
Is Calvin a Friend of the University? Calvin, Academia, and the Reconciled Mind*

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It is doubtful whether any single human activity has been responsible for causing greater polarization, oppression, hostility, war, and "ethnic cleansing" than "god-talk" of one form or another. This is borne out not only by recent history in the Balkans, the Middle East, South Africa and Northern Ireland but also by the harmful effects of religion on the lives of ordinary people as these have been exposed, for example, by feminist critiques. No one who engages in the task of academic theology can ignore the extent to which theological assumptions and claims can lead (and have led to) profoundly destructive social dynamics.¹

With this in mind, what is to be said of the contribution of John

* To be asked to give this lecture at McGill University, whose impressive contribution to Calvin scholarship is exemplified not least in the person of Dr. John T. McNeill, was a particular honour. An alumnus of McGill who studied at the Presbyterian College in Montreal, Dr. McNeill was responsible for producing the now standard scholarly edition of Calvin's *Institutio*. This has now served a generation of theologians and there is no sign yet that it is likely to be replaced. I must also express my indebtedness to the Erasmus Institute, University of Notre Dame, where I was appointed Senior Research Fellow and, thereby, enabled to carry out the research published here.

Calvin to the business of God-talk? The answer presents us with a paradox. Theological insights originating from his theology served to undergird the profound influence of the Puritan fathers on Canada's neighbour south of the border, shaping and informing the American Constitution. They sought to emphasize that the individual is created by God as a rational being who can read the "book of nature" and God's purposes inscribed within it by the "light" of natural reason. The Puritan Calvinists were led, thereby, to affirm three basic human rights: (1) the right to life, (2) the right to liberty, and (3) the right to the pursuit of happiness.

Their political legacy is simple and influential: human beings can discern that it is a law of nature that "all men are created equal." Precisely this served to underpin the civil rights movement in the early '60s. Martin Luther King and the oppressed blacks knew, during their struggle against segregation, that they had the declared intent of the American Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights on their side.

When we turn, however, to the impact of Calvinism on South Africa, the paradoxical nature of the contribution of Calvin becomes manifest.² The primary responsibility, of course, for the tragically ill-conceived dream of Afrikanerdom and thus the emergence of the apartheid system lies unquestionably at the feet of the British. It was Britain's greed and the appalling oppression and brutalization of the Afrikaners in the Boer War—not least, their institution of the "concentration camps" (a phenomenon invented by the British) and their consequent responsibility for the deaths of the thousands of women and children who died of disease within these camps—that led ultimately to the self-protective measures of the Afrikaners and, consequently, the establishment of apartheid. It is also the case, however, that the long term effects of the evils perpetrated by the British would not have resulted in the apartheid regime (and all the oppression that attended it) had it not been for the perceived support of Calvin's theology. The Calvinist theological epistemology generated a hermeneutic of the natural order which furnished the convictions of the white *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk* (the Cape Dutch Reformed Church) and the *Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk* that their

support for state policies of apartheid is in accordance with the will of God and Scripture.³

Consequently, on the one hand the Calvinist tradition established the conceptual framework for the American Constitution, its principles of justice and system of rights thereby offering the legal support for the civil rights movement which finally led to the end of segregation in the United States. On the other hand, however, the same Calvinist theology was arguably responsible for the immense daily suffering, oppression and disenfranchisement of around 24 million blacks and coloureds in South Africa over several decades this century. In short, Calvinist theological epistemology, combined with a doctrine of creation, led in the two different contexts to diametrically opposite conclusions. For the Puritans, all people can perceive by the light of natural reason that God has “created all men equal.” For the Afrikaners, we can perceive by the light of natural reason that God has, to all intents and purposes, not “created all men equal.” We might also add that, in both contexts, it was widely held by Calvinists that the light of natural reason declared that men and women were not created equal!

With this in mind, I would now like to turn to another observation which serves to direct us to the heart of the paradox. It is significant to note that whereas, prior to the 1950s, no work on Calvin’s doctrine of the knowledge of God had ever appeared in English, in 1952 two major books were to emerge on the subject within just a few months of each other. These were: E. A. Dowey’s lengthy tome, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology*, and T. H. L. Parker’s *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God: A Study in the Theology of John Calvin*. So why was it that Calvin’s epistemology should suddenly spring to centre stage? The reason is related to the events which led to the reign of German National Socialism, the nature of the religion implicated in it and the failures of the church in what was, after all, a devoutly religious land and the home of the Protestant Reformation. That the church had not more effectively recognized and then opposed the rise of such a demonic regime posed the question, Why? As the post-war church began to reflect on these matters, the full extent of the courageous theological discernment of the Confessing Christians began to

be appreciated—a profoundly impressive witness which Hitler failed to extinguish. By the early 1950s the socio-political relevance of the Barmen Declaration of 1934 was seen to have been vindicated by the tragic failures it foresaw and which it opposed on the basis of its christological mandate. In theological circles, Karl Barth's famous *Nein!* to Emil Brunner which had thundered from Basel in that same year, 1934, was beginning to echo around the corridors of academia and demand to be considered in depth.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Emil Brunner had found himself increasingly interested in the question of natural theology. His concern, as a Swiss academic, was to analyse and articulate the point of connection (*Anknüpfungspunkt*) between revelation on the one hand and three other areas: (a) the universe as God's creation; (b) the existence of human beings as created in the image of God; and (c) the ordering of human life and society—in particular, the institutions of marriage and the state traditionally conceived as ordained by God. As Alasdair Heron puts it, "these three together marked out the 'natural order', marked and disfigured, certainly, by sin and fallenness, but also upheld by God's preserving providence" (1980, 84–88).

