

## IS THERE A REFORMED OBJECTION TO NATURAL THEOLOGY?

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**I**n discussing the so-called Reformed objection to natural theology, Michael Sudduth concludes:

So is there a good Reformed project objection to natural theology? No; at least not from among the objections examined in this book. To be sure, there are plausible objections to particular models of natural theology within the tradition. As we have seen, some of these objections converge on the pre-dogmatic model of natural theology. But the project of natural theology, suitably reconstructed on Christian presuppositions and carried out as part of the dialogue of dogmatic theology, is altogether another matter. I cannot see that any of the objections examined in the book provide a good objection to this approach to the project of developing rational arguments for the existence and nature of God. (pp. 227-28)

Sudduth's book *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology*, like so much of theological philosophy today, takes its cue from Alvin Plantinga; the title of the book itself came from an article written by Plantinga.<sup>1</sup> Unlike Plantinga, however, Sudduth has included a good bit of material—both historical and theological—in order to bolster his philosophical analysis and critique. For those interested in the question of natural theology and its relationship to Reformed theology and apologetics, this is the book to read. It is unique both in its scope and its depth.

### I. Analysis

#### 1. Introduction

In order to do justice to Sudduth's argument, it seems best to work through his argument in some detail, so that we can focus this review on the overall case that Sudduth makes for the legitimacy of the project of natural theology. I will attempt, therefore, to set out the central contours of Sudduth's case, after which I will offer some of my own reflections, from the perspective of a Covenantal approach to apologetics.

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<sup>1</sup> Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 54 (1980): 49-63.

Before getting into the substance of the book, one minor alteration must be broached here, as it will affect the rest of what is said. Typical of philosophy in the analytic tradition are symbolic locutions that are meant to clarify or summarize a given proposition, concept, or point. These can be helpful (and will be used below) and there can be no question that analytic philosophers are quite fond of trotting them out aplenty in virtually every essay.

However, it seems a good argument can be made that these “symbolocutions” can sometimes tend to confuse rather than clarify. In this book, Sudduth wants to make a distinction between the natural knowledge of God that is gained without any conscious process of reasoning,<sup>2</sup> on the one hand, and theistic arguments, on the other. Instead of calling them “natural knowledge of God,” and “theistic arguments,” Sudduth denominates them as natural theology  $\alpha$  and natural theology  $\beta$ , respectively. There may be good reasons for doing this, not the least of which is the fact that the Reformed objection is to natural theology. Thus, distinguishing two kinds of natural theology may make some sense. However, given that the standard articulation of these two aspects of our knowledge of God seems fairly straightforward, we will simply use the typical phrases in place of Sudduth’s  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ . So, unless otherwise noted, when the subject matter discussed or cited below is an intuited or implanted natural knowledge of God, we’ll denominate it as “natural knowledge of God” (instead of his natural theology  $\alpha$ ) and when the subject matter is theistic arguments, we’ll denominate it as “theistic arguments” (instead of his natural theology  $\beta$ ). It seems to me this change of locution is clearer and should produce less confusion with respect to his arguments.

Next, there are a number of distinctions that are laid out in the opening chapters which need to be kept straight as the argument progresses.

Sudduth is aware of the vast differences that obtain among those who call themselves “Reformed.” Initially, the adjective “Reformed” is taken to include most Protestant denominations, as well as those who engage the Protestant tradition. In the process of his analysis, however, there is a particular focus on the Dutch Reformed tradition, in its various modes, with some scrutiny given as well to Barth and Brunner. To his credit (and rarely seen in philosophical discussions of this sort) Sudduth recognizes that Barth and Brunner, though interacting with Reformed theology, stand in a radically different tradition; they should not be included in the tradition of Reformed orthodoxy (e.g., pp. 46, 113). They are brought into Sudduth’s discussion due to their own respective analyses of natural theology in the Reformed tradition.

With respect to natural knowledge of God, the typical understanding of such is that it does not arise as a result of some conscious process of reasoning. This does not, according to Sudduth, mean that there is no inference involved. Given this natural knowledge of God, theistic arguments involve “the conceptual clarification and reflective development of natural knowledge of God, a kind of

<sup>2</sup> Specifically, Sudduth includes in natural theology  $\alpha$  both immediate, intuited knowledge as well as knowledge arrived at via basic, inferential processes.

formalization of an innate or spontaneously acquired knowledge of God. Hence, we can think of theistic arguments as grounded in the natural knowledge of God. Moreover, to the extent that Scripture itself affirms the natural knowledge of God . . . , we could view theistic arguments as a clarification, development, and defense of a datum of Scripture. In this way, the project of theistic arguments would have biblical warrant, in much the same way that the systematic development of other biblical doctrines is warranted" (p. 4).

This leads to an important and helpful distinction that Sudduth initially makes between what he calls a dogmatic approach to theistic arguments, on the one hand, and a pre-dogmatic approach, on the other. He notes that such a distinction has not been made clear in the literature (p. 6), by which I take him to mean the more current, twentieth-century literature in philosophy of religion. The dogmatic approach is the use of theistic arguments within the context of Reformed theology; the pre-dogmatic approach sees "theistic arguments as something external to dogmatic theology, a *purely rational prolegomenon* to our *rational foundation* for dogmatic theology" (p. 5, my emphasis).

When discussing the "Reformed objection to natural theology," it is useful to be clear, not only on what the objection is, but on what kinds of objections there are. Sudduth distinguishes between what he calls "model-specific" objections to theistic arguments and a "project objection." Sudduth's concern is primarily with whether or not there is a project objection to theistic arguments, the kind of objection that would dismiss *any* theistic argumentation as illegitimate. Of less concern is whether or not there are model-specific objections to theistic arguments—the kinds of theistic arguments that are meant to provide a rational ground for theology, for example. Model-specific forms of theistic arguments include a pre-dogmatic model, a dogmatic model, and an apologetic model. So, while some may have objections to theistic arguments, as those arguments are incorporated into some specific *model*, such objections do not necessarily provide a *project* objection to theistic arguments. "Project objections' to theistic arguments are those that object to all models of theistic arguments; model-specific objections are those that object to one or more of the dogmatic, pre-dogmatic or apologetic models of theistic arguments" (p. 54). That is, rejecting a particular use of theistic arguments does not thereby reject every use of such arguments. Sudduth's main thesis is that there are no Reformed project objections to natural theology. Just for the record, and before we explore the details of his discussion, I think he's right.

