. There is a further, related difficulty. If reflective rationality can only be achieved by a few Christians and the majority are dependent for their being reflectively rational on 'trickle down' from the labours of the most intellectually gifted, what does this suggest for how we understand the relationship between faith and awareness of being in a good cognitive state? Sudduth does not discuss this relationship. However, it would be unhelpful if the argument for reflective rationality turned out to imply that those who are capable of reflective rationality occupied the position of an elite amongst the faithful[52] or if, like the argument for antecedent natural theology, it detracted from the simplicity of Jesus' warning that 'unless you change and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 18:3).

Sudduth tells us that the requirement that we be reflectively rational obtains especially for Christians because theirs is a 'type of belief which is subject to doubt by large segments of society'.[53] On this view, Christian beliefs might be rational for Christians, but the normative epistemological

[50] I am not arguing that Christians should not be reflectively rational, but against the suggestion that Christians are under a generic epistemological obligation to become so and that natural theology provides the correct materials and forms of argument for arriving at this state (cf. Sudduth, 'Prospects', p. 66). For example, Christians might show to themselves the reflective rationality of their faith by an Anselmian exercise in *fides quaerens intellectum*. For Anselm in the *Proslogion* this is an exercise of the sinful mind-at-prayer at work on revealed data and thus runs counter to the currently philosophically favoured priority of the *ordo cognoscendi* over the *ordo essendi*. And, further, since Anselm did not think that his faith required legitimation of the kind envisaged by Sudduth, it is doubtful whether Anselm's project of *fides quaerens intellectum* is correctly termed consequent natural theology. Wolfhart Pannenberg – who rejects natural theology – sees achieving a kind of reflective rationality as the task of dogmatic theology (see his *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), pp. 48–61).

[51] 'Alstonian Foundationalism', pp. 38–9.

[52] Cf. 1 Cor. 1:26ff.

[53] 'Alstonian Foundationalism', p. 38.

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demands of the culture in which they are embedded requires that they engage in the disciplines of reflective rationality.

But, we might ask, why should a Christian accept the epistemological demands of those who question or doubt their beliefs? It is one thing to explain patiently the substance of Christian belief and to try thereby to remove misunderstandings about it.[54] But it is another for Christians to accept that faith is epistemologically below par and that they are under an obligation to show that their beliefs are justified in the terms set by the dominant social context. Sudduth seems to be operating with a generic epistemological principle to the effect that members of a community who hold beliefs that are doubted by the majority in society are obliged to be able to present reasons for their beliefs that will pass muster at the bar of the majority view of what constitutes possessing adequate grounds for a belief.[55] But he does not offer any theological reason for thinking that Christians are under an obligation of this kind, and it certainly appears from Paul's argument at the beginning of 1 Corinthians that they need not accept any such obligation. Quite the contrary. Nor does Paul make conspicuous effort to defend the reflective rationality of resurrection belief later in the letter[56] – and this even though the earliest Christians were more oppressed and in a much smaller minority than they are today. I therefore suggest that there is good reason for Christians not to engage in exercises in reflective rationality which arise from a prior concession to the epistemological demands of surrounding culture.

There are also good historical grounds for thinking that the effects in practice of Christians' acceding to the demands of their culture have not been beneficial for the faith. It is not possible to go into detail here, but the story can be found in the books *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* and *Denying and Disclosing God* by Michael Buckley SJ.[57] The burden of both books is summarised in the

[54] This is the task of Christian apologetics – with which natural theology should not be identified. See Jean-Luc Marion's Pascalian meditation on 'Evidence and Bedazzlement' in his *Prolegomena to Charity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), pp. 53–70.

[55] See 'Alstonian Foundationalism', pp. 37–8.

[56] Although part of the tradition of resurrection belief to which Paul appeals in 1 Cor. 15:4ff. includes Christ's having 'appeared' to witnesses, it remains the case that their testimony only relates to Christ's appearing; it does not relate to the substance of resurrection faith, i.e. that 'Christ died *for our sins* . . . and that *he was raised* on the third day' (1 Cor. 15:3, 4; emphasis added). Paul's appeal to the witnesses' testimony therefore offers only circumstantial support for the reflective rationality of his belief that Christ's death and resurrection was the reconciling work of the triune God.

[57] *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1987); *Denying and Disclosing God: The Ambiguous Progress of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

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Preface to the latter:

> [T]he strategies of theism or religious apologetics in early modernity . . . led theologians to bracket whatever was of specific religious character or warrant and to rely upon the new and prospering sciences for 'the first foundations of religion'.[58] The implicit but unrecognized premise in such a strategy . . . was that the uniquely religious – in all its experiential, traditional, institutional, and social forms – was cognitively empty, that religion could not secure its own central assertions, and that it had to appeal to other sciences and disciplines for its foundations and even its methodology. It was only a question of time until the vacuity of the fundamental religious proposition appeared explicitly, when the various natural philosophies or sciences would indicate that they did not need a divine hypothesis to explain design in the solar system or organic nature. The more the physical-theologies had in previous centuries insisted that scientific discoveries were to furnish the evidence for the existence of God, the more they unwittingly promoted the inherent contradiction to their own proper and foundational assertion. Nature could no longer serve as religion's evidence. This dawning realization culminated with Paul d'Holbach, Denis Diderot, and the atheism in which Hegel would register them.[59]