Within Brunner's approach one detects the concern of a devoutly Christian academic, who is determined to avoid any risk of bringing the church into disrepute by refusing to affirm the integrity of academia. Brunner wanted to suggest not only that the two realms were compatible but, by way of his eristics, that culture was a *praeparatio* or propaedeutic for Christian faith. Whether this was to be interpreted charitably as suggesting a tactical apologetic concern or, less so, as denoting a loss of evangelical nerve, Karl Barth would have none of it. Not only was it, to Barth's mind, theologically ill-conceived, but Brunner's interest in the notion of the orders of creation offered wholly inadequate defences against the risks Barth associated with the rise of the German Christian Movement (Heron 1980, 85–86). It all too easily opened the door to a situation whereby "culture" or, more accurately, our prior reading of our culture and its agendas, became the foundation for the interpretation (or reinterpretation) of God's dealings with the world—hence the age-old tendency of apologetics to become a capitulation to contemporary cultural dictates. For Barth,

if the day has dawned and Christ is the light of the world, no other option is open to the Christian but to interpret the totality of human existence—culture as well as political life—from that centre and from that centre alone.

But what has this to do with the sudden flurry of activity in Calvin scholarship that emerged in the early 1950s? The reason is simple. Central to the debate between Brunner and Barth lay a divergence with respect to the interpretation of Calvin. Both were Reformed and both sought Calvin's support for their respective positions. Brunner saw Calvin as endorsing the fact that there is a "general revelation" of God in the ordering of the created universe, the subjective correlate of which is humanity's being created as bearer of the image of God—our essential humanity, reason and capacity for ethical judgement.⁴

Brunner therefore claimed support in Calvin for the nature-grace model. Since grace does not destroy nature but perfects it, nature and, by implication (although Brunner seeks to offset this by appealing to his formal/material distinction), its self-understanding and dictates are assumed to have a foundational role in the interpretation of "grace." The interpretation of God's special revelation in Christ and the Scriptures presupposes God's general revelation manifest in the natural order and human nature's ability to read this—"the creation of the world is at the same time a revelation, a self-communication of God."⁵ This is interpreted (albeit inadequately) by the light of natural reason and our capacities for ethical reflection and judgement which, though damaged, should not to be considered as having been destroyed.⁶

What is particularly pertinent here, however, is Brunner's exposition of Calvin to add support to his own views. He writes, "nature is for Calvin both a concept of being and a concept of a norm, and over and over again we meet with the expression: *natura docet, natura dictat*, which for him means almost the same as: God teaches—i.e., the will of God, which has been implanted in the world from creation, the divine rule of the world, teaches. It is therefore quite natural for Calvin to use the concept of the *lex naturae* and also that of the order of creation in the same sense.... The will of God, imprinted upon all ex-

istence, implanted in it from creation, can therefore be recognized as such" (1946, 37).

Barth vigorously opposed the whole direction of Brunner's thought while simultaneously challenging his interpretation of Calvin. Barth saw Brunner's whole approach as compromising God's revelation in Christ and opening the door to making foundational recourse to sources and authorities independent of God's revelation in Christ. In the Germany of the time, the risks of circumscribing special revelation within the context of a prior reading of God's general revelation, be it for the Aryan people as a whole or the German Volk in particular, were unambiguously clear for anyone with any prophetic insight.

For Barth, the Word of God establishes its own "point of contact" in the Spirit. God's once and for all Word to humanity creates its own space and there is absolutely no justification for choosing to begin from some other centre or for seeking to predetermine in advance (and thereby condition) the shape or form or content of its affirmations. In short, we must interpret God and God's purposes for humanity (be it for Germans, Jews, as also Afrikaners, women or men) not in the light of our prior rendering of God's general revelation in the natural order—interpreting nature out of our own unenlightened readings of it—but in the light of the one through whom and for whom all things were created, in the light of the incarnate Logos in whom the fullness of the Godhead is disclosed. When day has broken and the light has dawned, we do not continue to try and find our way by the reflected light of the stars! To put it more bluntly, to refuse to think out of this centre constitutes a *de facto* denial of that centre. "Natural theology has to be rejected *a limine*—right at the outset. Only the theology and the church of the antichrist can profit from it. The Evangelical Church and Evangelical theology would only sicken and die of it" (Barth 1946, 128).

All of this poses the question as to how we read Calvin and who was interpreting him aright. If Brunner was correct, then the Afrikaner supporters of apartheid could also be argued to have been interpreting him correctly—in which case, Barth's criticism of Brunner becomes a prophetic condemnation of the dangers of Calvin's own theology as witnessed in the tragedy of South Africa. On the other

hand, if Barth was reading him correctly, then Calvin anticipated the theology of the Barmen Declaration, as also that of Douglas Bax, John de Gruchy, Charles Villa-Vicencio and the other opponents of apartheid who sought to apply Barth's reading of Calvin in that situation.

So will the real John Calvin please stand up!

Support for Brunner's interpretation is argued on the basis of Calvin's introduction of the phrase "duplex cognitio" in the final 1559 edition of the *Institutes*—that is, that there is given to humanity a two-fold knowledge of God. On the one hand, God shows himself to be Creator and, on the other, God shows himself in Christ to be Redeemer. This twofold revelation gives rise, it is suggested by Edward Dowey and supporters of Brunner, to a two-fold epistemic access to the divine purpose: in creation and thus "general revelation" on the one hand, and in salvation or "special revelation," on the other.