## 2. *The History*

Much of the material in the historical section of the book is quite helpful as a concise summary of the Reformed tradition's view(s) on theistic arguments. It is not necessary to repeat those here. There are, though, a few points worth noting. First, "By the end of the second phase of early orthodoxy the apologetic use of theistic arguments was deeply entrenched in Reformed theology" (p. 22). Sudduth also rightly points out that "[t]he Reformed countered the Arminian

position, not by denying natural theology, but by underscoring the limits imposed by the effects of sin on the powers of human reason and consequently the non-saving character of all natural knowledge of God. In fact, when Socinians rejected natural theology, Reformed theologians were quick to challenge their denial" (p. 43)!

Even Jonathan Edwards, who, Sudduth points out, clearly stipulates that "we first ascend, and prove a posteriori, or from effects, that there must be an eternal cause . . . , " nevertheless maintains "that in fact all such knowledge depends on our moral temperament or the proper orientation of our passionate nature. . . . So like many other Reformed thinkers, he viewed natural theology as operating most effectively in the context of the Christian life" (p. 29-30).

There was, however, a shift in thinking about theistic arguments that took place beginning (roughly) in the eighteenth century. According to Sudduth, the shift was "from Scripture to reason as the *principium cognoscendi theologiae*. Consequently, natural theology acquired the status of a prolegomenon to revealed theology" (p. 31). This latter historical point is central and important in this entire discussion. According to Sudduth,

This pre-dogmatic function of natural theology stands in sharp contrast to the way theistic arguments were utilized in sixteenth- and many seventeenth-century dogmatic systems. As illustrated earlier, when theistic arguments were presented in earlier dogmatic works they were typically placed under prolegomena or the *locus de Deo*, both of which exhibit *dependence on and integration with Scripture and the Christian doctrine of God*. . . . While this did not exclude the apologetic use of theistic arguments, it prevented them from developing into an *autonomous system of rational theology prefaced to dogmatic theology*. (p. 32, my emphasis)

Not only does Sudduth see Edwards as an exception to this shift, he also notes that some Reformed theologians in the nineteenth century escaped this Enlightenment ethos as well. Notably, Hodge

regarded theistic arguments as primarily establishing truths about the nature of the Being whose existence is grasped by an intuitive perception. The arguments are significant even if they are not the initial source of belief in the existence of God, for they help unpack what lies enclosed in the intuitive grasp of God's existence. Hodge says, "The arguments are not designed so much to prove the existence of an unknown being, as to demonstrate that the Being who reveals himself to man in the very constitution of his nature must be all that Theism declares him to be." (1.203). He and A. A. Hodge emphasized the cumulative nature of the arguments. (p. 37)

So also for the Southern Presbyterians, and for Shedd and Girardeau. They all "emphasized that theistic arguments are not the source of belief in God, nor do these arguments presuppose that God's existence is in some sense initially doubtful" (p. 39). In the Dutch context, "Bavinck and Kuyper each affirm the importance of developing theistic arguments, and even using them in Christian apologetics. They simply deny their role as a pre-dogmatic foundation for faith. They do not reject them *per se*" (pp. 46-47).

It seems to me that Sudduth's distinction between the dogmatic and pre-dogmatic use of theistic arguments is not only conceptually helpful, but in general is an accurate way to ferret out some of the primary historical differences that obtain with respect, not necessarily to the *structure* of theistic arguments per se, but to their intended use and place for the Christian. For example, according to Richard Muller:

These early Reformed statements concerning theological presuppositions focus, virtually without exception, on the problem of the knowledge of God given the fact not only of human finitude but also of human sin. The critique leveled by the Reformation at medieval theological presuppositions added a soteriological dimension to the epistemological problem. Whereas the medieval doctors had assumed that the fall affected primarily the will and its affections and not the reason, the Reformers assumed also the fallenness of the rational faculty: a generalized or "pagan" natural theology, according to the Reformers, was not merely limited to nonsaving knowledge of God—it was also bound in idolatry. *This view of the problem of knowledge is the single most important contribution of the early Reformed writers to the theological prolegomena of orthodox Protestantism.* Indeed, it is the doctrinal issue that most forcibly presses the Protestant scholastics toward the modification of the medieval models for theological prolegomena.<sup>3</sup>

Historically, therefore, there is, in the nascent stage of the Reformation, a significant and radical shift with respect to theological prolegomena, generally, and natural theology, more specifically. Because of the Reformed notion of the noetic effects of sin (of which more below), the Reformed saw a need to adjust the medieval notion of natural theology such that its conclusions, apart from the Christian context, were basically idolatrous. That is, the best that one could do, outside of Christ, with theistic arguments was to conclude for *a* god, who was not the true God of Christianity. This, I think, Sudduth captures well in his dogmatic/pre-dogmatic distinction. Just how exactly this might relate to the apologetic use of such arguments we will discuss in our "Reflections" below.

Complicating the issue, however, is not simply that the early Reformers, looking backwards, were compelled to revise the standard medieval prolegomena. It was also the case, looking forward, that the all-too-persistent pest of rationalism pressed its way back into Protestant discussions and articulations of prolegomena, and of natural theology. So, says Muller,

Changes in content and approach in Reformed theology generally and in the prolegomena in particular during the course of the *eighteenth century* help elucidate the reasons for the *decline of Protestant orthodoxy* and, moreover, for the interpretation of it as a form of rationalism at the hands of nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers. Whereas the high orthodox theologians maintained the ancillary status of reason and philosophy and *did not perceive a need either to buttress or to preface their theologies with a rational or natural theology prologue*, this approach did become a standard pattern among the nominally orthodox thinkers of the late orthodox era.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 3: *The Divine Essence and Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 108; my emphasis.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 122; my emphasis.

Muller goes on to point out the transition that took place, in Germany and elsewhere, from the orthodoxy of F. Turretin, through the rationalizing tendencies of Pictet and J. A. Turretin, to the “necessity of a natural theology grounded in the proofs to any system of revealed theology” in Wolf and Wyttenbach.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the dogmatic model of natural theology, including its apologetic use, is bounded on both historical sides by a rationalism that, in principle, undermined that model. This, perhaps more than any other datum, accounts for what has come to be known as “the Reformed objection to natural theology.” But this should not detract from the fact, as Sudduth argues and as Muller explains, that there was, is, and can be a proper and biblical *use* of theistic arguments within a robust, orthodox Reformed theology.