The form of arguments for God's existence in early modernity provides a good example of the incoherences that arose from believers' attempts to provide warrant for their beliefs on the basis of the new sciences. Buckley describes this as follows: 'In their search for proof for divine existence, the theologians [of the seventeenth century who, Buckley holds, were of 'unquestionable orthodoxy'] had shifted from the god [sic] defined and disclosed in Christ and religious experience to a god disclosed in impersonal nature'.[60] 'Basically, the warrant for the personal god was the impersonal world: the strongest evidence for the personal god was the design within nature'.[61] They obtained their arguments from Cicero rather than Christian theologians. The contradiction Buckley detects in nascent theism between a personal god and an impersonal nature generated an internal incoherence within the Christian faith, for on the new view, '[t]he Christian god was

[58] The quotation is from Samuel Clarke, *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God* (London: Botham/Knapton, 1738, 9th edn), p. 126. By 'theism' Buckley has in mind traditions of thinking about God and religion whose sources lie in the work of Descartes, Malebranche, Newton, and Clarke; see *At the Origins*, p. 33.

[59] *Denying and Disclosing God*, p. xi.

[60] *At the Origins*, p. 350.

[61] Ibid., p. 343.

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to be justified without Christ'.[62] The account of the warrant of Christian belief that was being developed held that the grounds for believing in God were external to Christian belief and practice: 'One [became] convinced or informed of god "from the outside"' – that is, from nature and without appeal to christology or religious life.[63] As a result, Christianity allowed itself to be alienated from itself: 'theologians bracketed religion in order to defend religion'; 'Christianity, in order to defend its god, transmuted itself into theism'[64] which dialectically generated modern atheism. This process affected not only the way in which Christians argued for their position, it also and most significantly affected Christian understandings of God: 'Mersenne's god', writes Buckley, 'is the comprehensive, transcendent, and pervasive explanation of all phenomena'.[65] The Christian concept of God had been abstracted from the person of Christ and supplanted by the concept of a God who was the explanation of nature. The parallels with contemporary analytic philosophy of religion are obvious.

Buckley's charge is that Christians relinquished their own intellectual and cultural territory and heritage with the result that, since then, they have felt that it is necessary to make accommodations with or to seek legitimation from secular culture. Since the Enlightenment, Christians have generally accepted unquestioningly that the onus of proof is on them to establish that their views are warranted – that they possess 'reflectively rationality' – in the face of the perception that science is the acme of intellectual respectability.[66]

Buckley's summary of what happened in the seventeenth century is as true now as it was then. He writes:

> The theists and putative atheists had to find a common ground, and that ground was neither the person of Jesus nor the individual or communal experiences of religion. Common ground was provided by the cosmos; the world bore witness to god. Let nature, then, whether in the inner orientation of things or in the ontological structure of ideas, constitute the evidence for the existence of god; let philosophy be the discipline by which this evidence is analyzed.[67]

[62] Ibid., p. 346.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid., pp. 345, 346.
[65] Ibid., p. 344. Buckley argues that Marin Mersenne (well-known to philosophers for his correspondence with Descartes) and Leonard Lessius were the original movers of the intellectual shift he charts.
[66] See *Denying and Disclosing God*, pp. 1–24.
[67] *At the Origins*, p. 345.

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Buckley's painstaking and carefully argued historical research confirms Pascal's prophetic insight when, three and a half centuries before Buckley, and when Christians and non-believers were just beginning to take to the lists against each other, Pascal wrote:

> I shall not undertake here to prove by reasons from nature either the existence of God, or the Trinity or the immortality of the soul, or anything of that kind: not just because I should not feel competent to find in nature arguments which would convince hardened atheists, but also because such knowledge, without Christ, is useless and sterile . . . All those who seek God apart from Christ, and who go no further than nature, either find no light to satisfy them or come to devise a means of knowing and serving God without a mediator, thus falling into either atheism or deism, two things almost equally abhorrent to Christianity.[68]

Buckley observes that had seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Christians recognised the denial of God as itself a *religious* rejection of Christian belief then, instead of using philosophical arguments as a putative common ground with atheism, they might have rejected the new movement as the unbelief that it was and returned to the proper tasks of theology.[69]

It would be ironic if contemporary Christians were to add a further twist to the dialectical relationship between theism and atheism by using natural theology to achieve that reflective rationality which, it is mistakenly supposed, their needing to legitimise their beliefs requires. We might live in a culture that ridicules, or is indifferent to, Christians' epistemic claims, but perhaps the best way to win acceptance for them is not to internalise the contradiction between the two and adopt a defensive stance. Perhaps rather it is to have the confidence imparted by properly theological convictions and accept that there is a humanly unbridgeable gulf between belief and unbelief.[70]

[68] *Pensées*, §449.

[69] For the impact of the new epistemological settlement on theology, see Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), esp. pp. 126–37.

[70] I am grateful to the Philosophy and Theology Seminar of the Society for the Study of Theology, to the Systematic Theology Seminar at Oxford University, and to Peter Kail and Tim Mawson for helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

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