Barth, by contrast, found an altogether different emphasis in Calvin's approach—one which, if correct, would serve seriously to undermine any appeal (as we find it, for example, in Afrikaner Calvinists) to the notion of generally revealed orders of creation or, indeed, spheres of sovereignty (as advocated by Kuyper) as these were used either to isolate the significance of the person of Jesus Christ for interpreting the state or, indeed, to justify the endorsement of separate ethnic development and thus apartheid.

So which was right? Clearly, a comprehensive discussion and analysis is beyond the scope of this article. However, T. H. L. Parker's magisterial analysis of Calvin's doctrine of the knowledge of God suggests that any straightforward appeal to the notion of a *duplex cognitio* to endorse, in the name of Calvin, veridical epistemic access to God's purposes in creation independently and in advance of any christological control can only be highly problematic in the light of Calvin's express claims in this regard.

Calvin on the Knowledge of God and Creation

For Calvin, God reveals himself in his works (*opera Dei*). That is, God freely bestows in these works testimonies to his own glory and creative goodness. This stands in radical contrast to the scholastic Thomism of the period, as it can be traced to Cardinal Cajetan's interpretation of Aquinas, which argues that knowledge of God is possible because every agent acts in a manner similar to itself (*Omne agens agit simile sibi*). Since God is an agent, there will be an essential and necessary similarity between all God's works and God himself. Calvin repudiates this kind of foundationalist predetermination of the necessary implications of interpreting God as creative agent.⁷ In radical contrast to this, he affirms that the created order holds forth the glory of God, not because God is necessarily pegged out for view, as it were, but because, and to the extent that, God freely determines to place within it pointers to his glory. The Lord places "the fabric of the heaven and earth before our eyes, rendering himself in a certain manner present in them. For his eternal power and Godhead (as Paul says) are there exhibited (Rom. 1:20)" (*Comm. on Gen.*, CR 23:7; cited in Parker 1952, 17). And why does God do all this? In order that he may "invite us to the knowledge of Himself." As Parker emphasizes, "This He did freely; He need not have left these marks upon His work" (18–19).

In expanding this Calvin uses two significant metaphors. Creation has impressed on it "certae notae" (certain marks/indicators) of his glory and workmanship such that the universe becomes a "mirror" in which God paints a "portrait" of himself (*effigies Dei*) and through which we can see the face of God and discern his nature and character.⁸ Another metaphor he uses describes the creation as the garment of God, the "visible apparel" of the invisible God: "For God, by other means invisible clothes Himself, so to speak, with the image of the world, in which He would present Himself to our contemplation" (*Comm. on Gen.*, CR 23:7; cited in Parker 1952, 19). God does all of this *so that he might be known*. The created order is to be seen, therefore, as a kind of "semiotic system"—a system of signs or pointers, freely placed in creation and which communicate to us God's nature

and purposes.⁹ All this, however, requires a subjective correlate—and God, indeed, provides precisely this. God implants in the human creature what Calvin refers to as the *divinitus religionis semen* (seed of religion) and that is a kind of sense, the *sensus deitatis* (sense of the divine) which would lead us to find God in his works (Parker 1952, 30–32).

To use the language of contemporary Reformed epistemologists, we are “hard-wired” in such a way that we can read the signs freely placed in the created order. You might say, in the jargon of today, we are given the necessary ROM chips required to compute the theological data programmed into the contingent order and thus to read God’s declaration of his glory and character.

For Calvin, the combination of God’s free placing in the created order of testimony to his glory and character and the parallel placing in us of a sense of the divine should lead humanity to a veridical perception of the divine purpose. But there is, for Calvin, one decisive conditional. Humanity *would* have been led by these means to a proper and reliable knowledge of God and his purposes “si integer Adam stetisset,” namely, if Adam had remained upright or whole, that is, if humanity’s integrity had been retained. As it is, however, the impact of human sin and alienation¹⁰ on our minds and upon our understanding means that this is to no avail. And what now results from that “primal and simple knowledge to which the very order of nature would have led us if Adam had remained upright”? “In this ruin of mankind no one now experiences God either as Father or as Author of salvation or favourable in any way, until Christ the Mediator comes forward to reconcile him to us” (*Inst.* 1.2.1). As for divinely implanted subjective correlates—the “seed of religion” and the “sense of the divine”—they no longer succeed in directing us, let alone allowing us to see the face of God in the created order. Indeed, in their corrupt form they serve to lead humanity into idolatry and a distorted reading of the natural order, that is, of the semiotic system that God has placed before us. Consequently, we misinterpret God’s purposes (for Jews and Aryans, for blacks and whites, for women and men) due to the blinding and distortive effect of epistemic alienation. In sum, “men, who are taught only by nature, have no certain, sound

or distinct knowledge, but are confined to confused principles; so that they worship an unknown God" (*Inst.* 1.5.12).

Does this mean that the revelation of the *opera Dei* has no validity or function? Only the negative one of depriving us of any excuse for sin: "But whatever deficiency of natural ability prevents us from attaining the pure and clear knowledge of God, yet since that deficiency arises from our own fault we are left without any excuse" (*Inst.* 1.5.15; cf. Parker 1952, 34).

The Role of Scripture¹¹

Where the revelation which belongs to the *opera Dei* has a negative function, Scripture has a positive one. The Scriptures constitute a school wherein, Calvin suggests, the Holy Spirit is the schoolmaster and believers are the pupils—*Scriptura duce et magistra* (guide and teacher; cf. Parker 1952, 44). Without it we fall into error (*Inst.* 1.6.3) for it communicates what the revelation in creation cannot (1.6.4). Referring to the function of the Law, he writes, "since God in vain calls all peoples to himself by the contemplation of heaven and earth, this is the very school of God's children" (1.6.4, my emphasis).