Sudduth points out that, with respect to the Reformed, the classic text in discussions of this sort, Rom 1:18ff., was rarely taken to affirm theistic arguments. Rather, the text is typically taken to affirm that all men have true knowledge of God by way of natural revelation. That natural knowledge *may* be “confirmed, clarified, and developed by theistic proofs” (p. 52). This confirmation, clarification, and development of theistic proofs, based as they are in the natural knowledge of God, includes an apologetic function.

Theologians of the early and high orthodox period recognized a defensive use of theistic arguments to *refute objections* made against the faith. This is entirely compatible with the instrumental use of reason affirmed by the theologians of these periods. So theistic arguments often appear as digressions within the dogmatic system designed to counter atheistic objections, or at any rate, designed to supply the Christian with such responses. Indeed, in this context we often see a close connection between the apologetic use of theistic arguments and their use to strengthen the Christian’s belief in God, which presumably might be threatened by atheistic criticisms. The pre-dogmatic function of [theistic arguments], however, entails a more positive use of theistic arguments to *establish* the faith. Here reason has become a *principium* of the dogmatic system. Consequently, reason plays a substantive and formative role in the dogmatic system, including the subtle implication that faith, or at least the reasonableness of faith, rests on the prior establishment by reason of Christian doctrine. (p. 53)

### 3. *The Objections*

In Part 2 of the book, Sudduth moves from historical considerations to an analysis of just what exactly might constitute an objection to natural theology, given that all men know God by way of natural revelation. How, then, are theistic arguments related to the natural knowledge of God in a way that might prove objectionable? In answering this question, we must first get straight another of Sudduth’s distinctions (pp. 58-59). Does the fact that natural knowledge of God is immediate bring about an objection to theistic arguments? Is it the case, in other words, that, given the universal knowledge of God, theistic arguments are either *superfluous* (i.e., irrelevant) or *unable* to give us a knowledge of God?

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

The first option is Sudduth's SI thesis. The SI thesis maintains that the immediate, natural knowledge of God is sufficient such that theistic arguments are superfluous, or irrelevant. Here the idea is that the knowledge of God that all men have, as described for us in Rom 1, is sufficient for all; no theistic arguments are needed.

Perhaps I've missed something in Sudduth's explanation of the SI thesis, but it is not clear to me just exactly what is meant by the *sufficiency* of the immediate natural knowledge of God. It is clear that what Sudduth means is "sufficient so that theistic arguments are irrelevant," but this does not help with the notion of sufficiency itself. No one would argue that the knowledge of God given in natural revelation is all that is needed *per se*. That knowledge was always, from the beginning, meant to go hand-in-hand with the knowledge of God given in special revelation. Moreover, as Scripture testifies in Rom 1, the immediate natural knowledge of God is sufficient (1) for knowledge and, therefore, (2) to render all men inexcusable before God. Just exactly *how* this sufficiency fits into Sudduth's notion is not clear. Fortunately, Sudduth proposes to focus on the second distinction.

Along with the SI thesis, there is also the notion that immediate natural knowledge of God is all that there is with respect to this kind of knowledge of God. There *can be* no other kind, or method of acquisition, with respect to the natural knowledge of God. Thus, theistic arguments *cannot* provide knowledge of God; in Sudduth's terms, given the immediate natural knowledge of God, theistic arguments cannot be epistemically efficacious. This latter distinction, since its focus is on the *exclusivity* of the immediate natural knowledge of God as alone epistemically efficacious, is denominated as the EI thesis. So the question in this section centers around whether there is a Reformed notion of the natural knowledge of God that entails either SI or EI, and thus constitutes a project objection to natural theology.

After analyzing three models with respect to the implanted knowledge of God—the Reformation model, the scholastic model, and the nineteenth-century theistic intuitionist model (e.g., Hodge, Shedd)—Sudduth concludes that none of them entails or implies either the SI or the EI thesis. As a matter of fact, "[Theistic arguments are] a desideratum because of the importance of a systematic doctrine of God, which requires the careful articulation of the contents of natural revelation. In this way, the project of [theistic arguments] is grounded in, not undercut by, the fact of a naturally implanted knowledge of God" (p. 75).

There is, however, a significant and radical problem that needs to be addressed—the problem of sin. Sudduth, to his credit, devotes an entire section of the book to this problem.

Initially, Sudduth notes the Barthian assessment (of Calvin's view) that the natural knowledge of God is completely eradicated by sin (p. 113). Given that such an assessment can be supported neither theologically nor exegetically, its conclusions can be ignored.

In his discussion of Calvin's view of the natural knowledge of God, Sudduth contends that such knowledge, for Calvin, has both propositional content as

well as an affective/moral aspect to it (p. 114). In his analysis of Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*, Sudduth argues that the noetic effects of sin have a detrimental effect on the propositional content of the knowledge of God. Such an effect, that "perhaps little more than knowledge that there is some creator and that he ought to be worshipped," remains in man. Thus, "what all unregenerate minds grasp by nature is fairly general" (p. 117).

#### 4. *Sin, Warrant, and Knowledge*

Without embarking on an exegesis of Calvin at this point (more on this below), there are a couple of aspects to Sudduth's discussion here that need more attention. First, we should recognize that Calvin's understanding of the *sensus divinitatis* has its origins in (at least) Rom 1:18ff. The question, then, according to Sudduth, has its focus on whether the Reformed view of total depravity is logically inconsistent with

[K] Unregenerate persons possess some natural propositional knowledge of God. (p. 125)

It is at this point in the discussion that things begin to become somewhat confused. Sudduth proposes to deal with the question of the noetic effects of sin by way of (at least) two suspect notions—suspect, that is, with respect to a biblical and theological understanding of Rom 1. The first suspect notion includes the idea that knowledge is true belief plus something else (e.g., justification or warrant). In order for one to know God, therefore, one must believe a true proposition with respect to God, and be justified or warranted in believing such a thing. The second suspect notion includes Sudduth's adopting and adapting of "warrant" as that property, enough of which converts true belief into knowledge.

Discussions abound in philosophy and epistemology with respect to this understanding of knowledge. It arguably goes back to Plato, but has had such an ascendancy in the modern period, and into the present, as to constitute the Law of the Medes and the Persians in epistemology. No (or few) serious epistemologist would question the notion that knowledge is justified, or warranted, true belief (together with other codicils and qualifiers that need not detain us here). There are a host of questions and assumptions here. Is it the case, for example, that one *must* have a belief and move, from there, to knowledge in order to know *anything*? We will discuss this below in the "Reflections" section.

In this chapter on the noetic effects of sin, Sudduth proposes to "draw on the insights from contemporary epistemology to examine the prospects for a case against *propositional* natural knowledge of God based on the noetic effects of sin" (p. 125). Though the mode of discussion here, as mentioned above, takes the "justified (or warranted) true belief" form and thus may not be as helpful overall in assessing the topic at hand, Sudduth's explanation of reliability with respect to our cognitive processes is quite helpful, and worth quoting in full.

He broaches the reliability question in the context of what he calls a "Strong Unreliability Thesis." That thesis is denominated as

[N] No natural belief-forming cognitive process in unregenerate persons reliably produces any true beliefs about God. (p. 128)

Here Sudduth describes what might be meant by a reliable belief-producing process, or lack thereof:

A reliable cognitive process is often understood as one that has an actual track record that is favorable vis-à-vis the goal of producing true beliefs, that is, produces mostly true beliefs. Alternatively, “reliable” can mean a *propensity* to deliver a significantly high number of true beliefs. In the latter case, a cognitive process could be reliable even if it has never been deployed, whereas an actual track record requires some number of actual deployments. As long as the faculty, mechanism, or process *would* yield a significant proportion of true beliefs in a suitable run of deployments, it is reliable. I will take “unreliability” in [N] as the negation of reliability in this dispositional sense. As far as I can see, Reformed theologians who assert that human reason is unreliable in theological matters intend in the first instance to make a dispositional claim. Indeed it looks like [N] will entail not only the *absence* of a propensity toward producing mostly true theistic beliefs, but a propensity toward producing mostly *false* theistic beliefs. Of course, Reformed thinkers will also affirm that unregenerate human reason has an actual poor track record in delivering truths about God. (p. 129)

Because Sudduth wants to assess the relevance of the Reformed view of sin by way of concerns in contemporary epistemology, he discusses the relevance of [N] to externalist and internalist accounts of knowledge.

Two examples of externalist accounts of knowledge are mentioned—reliabilism and proper function. In both cases, the conjunction of each with [N] renders [K] false. That is, if reliabilism is true, for example, then [N], which attempts to give an account of the noetic effects of sin, together with reliabilism will have to conclude that there is not, in fact, a reliable belief-producing process that obtains with respect to a belief in, or knowledge of, God. Thus, [K] is false.

With respect to internalism, Sudduth highlights the Gettier-induced aspect of veritic luck with respect to epistemology (for his helpful discussion of this, see pp. 131-33). Because of this, any true proposition one might obtain could just as easily have been a false proposition. “Given [N] humans are not simply lucky to have the evidence they possess, they are lucky to get it right given the evidence they have. They might just as easily have acquired a false belief about God” (p. 133). The conclusion for internalism is the same as for externalism, “If [N] is true, there can be no propositional natural knowledge of God for fallen, unregenerate persons” (p. 133).

The problem, however, may be with [N]. Sudduth proposes a modified version of [N], based on discussions of total depravity in Hoeksema, Masselink, and others. It may be the case that what is rejected in the Reformed notion of total depravity is *inferential* knowledge of God. Thus,

[N\*] No natural *inferential* cognitive process in unregenerate persons reliably produces any true beliefs about God.

In support of [N\*], Sudduth turns to Bavinck and Berkhof. According to them (according to Sudduth), the difference between that knowledge of God which is implanted in us and that which is inferred is focused on our *will*.

If this is true, then we can begin to see how it can be that [N\*] and [K] can be logically consistent. Since [K] is not specific with respect to the *process* of the knowledge of God that unregenerate persons possess, it can certainly be the case that the unregenerate *can* possess knowledge of God without that knowledge being *inferred* by them.

Not only so, but in his assessment of theistic proofs, Sudduth returns again to the question of whether there is a *project* objection to such proofs. “For example, the dogmatic conception of [theistic proofs] presupposes a *theologia naturalis regeneratorum*, a natural theology of the regenerate” (p. 140). So, given that regeneration serves to reverse the effects of sin in us, it can easily be argued that the implanted knowledge of God, together with the inferences from creation with respect to God, can combine in the Christian to produce true knowledge.

This may not be so with respect to all *models* of natural theology. Perhaps [N] or [N\*] provides an objection to the *apologetic* use of theistic arguments (p. 141). This would be the case “only if the task of apologetics presupposes that rational inference is a *source* of knowledge of God in the unregenerate. But the apologetic presentation of theistic arguments need not involve this presupposition” (p. 141).

Here Sudduth discusses the legitimacy of so-called negative apologetics—what might be called *mere* defense. In these kinds of arguments, one does not advocate for the truth of Christianity or Christian theism. Rather, one sets out to weaken, undermine, or otherwise subvert the objection or attack against Christian theism. Sudduth quotes Bavinck (among others), “The arguments for the existence of God may be weak, but in any case they are stronger than those advanced for its denial” (p. 141).

Also of importance is the way in which theistic arguments might be useful as supporting grounds for the knowledge of God that unregenerate people have. So, says Sudduth, “if we suppose that unregenerate persons have an intuitive knowledge of God, we can view theistic arguments as a way of adding warrant to antecedent religious convictions which have some warrant on grounds other than inference” (p. 142). This way of viewing theistic arguments is perfectly consistent with a Reformed apologetic approach and, perhaps, has been under-utilized in the contemporary Reformed context.

The final chapter in Part 3 is entitled, “The Dogmatic Model of Natural Theology.” In this chapter, Sudduth discusses the reversal of the noetic effects of sin, and the influence of Scripture in the development of theistic arguments. Here he rightly notes one of the primary differences between the dogmatic model of theistic proofs/arguments and the pre-dogmatic model.