But wherein lies the authority of this school? The authority resides quite simply, for Calvin, in "the eternal Wisdom residing in God from which proceeded all the oracles and prophesies" (*Inst.* 1.13.7). Behind the *verbum Dei* is the *Sapientia Dei*, or the *aeternus Sermo Dei*—as Parker points out, "the *verbum Dei* is the temporal form of the *Sapientia Dei* or *aeternus Sermo Dei*" (1952, 64). And it is as we interpret Calvin's views here, that we begin to understand the hermeneutic function of his *Institutio*.

For Calvin, it is in the incarnation of the Word that we find the hinge or cotter-pin that integrates the eternal Wisdom of God and human knowing. In his *Commentary on John*, he speaks of a *duplex relatio*—a twofold relation. The Word of God is eternally *apud Dei*, while, on the other hand, it is the revelation of God to humankind. It is the eternal Wisdom and Will of God and secondly, the clear expression (*effigies*) of his purpose. And here the notion of the "effigy" or image re-emerges: "for, as speech is said among men to be the image of the

mind, so it is not inappropriate to apply this to God, and to say that He expresses Himself to us by His Word spoken" (*Comm. on John* 1.1; cited in Parker 1952, 64).

What Parker shows to be so significant here, however, is the way Calvin resurrects the words "mirror" and "portrait" (*effigies*). Whereas their application to the created order is seen to have no real significance for our knowledge of God because of sin, Calvin now takes them and reinterprets them christologically—and with penetrating force. The incarnate Word becomes the mirror in which we see reflected fully and effectually a portrait of God (*effigies Dei*). As such the incarnate Word also constitutes the image of God. But, as Parker points out, there is a profound and highly significant difference. Whereas the universe is the mirror of God insofar as it bears the marks of his workmanship, Jesus Christ is the mirror of God (the *speculum Dei*) because he is in himself, as the eternal Word made flesh, truly the *imago Dei* (Parker 1952, 75). In the incarnate Word, therefore, we have not only the hands and feet which are the most we could discern from the works of God (54), we have the very *heart* of God (58). At the very centre of Calvin's thought, therefore, there stands an unambiguous reaffirmation of the *homoousion*—the focal, critical control on God-talk—and the ultimate warrant for it is the incarnation. Without it we simply do not have reliable or, indeed, valid grounds for theological claims, not least, about the nature of God's purposes for the created order.

Moreover, as Parker points out, it is significant that Calvin is never more emphatic in this than in his *Commentary on Genesis*: "Nothing shall we find, I say, above or below, which can raise us up to God, until Christ shall have instructed us in his own school." And again, "As soon as ever we depart from Christ there is nothing, be it ever so gross and insignificant in itself, respecting which we are not necessarily deceived" (*Comm. on Gen.*, CR 23, 9–10; CTS 1, 63–64).

So how is God known and recognized in Scripture and in the Word which grounds Scripture and to which Scripture also bears witness? Clearly, it is through being "schooled in Christ" and thereby through the reconciliation of our minds by the Spirit. Revelation to sinful humanity remains, therefore, an act of grace which recognizes

no dichotomy between revelation and reconciliation! Knowledge of God takes place by virtue of the Spirit's taking the human being who is *alienati mente* and, by the Spirit, reconciling her to know the Father, the very heart of God in Christ. To cite Parker: "He does not show God to men capable of the *visio Dei*, but opens their eyes that they may see Him. He is not a mutual acquaintance bringing into renewed fellowship two friends who have lost touch with each other, but a Mediator of the grace of God to rebellious sinners, destroying that rebellion, leading them back to God and reconciling them to Him. We cannot consider the revelation of God in Christ apart from, or, indeed, in any way as different from, the reconciliation of God in Christ" (1952, 81).

Faith, conceived in these terms, provides *cognitio*—knowledge of God confirmed to our hearts by the Holy Spirit. This of course remains for Calvin through a mirror darkly and therefore "in a manner present and in a manner absent." In expounding this, the mirror and image metaphors return yet again: "Our faith therefore at present beholds God as absent. How so? Because it sees not His face, but rests satisfied with the image in the mirror; but when we shall have left the world and gone to Him, it will behold Him as near and before its eyes. Then we shall see God not in His image, but in Himself" (CTS 1:430–31; cited in Parker 1952, 116).

The whole thrust of this is that, ultimately, an appropriate teleological reading of the contingent order is inconceivable for Calvin independent of faith in Christ. The semiotic system which interprets the divine purpose in the created order simply cannot be read except in and through the Word conceived not in terms of a *duplex cognitio*—a twofold knowledge of God in creation and redemption—but in terms of the *duplex relatio* of the incarnate Word.

To the extent that Calvin remains consistent in his thinking here, the political ramifications are unambiguously clear. There is no ground for seeking to interpret God's purposes vis-à-vis the Aryans or the Jews or blacks or whites, or women or men or any other group independently of reference to the one Mediator, in whom there is neither Jew nor Aryan, black nor white, male nor female. There is no sphere of sovereignty that does not require to be interpreted out of

the heart of God which is revealed in Christ alone. If our claims are not true to the *logos theou*, they cannot be assumed to constitute “theology,” that is, valid God-talk, in any way at all. Veridical interpretation of the *telos* of the created order occurs exclusively in the context of the reconciliation of our minds in and through Christ.