The crucial issue is the relationship between natural theistic arguments and revealed theology and hence the placement of [theistic proofs] within the system of dogmatic theology. In the pre-dogmatic foundations model [theistic argumentation] does not

presuppose the content of revealed theology. It is an autonomous system based solely on the resources of human reason and constituting a justificatory preface to the system of revealed theology. (p. 150)

As Sudduth references a number of Reformed sources that affirm this view—including Lecerf, Kuyper, and Bavinck—he also brings Barth into this discussion. As noted above, Sudduth is aware of Brunner’s and Barth’s anomalous status with respect to Reformed theology. Bringing in Barth’s critique at this point, therefore, serves to confuse the discussion. Given that Barth’s views of God and of Scripture are wholly unique and unorthodox, and not aligned with Reformed orthodoxy, to include him here is curious, at best.

Of particular interest in this chapter is Sudduth’s analysis of the interplay between truths revealed in Scripture and truths revealed in nature, especially as those truths relate to the discipline of apologetics. In a subheading entitled, “Functional Guidance,” Sudduth discusses the guidance of Scripture in the apologetic use of theistic arguments. He recognizes that 1 Pet 3:15 provides the biblical warrant for Christian apologetics, though it is not specific on what kinds of reasons one might provide. However, in “Acts 14 and 17 the Apostle Paul illustrates the apologetics use of theistic arguments. Here we find Paul reasoning with the Gentiles on the basis of observations from publicly observable phenomena and citing passages from Greek literature” (pp. 156-57). Though Paul does not, in these examples, try to prove the *existence* of God, he does seek to “make points about the nature of God and the implications of the nature of God for worship” (p. 157). Given that Scripture teaches that all men know God, the purpose of theistic arguments “in the apologetic encounter is not so much to persuade the unbeliever of what she does not know but to bring to consciousness what she implicitly already knows. The apologist does not attempt to help the unbeliever reach God by way of reason, but rather he attempts to bring clarity to how God has already reached the unbeliever in the unbeliever’s own rational and moral constitution” (p. 157).

This, it seems, is a fair representation of the matter, though a comment or two will be offered below.

### 5. *The Logic*

In Part 4, Sudduth deals with “The Logic of Natural Theology.” Here, the ostensive Reformed objection to natural theology targets the logic of the arguments themselves. In this context, theistic arguments are thought to be logically inadequate; they fail as demonstrations of the existence of God. This, according to Sudduth, has been the most prominent objection to natural theology in the western philosophical tradition, as well as the Reformed tradition, since the eighteenth century (p. 167).

Sudduth notes a number of writers who have lodged objections to theistic arguments *as proofs*, among which are William Josiah Irons, Johannes Van Oosterzee, A. Lecerf, L. Berkhof, H. Hoeksema, H. Bavinck, and Gordon Clark. All of

these reject the notion that theistic arguments are able to *prove* that the true God exists. Important in this discussion, as Sudduth notes, is that these authors seem to agree that “a proposition that has been logically demonstrated has extremely high epistemic credentials: proven in an irrefutable manner (Irons), beyond all possible doubt (Berkhof), following necessarily from indisputable propositions (Van Oosterzee), possessing certainty analogous to mathematical proofs (Lecerf, Bavinck)” (p. 170). These high epistemic credentials also form the foundation for Hume’s and Kant’s refutation of theistic proofs, with which some of these Reformed authors agree.

Sudduth goes on to construct three propositions that constitute DAF, that is, a “demonstrative argument failure” with respect to theistic arguments: “(1) A proposition *p* is logically demonstrated just if it is a valid, non-circular inference from true and rationally compelling premises; (2) No theistic argument can satisfy the conditions of demonstration stipulated in (1); and (3) No theistic argument constitutes a logical demonstration of the existence of God” (p. 171). He concludes that while DAF might constitute a good model objection to theistic arguments, it does not constitute a project objection.

But what if DAF is construed to be a project objection? It would then require

(4) If an argument, *A*, for some proposition *p* is not a logical demonstration of *p*, then *A* is an epistemically deficient basis for believing *p*.

Epistemic deficiency, according to Sudduth, relates directly to the degree of warrant conferred on the belief that *p*. If the basis is epistemically deficient, either no warrant is conferred on *p*, or there is not enough warrant so that the belief can be said to approach knowledge. Sudduth then turns to relate demonstration to inferential knowledge by way of

(5) No inferentially derived proposition *p* constitutes knowledge for some person *S* who believes *p* unless *p* is the conclusion of an argument that satisfies the conditions of demonstration stipulated in (1). (p. 172)

Sudduth finds (5) to be implausible, especially given (a) the fact that we believe many inferentially derived propositions without restricting them to the conditions stipulated in (5), and (b) both internalist and externalist accounts of warrant deny (5) in their respective accounts.<sup>6</sup>

Most decisive with respect to DAF, however, is Sudduth’s third point, namely, “the project of [theistic arguments] does not require that [they] confer enough warrant for knowledge” (p. 174). To put this more generically, we need not suppose that theistic arguments alone provide the requisite knowledge of God. Here Sudduth relies on an earlier distinction he made between theistic arguments being either strongly or weakly epistemically loaded. If strongly epistemically loaded, then we should suppose that theistic arguments,

<sup>6</sup> The details of Sudduth’s discussion here need not detain us; see pp. 172-74 for a fuller argument for (a) and (b).

in and of themselves, provide the requisite knowledge. But, if weakly epistemically loaded (which is all that is needed if the project of natural theology is sustained), then theistic arguments may *supplement* that which is already known or believed; they may be grounded in a way that does not require that they alone provide the requisite knowledge. “So the epistemic success of theistic arguments need not depend on such arguments being sufficient to produce knowledge of God” (p. 174).

Perhaps of more interest to those committed to Reformed theology is Sudduth’s helpful analysis of some Reformed theologians who would, with him, affirm DAF, and who would also retain some value for theistic arguments. Here again Sudduth brings in Van Oosterzee, Berkhof, Lecerf, Bavinck, and others in order to show their support of theistic arguments, *not as demonstrative arguments*, but as testimonies to divine revelation. According to Sudduth, the Reformed objection to theistic arguments voiced by these theologians “is an objection to a particular model of [theistic arguments] which takes [them] to be logical demonstrations” (p. 176). Also, many of these Reformed thinkers who object to theistic arguments—thinkers such as Kuyper, Bavinck, and Berkhof—were objecting “to the pre-dogmatic model of [theistic arguments]. The pre-dogmatic model, which came into prominence during the heyday of classical foundationalism, typically construed theistic arguments as demonstrative arguments especially where dogmatics came under the influence of Cartesian and Wolffian rationalism.” So, continues Sudduth, “the contention that theistic arguments do not constitute logical demonstrations should be viewed as part of a package critique of the pre-dogmatic model of natural theology” (p. 177).

There is much more to be said of Sudduth’s work, but space allows only two final points before we move to our reflections.

First, in a section dealing with an inductive approach to theistic arguments, Sudduth argues for a positive use of probable arguments. Specifically, with respect to an apologetic use of theistic arguments, he notes that one’s apologetic appeal to, say, evidences of God’s existence from creation (though such an appeal might conclude with the *probability* of theism), does not thereby attest to the *ground* of one’s actual belief in God. In other words, a probable *argument* for belief in God does not entail the notion that God only *probably* exists. “Hence, the Christian’s use of probabilistic reasoning does not place the Christian in the position of undermining his own faith by carrying an implicit concession that ‘I . . . can only have probability with respect to Christian belief’” (pp. 181-82).

Sudduth goes on to argue, in this case specifically against Cornelius Van Til, that an acknowledgment of the *clarity* of general revelation does not thereby rule out or otherwise negate the use of probable theistic arguments.

There is no need to suppose that probabilistic reasoning about God assumes no pre-existing natural knowledge of God. Moreover, if theistic belief is produced by a spontaneous process of inference from features of the created world, then probabilistic *arguments* are not the source of belief in God, but they are ways of codifying or formally articulating the natural grounds of theistic belief. The fact that our explicitly

articulated inferential knowledge of God does no better than yield a probable conclusion does not entail that our knowledge of God, even our natural knowledge of God, is on the same level. (p. 183)

Second, in what seems to me to be one of the least compelling sections of the book, Sudduth notes references by some Reformed theologians to the arguments of Hume and Kant. Sudduth critiques some of the Reformed objections to natural theology to the extent that they use or reference Kant and Hume. He thinks that in doing that they also set themselves up for denying knowledge altogether, or at least knowledge of God. But, typically in Reformed literature, the use of Hume/Kant is for purposes of showing that such proofs cannot be used or be helpful if they are based on an empiricist or Kantian epistemology, or one that resembles those. It is not that the Reformed are adopting Hume/Kant as their position in order then to dismiss theistic argument. Rather, they are advocating that a Humean/Kantian epistemology will lead to the denial of a true, theistic argument. According to Van Til,

This criticism of Kant on Empiricism and Rationalism was undoubtedly correct as far as his contention that the mind of man and the facts of the universe should never have been separated is concerned. But it is equally true that the more fundamental question still is whether the mind of man should ever have been thought of in separation from the mind of God. How can the human mind know anything about any of the facts of the universe if these facts as well as the mind itself are not related upon the basis of a more fundamental unity in the plan of God? Yet it is exactly Kant's contention that the human mind does have a sphere of knowledge of its own apart from its relation to God and apart from the relation of the facts to God. . . . It should be observed then that the statement often made that Kant limited the field of knowledge in order to make room for faith is fundamentally mistaken. If Kant's position were to be retained, both knowledge and faith would be destroyed. . . . Knowledge and faith are not contradictories but complementaries. Kant did not make room for faith, because he destroyed the God on whom alone faith is to be fixed.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, what Hume and Kant have shown is that any attempt to prove God's existence based on their empirical (Hume), or semi-empirical (Kant), epistemology, will inevitably end badly. Without a Humean or Kantian epistemology, and in line with an epistemology based on revelation, we can affirm Sudduth's contention: "But if the knowledge of infinite being is an intuitive truth or otherwise grasped immediately, inference simply does not have the burden of proving an infinite cause, only of linking our intuitive conception of infinite being with the being revealed in the cosmos. What this shows . . . is that the immediate knowledge of God can supplement theistic proofs" (p. 209).

<sup>7</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *In Defense of the Faith*, vol. 2: *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969).

## II. *Reflections*

Sudduth's proposal is a modest one. He aims to show that, while there may be certain specific *model* objections to natural theology, there is no Reformed *project* objection to natural theology. It seems to me that he is successful in his proposal, and that his thesis will go a long way in clarifying such notions among analytic philosophers of religion. Among such philosophers, Sudduth has done what is rarely attempted. He has engaged the historical and theological literature that deals with the subject matter at hand, and has sought to understand the problem within its original context. He has not, as is often the case, taken the objection out of its theological context; he has not assumed that the objectors were themselves speaking the language of analytic philosophers. He gives due attention to the actual objections to natural theology, construes those objections properly, and then works with its principles, as an analytic philosopher. Because of his uniquely helpful approach, no philosopher of religion who deals with these particular matters will be able to do so without first understanding Sudduth's argument. He has laid the groundwork for further discussion and debate on Reformed objections to natural theology. This book is needed for anyone who wants to interact deeply with natural theology.

My own concerns about the book center around what seems to me to be the central point of debate with respect to natural theology in the Reformed tradition, that is, the use of such arguments in apologetics. The point of discussion in Reformed theology, historically and at present, and which Sudduth himself recognizes, has little interest in how natural theological arguments can be used by Christians—Sudduth's "dogmatic" model. These are important questions and can be pursued with profit. But the question that evokes the most heat is the apologetic question—whether or not, and if so how, natural theological arguments can be used in defense of Reformed Christianity. As we have seen, Sudduth does address these concerns in various places. Much of what he says is in line, generally speaking, with the Reformed tradition and is both accurate and very helpful. But there are emphases and aspects of this central apologetic question that could use more clarification and development. In the interest of space, I will discuss what I judge to be two primary, and interrelated, aspects of his thesis, as those aspects relate to the apologetic use of natural theology.

### 1. *Natural Theology $\alpha$ and Image of God*

The first aspect that needs a bit more clarification is Sudduth's natural theology  $\alpha$ , or the natural knowledge of God that comes to us by way of God's revelation. Historically, we can affirm the following:

There is no attempt made on the part of the sixteenth- or seventeenth-century orthodox to use the proofs of God's existence to demonstrate the validity of system or as a basis for moving from a rationally established natural theology to a supernatural or

revealed theology based on the achievements of reason. This model would appear in the eighteenth century under the impact of Wolffian rationalism but it is quite foreign to the mind of Protestant orthodoxy.<sup>8</sup>

As Sudduth points out (p. 31), natural theology must have its proper place within the context of revealed theology. It presupposes that theology and is able to thrive only in its light. Any use of natural theology for apologetic purposes, therefore, will need to take account of its proper *place* in order to its proper *use*. So far, so good.