To this extent Barth was closer to Calvin than Brunner. Calvin would have endorsed the Barmen Declaration and emphatically not, therefore, the Ansbacher Ratschlag which was endorsed by conservative evangelical Christians in that same year (1934) in opposition to Barmen’s unambiguous affirmation of the significance of the Lordship of Christ over all regions of human life.

But this immediately poses a difficult question—the question, indeed, in our title. Does this not take the interpretation of the contingent order out of the university and into the church? And is the effect of this not to undermine the independent role and status of the university as offering valid interpretation of the created order? One tradition of Calvinist thought, represented by Van Til, has the effect of doing precisely that.¹²

Van Til writes: “there can be no other point of collision between [faith and reason]...than that of head-on collision” (Van Til 1950, 19); “When...the non-Christian scientist discovers truth, this is not because of, but in spite of, his own theory of being and of knowledge.”¹³ The apparent success of modern science should not blind us to the fact that there is nothing here except brute factuality, raw, uninterpreted, meaningless and isolated facts, each one a realm to itself.¹⁴ As David Willows comments, “Van Til’s basic position then is clear: the ‘schematism’ of faith is alone sufficient to give ultimate account of the facts of science” (1999, 198). This seems to present us with a problem. If we do not take the noetic effects of sin sufficiently seriously, Calvin’s interpretation of God’s witness to himself in creation opens the door to the kinds of abuse of religion we find not only in Afrikanerdom but in Nazi Germany. If, on the other hand, we avoid these risks by emphasizing the significance of the noetic effects of sin and epistemic reconciliation through Christ as the condition of interpretation, then we would seem to find ourselves questioning the very grounds of the existence of the modern academic university,

treating contemporary academic culture, with all its staggering explanatory successes, with Van Tilian derision.

So how far can Calvin—humanist and outstanding scholar that he was—be considered a friend of the university now that he has been seen to have an answer to the abuses of Protestant thought to which we have referred? Do his emphases endorse or undermine the independent claims to objectivity and academic freedom definitive of the academy?

Two kinds of answer may be provided—a historical one and a theological one. Let us first consider his historical legacy to the academy. In recent years, a wealth of publications have emerged exploring the extent of academia's debt to Calvin. Building on studies by Pelseneer, Merton and others, Reijer Hooykaas provides evidence, in his modern classic, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science*, of the extent of the commitment and, indeed, contribution to the new science by Calvinists. This is reflected, for example, in the listings of the membership of various international scientific societies (such as the Académie des Sciences) together with extensive analysis of the dominance in the Royal Society in England of Puritan Calvinists (who constituted a minority of the population)—all of which suggest a remarkable preponderance of Reformed Christians among the early modern scientists. This cannot simply be dismissed, moreover, as reflecting a partisan reading of history. Matthijssen is just one of the Roman Catholic sociologists whom Hooykaas cites as supporting similar claims made by Weber and Merton (Hooykaas 1972, 98–105). Attention is also drawn to the domination by Protestants of botany and zoology: Brunfels, Bock, Fuchs, Clusius, Lobelius, Conrad Gesner and others (99). So why this remarkable coincidence between the “new doctrine” introduced by Calvin and the “new learning”—the origins of modern science in the academy?

Various explanations are offered. For Hooykaas one explanation is the Reformed notion that nature is to be conceived as a book inscribed with the glory of God. Kepler wrote in 1598 that astronomers were priests of God with respect to the book of nature and that the glory of God declared by this should be the object of their intellects. In the Netherlands Confession nature is described as being “before

our eyes as a beautiful book, in which all created things, large and small, are as letters showing the invisible things of God." The same conception of the "Two Books" (nature and Scripture) and the parallelism between them is found in the work of Francis Bacon.

A second factor was the new emphasis on the priesthood of all believers which encouraged the laity to become "priests of the book of nature" (Gunton 1998, 110–11). But there must be more to the picture. Harold Nebelsick argues that a further essential ingredient was the belief that creation was contingent without thereby being defective or less than really real. The essential property of creation was not its contingency but its rationality, what they termed its "contingent rationality." This divinely bestowed rationality inhered in the spatio-temporal and not merely behind and beyond it (Gunton 1998, 112–13). This in turn resulted from an emphasis on God's free creativity rather than mere causal agency. In addition to these three factors, however, there is the subjective correlate of this notion of "contingent rationality." T. F. Torrance (1965, chap. 5) argues that this is found in two features of Calvin's epistemology which integrated his humanist background with his interpretation of the incarnation.

First, there was Calvin's concept of "intuitive, immediately evident, knowledge" as opposed to deductive or abstractive knowledge. This Torrance describes as the direct knowledge of an actually present object, naturally caused by that object itself and not by another. God was perceived as having created an inherently rational, contingent order in such a way that it could be interpreted "out of itself" and "in its own light" with the consequence that things could be known as they are in and of themselves (T. F. Torrance 1965, 79). Second, Torrance argues that, under the influence of John Major, Calvin epitomized a move away from interpreting knowledge of God in terms of visual or ocular analogies to those of hearing—*intuitiva auditio*. The Augustinian and mediaeval ideal of beatific vision was displaced by verbal and auditive analogies. The theological impetus here was the notion of an intuitive knowledge of God where God is heard by the intellect in and through his uttering himself in his own intelligibility to us in the Word and the witness to that Word which

is the Scriptures. This same intelligibility is bestowed in creation, in the contingent order—the book of nature has its own inherent intelligibility which can be heard, that is, intuited by the human intellect through studying it. Hearing, it is argued, offers a more profound analogy of the relationship of our minds to the rationality and intelligibility of things than visual analogies (87–88).¹⁵

In sum, Calvin's understanding of the nature and character of knowledge of God by the created mind, and his emphasis on the contingency of the created order and thus its distinctness from God, may be argued to have served the emergence of the empirical sciences in academia.