However, as Sudduth recognizes in various places, the proper use of natural theology will require a proper understanding of the *sensus divinitatis*, as that is given to us, most explicitly, in Rom 1:18ff. The *sensus divinitatis* is itself central to Sudduth's notion of natural knowledge of God (i.e., his natural theology  $\alpha$ ), and, given that it provides a proper foundation for theistic arguments, must take its proper place in terms of Scripture's teaching on the matter. Perhaps some clarification here will help advance our understanding of the apologetic use of natural theology.

First, contrary to Sudduth's claim, the notion of man made in God's image is crucial to anything else we might say about the *sensus divinitatis*, specifically, and knowledge in general. Sudduth thinks an appeal to the doctrine of man as image in the context of the natural knowledge of God is a "dubious assumption," an "unhelpful digression from the question of whether the effects of sin render our rational faculties epistemically impotent" (pp. 125-26). On the contrary, the truth that man is image of God is neither dubious nor a digression with respect to man's knowledge of God, but is determinative for that knowledge and the effects that it produces in us.

Calvin, for example, in line with the structure of Paul's epistle to the Romans,<sup>9</sup> begins the *Institutes* this way:

It is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself (1.1.2). Our knowledge should serve first to teach us fear and reverence; secondly, with it as our guide and teacher, we should learn to seek every good from him (1.2.2). Since, therefore, men one and all perceive that there is a God and that he is their Maker, they are condemned by their own testimony because they have failed to honor him and to consecrate their lives to his will (1.3.1). Miserable men do not rise above themselves as they should, but measure him by the yardstick of their own carnal stupidity, and neglect sound investigation; thus out of curiosity they fly off into empty speculations (1.4.1). Yet hence it appears that if men were taught only by nature, they

<sup>8</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 1: *Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 323.

<sup>9</sup> For an extended discussion of the structure and content of the beginning of Calvin's *Institutes* and its relationship to the book of Romans, see K. Scott Oliphint, "A Primal and Simple Knowledge," in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes: Essays and Analysis* (ed. David Hall and Peter A. Lillback; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008).

would hold to nothing certain or solid or clear-cut, but would be so tied to confused principles as to worship an unknown god (1.5.12).<sup>10</sup>

If we read the subject matter of chapters 1–5 of the *Institutes* through the lens of Romans, it is evident that Rom 1:18ff. determines the order and content of these initial chapters in the *Institutes*. Why, given these verses, does Calvin begin with the mutual dependence of knowledge of God and knowledge of self? One explanation would be that Calvin has in mind here, implicitly, just exactly what the apostle Paul has in mind in these verses in Romans, that is, the image of God. This point seems clear enough, especially since Calvin reiterates this twofold knowledge later in the *Institutes* as he begins to discuss the image of God:

We must now speak of the *creation of man*: not only because among all God's works here is the noblest and most remarkable example of his justice, wisdom, and goodness; but because, as we said at the beginning, *we cannot have a clear and complete knowledge of God unless it is accompanied by a corresponding knowledge of ourselves*.<sup>11</sup> (emphasis mine)

The reason, in other words, that God's wrath is revealed, and that all people know God, is because man is made in the image of God. Though Paul does not state this explicitly in this section of Romans, there can be little doubt that what Paul is describing here is an essential part of what it means to be image of God.<sup>12</sup> It is just because we are image that we know God, and it is our reaction to that knowledge that motivates God's wrath toward those who remain in Adam. As image, it is impossible to know ourselves aright without, at the same time, knowing the One whose image we are. Calvin reiterates this point in his comments on Acts 17:28:

Now, we see that all those who know not God know not themselves; because they have God present with them not only in the excellent gifts of the mind, but in their very essence; because it belongeth to God alone to be, all other things have their being in him.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> All quotations are from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.15.1.

<sup>12</sup> Allusions in this section of Romans to the creation account are numerous, such that there can be no question that Paul has that account in mind. Note, e.g., Calvin's comment on Rom 1:18: "And he brings, as the first proof of condemnation, the fact,—that though the structure of the world, and the most beautiful arrangement of the elements, ought to have induced man to glorify God, yet no one discharged his proper duty" (John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* [ed. Henry Beveridge; CTS; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], 67; and on 1:19, "By saying, that God has made it manifest, he means, that man was created to be a spectator of this formed world, and that eyes were given him, that he might, by looking on so beautiful a picture, be led up to the Author himself" (*ibid.*, 70). For a discussion of Paul's allusions to creation, see K. Scott Oliphint, "The Irrationality of Unbelief," in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics* (ed. K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2007), 59–73.

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (ed. Henry Beveridge; 2 vols.; CTS; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 2:168–69.

Thus, we see the necessary affirmation of Calvin that the two “knowledges” are inextricably linked. They are inextricably linked because man is ineradicably and eternally image of God.<sup>14</sup>

This emphasis on image is highlighted by Bavinck as well. With respect to our natural knowledge of God, Bavinck notes: “And humans, *having been created in the divine image*, were gifted with the capacity to receive the impressions of this revelation and thereby to acquire some sense and knowledge of the Eternal Being.”<sup>15</sup>

The reason it is crucial and central in any discussion on the natural knowledge of God to emphasize the relationship of man as image of God to that knowledge is that the notion of image is a fundamental *ontological* notion with respect to our identity as human beings. Without detailing the discussion here, it is the *fact* that we are image that makes us either covenant-breakers or covenant-keepers; it is *image* in man that renders man a *covenant* being. It is the *fact* that we are image that entails our eternal existence, either in the new heaven and the new earth, or in hell. It is the fact that we are image that entails the fact that we all, from the fall and into eternity, reside either under God’s wrath, if we remain in Adam, or under his grace, if we are in Christ. Underlying the entirety of our existence, therefore, including our knowledge of God and everything else, is the fact that we are and will forever remain, image of God. To put the matter philosophically, there is no possible world in which we could be human and *not* be image of God.<sup>16</sup> What this means, as we will see, is that there is no possible world in which a human being, as image, can know something and not know the true and living God.