Is this to suggest, however, that Calvin should be regarded as the friend of academia as we now have it? To the extent that research seeks to interpret the contingent rationality, beauty and intricate order of contingent reality, Calvin surely remains an unqualified friend. To the extent that research serves humanity, its inalienable dignity and sanctity as steward of creation, be it in medicine, the social sciences, psychology or whatever, the whole thrust of Calvin's emphases would be in support.

To the extent, however, that academia strives to go beyond its remit, to transgress beyond the boundaries of science and seek to be more than priests of creation, then the picture changes. And never before have these issues been more significant than they are today—where the ethical “ought” (a category which postmodernity would suggest to be at risk without theological warrant) is increasingly receiving *de facto* definition. Scientific research becomes a virtue of such proportions that “can be researched” becomes “ought to be researched.” Indeed, even to question whether certain research “ought” to be carried out is seen as impeding the advance of science and human discovery. One suspects that certain forms of experimental genetic manipulation, Calvin would interpret as an alienated usurping of the divine prerogative and thus idolatrous curiosity. his critical control, here, would not be religious conservatism, an idolatry of the past, nor, indeed, the category of “nature,” but, rather, Christology.

And it is here we see the limits of the question in our title. To ask how far Calvin is a friend of the university all too easily suggests that

we judge what is good or valuable or true in terms of consistency with the ideals of contemporary academia. The theologian who has not collapsed under the weight of his own false modesty should surely formulate the question the other way round! The more interesting, and even relevant, question here concerns how far the university may be deemed to be the friend of Calvin?

Two leading academics who have dared to broach this topic are Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff—not only are they two of North America's most respected philosophers but they remain unashamed representatives of the tradition of Calvin. In his Stob lectures given at Calvin College and Seminary, Plantinga drew specific attention to two profoundly influential facets of contemporary academic life which cannot be allied with Calvin (Plantinga 1989-90, 9–17).

First, there is what he calls Perennial Naturalism. According to this view, “there is no God, and we human beings are insignificant parts of a giant cosmic machine that proceeds in majestic indifference to us, our hopes and aspirations, our needs and desires, our sense of fairness, or fittingness” (Plantinga 1989-90, 9–10). This, he points out, goes back as far as Epicurus and Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* and is explicit in much modern and contemporary philosophy (John Dewey, W. V. O. Quine, Wilfred Sellars, Donald Davidson). It is also implicit in diverse theological writings (Teilhard de Chardin, Barbour, Peacocke). In the biological sciences, however, it is widely assumed to be the essential “given” underlying scientific research. Its more explicit advocates, of course, would be Richard Dawkins, author of *The Blind Watchmaker*, and Richard Dennett, author of *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*. We could also mention its influence in other areas, such as social anthropology.

Indeed, in Plantinga's recent book, *Warranted Christian Belief*, he makes reference to Herbert Simon, who won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1978 for his work on bounded rationality (Plantinga 2000, 193 n. 32). Simon is a leading academic social scientist and author and one of the founding fathers of modern research in artificial intelligence. One of the puzzles he has sought to address is why certain people do not behave in the ways in which evolutionary theory would

dictate, namely, the effective spreading of one's genes. How, for example, do we explain the Mother Teresas of this world? His answer is framed in terms of two principles: (1) docility: some people are docile and tend to do what they are encouraged to do (that is, they do what their peers tell them to do without adequately questioning it!); and (2) limited rationality; namely, as Plantinga explains, stupidity! (2000, 214 n. 21). In terms of his naturalistic account, therefore, morally virtuous or self-denying people like Mother Teresa are an unhappy quirk of fate. Fortunately, their insufficiently evolved and evolving genes will be condemned by the evolutionary process for their docile gullibility and stupidity and purified out of the human race!

The advocacy of naturalism in the university serves ultimately to anaesthetize the academic domain against the notion of an objective sphere of value, of rights, of the categories of dignity. If "perennial naturalism" is widely influential in the natural sciences, a second pervasive influence is more specific to the humanities and the social sciences. This is what Plantinga refers to as Enlightenment humanism, Enlightenment subjectivism, or creative anti-realism (not insignificantly, it is entirely without advocates in the natural sciences!). This style of approach contrasts sharply with naturalism. Traceable to Immanuel Kant, creative anti-realism suggests that we human beings are fundamentally responsible for creating the structure and nature of the world—it is we who are ultimately the architects of any rationality apparent in the universe (Plantinga 1989-90, 14). To attribute the possession of properties to objects, is to attribute the projection of properties onto these objects by the creative activity of human subjectivity. This is not only the case with colours and smells but even space and time are subjective forms of intuition and have no objective reference. As Plantinga summarizes the position, "Such fundamental structures of the world as those of space and time, object and property, number, truth and falsehood, possibility and necessity—these are not to be found in the world as such, but are somehow constituted by our own mental or conceptual activity.... Were there no persons like ourselves engaging in noetic activities, there would be nothing in space and time, nothing displaying object-property struc-

ture, nothing that is true or false, possible or impossible, no kind of things coming in a certain number—nothing like this at all” (14–15).

This approach has infiltrated academia far beyond the realm of pure philosophy. The view that reality is a construct—either of individuals, or groups of individuals, or participants in shared language games—is widespread, not only in literary theory (Roland Barthes and Stanley Fish), history, social anthropology but also, unfortunately, theology and New Testament research (Bultmann, Kaufman, Wiles, Cupitt).¹⁶ The idea that reality is a human construct inevitably leads to the view that the truth is also a human construct.

One particularly influential leading contemporary who embodies creative anti-realism is Richard Rorty, who argues that the truth is “that with which your peers will let you get away with saying”—a position echoed by a theological advocate of “non-realism,” Don Cupitt, for whom truth is to be conceived as “the state of play.” The Rorty-Cupitt position has some interesting implications. For example, it means that if you do something wrong, the best thing you can do is to lie about it. That is because if you can persuade your peers that it never happened, then it becomes true that it never happened, in which case it did not happen, which means you did not do anything wrong—and which means, moreover, that you are not lying! This is the kind of advice that adults should communicate to their children!¹⁷

To use another illustration, when the Gestapo murdered the Jews, their propaganda machine set out to deny that atrocities had been committed and there were sophisticated attempts to destroy the evidence. If they had been successful and if there had been no witnesses left, then it would have become true that they did not murder the Jews, in which case the Jews would not have been murdered and they would have been telling the truth. The same applies to the role of women. In a society in which women are oppressed to the extent that they have self-denigratory beliefs, then these beliefs that they are inferior are simply true and it is right, good, true and moral to treat them and describe them accordingly and erroneous, immoral, false and inappropriate to do the opposite!

That creative anti-realism has become so popular lends support

to the view promulgated by Alvin Plantinga (and Nicholas Wolterstorff) that the Reformed tradition needs to recover its commitment to the two pillars of Christian scholarship (cf. Plantinga 1989-90). First, anyone who has sat at the feet of Calvin should appreciate the need for social, cultural and intellectual criticism; not least, with respect to the kinds of claim whereby people arrogate to themselves divine authority in actually determining what ought to be the case and making ultimate metaphysical or ontological claims of a naturalist or any other variety. No one who has any sympathy at all with the direction of Calvin's thought can do other than to insist that this is integral to the health of the university if not to its very *raison d'être* as an academy committed to the pursuit of truth.

If vigorous intellectual criticism of this kind is one pillar, its corollary is what Plantinga calls active "Christian scholarship from a specifically Christian perspective" (1989-90, 40). One of the confusions that has dogged the history of Christianity has been the dichotomy between faith and reason—something that rarely constrains the fideistic commitments of the disciples of naturalism or creative anti-realism. The result is that Christian academics too often think that what they claim to know about God and God's purposes, about what it is to be human, and so forth, should not impact in any way on their activities in the academic sphere. But this seems puzzling. Is it not the case that in academic activity we make use of all that we know in our attempt to understand our various fields? If so, it seems counter-intuitive that academics should claim that they believe in the existence of God and the creative divine purpose; that we are given access to this in revelation; that this tells us something about the very *telos* of humanity and society, what is right—and yet think that this is irrelevant to the task of social anthropology, or moral philosophy, or politics, or the scope of biological sciences, et cetera. Or perhaps we might take the view that reason should put faith to one side, as the papal encyclical (*Fides et Ratio*) suggests, lest we convert every proper domain into theology. For Calvin this would seem odd—like suggesting we play ice-hockey but refrain from using our eyes. One could do that, but why would anyone want to do so?

Calvin's vision of scholarship is one in which we are first and

foremost members of the Church and second, members of the academy. His view is also one, however, which suggests that when one is the first, not only does this not undermine scholarly participation in the latter but it enhances it. To believe in the reconciliation of our minds in Christ is to desire to see the academy be what it is in truth—the servant of the contingent rationality of the created and human orders.

This is emphatically *not* to suggest that Christians should arrogantly assume that, on account of their faith, they have a monopoly on the truth and thus do not stand to be critiqued by or learn from others—from agnostics, atheists and even from anti-realist philosophers. It is to believe, however, that underlying and informing the dialogue there is and remains a pressure of interpretation which is *from* the truth of God and God's self-revelation in Christ rather than *to* the truth of God and that this is, at the very least, likely to enhance our understanding and interpretation of contingent reality. It remains, of course, the (often challenging) task of the Christian academic to understand and interpret precisely how this does impact on her or his field of research.

Fifty years ago, in the same year that the Faculty of Religious Studies was founded at McGill University, Richard Niebuhr gave his famous lectures on "Christ and Culture." The inadequacy of his categories, most notably his hypostatization of culture and the failure to take proper account of theology's hermeneutic task in interpreting what exactly we mean by "culture," has seriously undermined the debate. Calvin shows us that the primary task of the Christian academic is a differentiated *interpretation* of the culture of academia in dialogue with its participants. It is in this context that it can make a differentiated *contribution*—conceived as having both a positive and critical dimension. Any such contribution is grounded, not in so-called "natural theology" but in and through the understanding that stems from the reconciliation of our minds in and through Christ Jesus to interpret God's purposes vis-à-vis the contingent order. Consequently, Calvin takes us well beyond Niebuhr's schematization by suggesting that the contribution of the Christian theologian to academic culture is neither simply to oppose, nor to side-step, nor to

capitulate to, nor simply to transform it, as if “culture” denotes some self-contained and circumscribable entity. Rather, the primary task of theology is to help articulate the true nature of human creativity and discovery in the context of contingent reality, and thus what “culture” is. It is thus and in that light that the Christian can contribute humbly and critically to the creative and heuristic vocation of humanity—yet with all the courage of her convictions thinking first and foremost from that centre which is that kinship which the Eternal has established with humanity in time. It is in and through being faithful, therefore, that the Christian helps the university to be what it is in truth—and, in our present climate, to help it to recover its true agenda and vocation as an *universitas* in the context of the threat to its very enterprise stemming from the contemporary ideologies of relativism, scepticism, anti-realism and naturalism.

In this way, Christian theology can help to safeguard objective, empirical and intellectual engagement with the contingent rationality of the created order not only in the natural sciences but in the human sciences as well. For Calvin, we are called by the reconciliation of our minds to be priests of creation and servants of truth within academia. And never before has the contemporary university so needed friends like John Calvin!

Notes

¹ In a chapter on “Religion’s Violent Accomplices” in his recent book, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation*, R. Scott Appleby discusses the way in which “Religion can provide a supernatural justification for mundane ethnic claims, lending them an eternal (and thus non-negotiable) aura” (2000, 61). Rather than breaking down ethnic barriers, it too often “fortifies them” (62)—a phenomenon he then goes on to document in an analysis of the role of religion in the Bosnian war.

² I owe these observations to my father, Professor James B. Torrance.

³ On the appeal to Scripture in this context, see Combrink 1986. That this “Scriptural” endorsement of apartheid was once the official stand of the (white) Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk on race relations is reflected in its 1975 report entitled “Ras, Volk en Nasie en Volkeverhoudige in die Lig van die Skrif” (also published in English under the title, “Human Relations and the South African Scene in the Light of Scripture”). In this it is argued that “ethnic diversity is in its very origin in accordance with the will of God for this dispensation” (13). As J. Botha argues, in

"apartheid theology the idea of the diversity of nations as a given of Creation (and thus God's will) functions...to shape the entire reading of the Bible" (Botha 1988, 92–93). John de Gruchy (1979, 71, 201–2) also discusses these issues. Even more perceptive with respect to the underlying theological influences, however, is Douglas Bax's useful summary and evaluation of the NGK report, *A Different Gospel: A Critique of the Theology Behind Apartheid*.

⁴ Distinguishing between the formal and material dimension to humanity's bearing of the image of God, Brunner writes, "This *function* or calling as a bearer of the image is not only not abolished by sin; rather is it the presupposition of the ability to sin and continues within the state of sin. We can define this by two concepts: the fact that man is a subject and his responsibility. Man has an immeasurable advantage over all other creatures, even as a sinner, and this he has in common with God: he is a subject, a rational creature. The difference is only that God is the original, man a derived subject. Not even as a sinner does he cease to be one with whom one can speak, with whom therefore also God can speak. And this is the very nature of man: to be responsible" (1946, 23). Consequently, he argues, the "*quid* of personality is negated through sin, whereas the *quod* of personality constitutes the *humanum* of every man, also that of the sinner" (24).

⁵ "Wherever God does anything, he leaves the imprint of his nature upon what he does. Therefore the creation of the world is at the same time a revelation, a self-communication of God. This statement is not pagan but fundamentally Christian. But nowhere does the Bible give any justification for the view that through the sin of man his perceptibility of God in his works is destroyed, although it is adversely affected.... A being which knew nothing of the law of God would be unable to sin.... Responsibility of the sinner and knowledge of the will of God as the source of law... are one and the same thing.... Scripture clearly testifies to the fact that knowledge of God is somehow also knowledge of God" (Brunner 1946, 25).

⁶ It should be noted here that, as Heron reminds us, Brunner wanted to reject any independent natural theology and certainly did not wish to bypass special revelation (Heron 1980, 87).

⁷ Elsewhere, I have argued that the Thomist argument from the *omne agens* principle risks contravening Aquinas's other principle, *Deus non est in genere*, given that the force of the argument seems to rely on God's belonging to the class of agents of whom certain universal truths necessarily apply. Cf. my *Persons in Communion: An Essay on Trinitarian Description and Human Participation*, chap.3.

⁸ "The symmetrical arrangement of the world is like a mirror in which we may contemplate the otherwise invisible God" (*Inst.*1.5.1); "The Lord clearly represents both Himself and His immortal Kingdom in the mirror of His works" (*Inst.* 1.5.11).

⁹ I owe this analogy to Professor Christoph Schwoebel.

¹⁰ Calvin's phrase here, *alienati mente*, is taken from the *Vulgate* translation of the Pauline expression *echthroi te dianoia*.

¹¹ The exposition that follows is based on T. H. L. Parker's magisterial and immaculately documented exposition of Calvin's doctrine of Scripture in the third chapter of *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, entitled, "Knowledge through the Word."

¹² Here I am utilizing the doctoral research of my student, David Willows, shortly to be published.

¹³ Van Til 1950, 9; cf. Van Til 1956, 285: “[progress in] science is absolutely impossible on the non-Christian principle.”

¹⁴ On the importance of a unifying principle for effective learning, see Blake 1976, 107: “A teacher who concentrates on facts at the expense of universals will likely concentrate on the regurgitation of these facts at the expense of understanding them. They will quickly be forgotten, not being tied to any universal organizing principles.”

¹⁵ The implication, borne out by experience, would be that hearing someone’s words and self-portrayal would provide one with far profounder insight into who and what they are than simply looking at their outward appearances!

¹⁶ The roots of its influence in theology and biblical scholarship has been effectively traced by Johnson (1974) and Thiselton (1980, cf. chap. 8) to the influence of Marburg Neo-Kantianism of Cohen, Natorp and others.

¹⁷ This is drawn from unpublished lectures given by Alvin Plantinga.

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