## 2. *Sensus as Knowledge*

For Sudduth, however, perhaps because the image of God is thought to be tangential to a discussion of natural knowledge of God, the *sensus divinitatis*, in places in the book, takes its place within the context of current analytic discussions in epistemology.<sup>17</sup> Not only so, but Sudduth indicates that the knowledge given by way of natural revelation is minimal (e.g., see pp. 114-16). Both of these notions may fit well within the context of analytic philosophy, but they seem to do an injustice to a biblical and theological discussion of the natural knowledge of God.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> If we think, to use one example, of a mirror image, the image in the mirror is dependent for its very being and existence on the reality that stands before it. Not only so, but it is defined and its properties are determined according to that reality. So it is with man. If, per impossible, the reality (God) were ever removed from us, we would cease to exist. Conversely, our “reality” is such only in the light of his.

<sup>15</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2: *God and Creation* (ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 73; my emphasis.

<sup>16</sup> Assuming, of course, that possibility is indexed to actuality, and that God is its author.

<sup>17</sup> At least in some places. Sudduth does affirm that what Paul teaches in Rom 1 is that there is *some* (though scant) knowledge of God.

<sup>18</sup> Much of the material in the next few paragraphs is an edited version taken from Oliphint, “The Irrationality of Unbelief.” For the more complete, exegetical concerns of this text, see that article.

As Paul begins his discussion of the revelation of God's wrath from heaven,<sup>19</sup> he has two primary aspects of that wrath in view—the cause and the effects. He gives the universal scope of the cause itself in v. 18. God's wrath is revealed from heaven “against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.” It is ungodliness and unrighteousness against which God's wrath is revealed. But Paul goes on to define, in a striking way, just what it is that motivates God's wrath toward all who are in Adam, all who are covenant-breakers. He introduces a specificity to this unrighteousness; it is an unrighteousness that is defined essentially as a suppression of the truth.

Verse 18, then, is a general announcement of the fact that God's wrath is revealed, and of the reason for that wrath. The cause of God's wrath toward us is our unrighteous suppression of the truth. In other words, God's wrath is revealed from heaven because, in our wickedness and unrighteousness (in Adam), we hold down (in our souls) that which we know to be the case.<sup>20</sup> Within the context of this general announcement, however, Paul knows that he has introduced two concepts, suppression and truth, that will necessarily need clarification. In vv. 19-23 (and, to some extent, v. 25 as well), Paul develops and amplifies the notions of “suppression” and of “truth.”

If we take vv. 18-32 as a unit,<sup>21</sup> we can see how Paul puts flesh on his (so far skeletal) notion of “truth” as he reiterates what he means by truth in vv. 19, 20, 23, and 32 (with v. 25 simply repeating the notion of “the truth of God”). In each of these verses, Paul gives more specificity to the concept of truth mentioned in v. 18. We shall take these verses together in order to understand what Paul means by “the truth” which is suppressed.

In v. 19, Paul tells us that by “truth” he means “that which is known about God.” The truth that is suppressed, therefore, is specifically truth about God. The way in which we come to know this truth is two-fold. We come to know it, in the first place, because it is evident in or among us. Paul will expand this idea in the next verse. Before that, however, he wants us to understand just how this truth, this knowledge of God is evident, or clear, among us.

This is vitally important for Paul. It is vitally important both because Paul is concerned with God's activity in revealing himself (more specifically, his wrath), and because Paul wants to highlight the contrast between what God is doing in this revelation, on the one hand, and what we (in Adam) do with it, on the other.

<sup>19</sup> The wrath of God from heaven (as in “the righteousness of God”) should be seen as that which comes from God to his creatures, resulting in the effects which Paul will outline in vv. 24-32.

<sup>20</sup> The word translated “suppress” here is the participial form of the verb κατέχω. This verb can mean suppress, but it can also be translated “possess” or “retain.” While “suppress” is the best translation of this verb, given that the instrument of this activity is our unrighteousness, it seems likely as well that we should include, along with this suppression, the notions of retention and possession. There is, perhaps, here a purposeful ambiguity such that all aspects of this verb are meant to be included. Paul's own analysis of suppression will necessarily include the fact that the truth that we suppress we nevertheless continue to retain and possess.

<sup>21</sup> To break the passage off at v. 32 is somewhat artificial since crucial aspects of Paul's argument continue in chs. 2 and 3. For our purposes here, however, we need not go beyond the first chapter.

So, Paul says immediately (even before he explains the sweeping scope of that which is evident among us) that the reason that God's revelation is evident among us is that God has made it evident to us.

We should be clear here about Paul's emphasis. What Paul is concerned to deny, in this context, is that we, in our sins, as covenant-breakers in Adam, would ever, or could ever, produce or properly infer this truth that we have, this knowledge of God, in and of ourselves. Paul wants to make sure that we are not tempted to think that the truth of God, as evident among us, is evident because we have marshaled the right arguments or have set our minds in the proper direction. His point, at least in part, in this entire section, is to remind us of the devastating effects sin continues to have on our thinking (in Adam). The truth that we know, that we retain, possess, and suppress, therefore, is truth that is, fundamentally and essentially, given by God to us. God is the One who ensures that this truth will get through to us. It is his action, not ours, that guarantees our possession of this truth.

The truth which we all, as creatures in Adam, know and suppress is a truth about God. Even more specifically (v. 20), it is a truth concerning the "invisible things" of God, that is, his eternal power and deity. These words are categories that are meant to envelope a host of divine attributes. What might Paul mean by this description? While it is perhaps not possible to be absolutely definitive, it seems that Charles Hodge is right in his assertion that what Paul has in mind here are "all the divine perfections."<sup>22</sup> Had Paul wanted to limit his description, he would more likely have delineated just exactly what characteristics of God were known through creation. This notion of a fuller and deeper knowledge of God moves much further than what Sudduth wants to affirm. He has precedence in his affirmation, but it does not easily comport with the biblical teaching on this matter.

This truth that we all know, then, is the truth of God's existence, infinity, eternity, immutability, glory, wisdom, and so forth.<sup>23</sup> As Paul is developing this thought in v. 23, he speaks of this knowledge of the truth as "the glory of the incorruptible God." It is this that we all know as creatures of God. It is this that God gives, and that we necessarily "take," as knowledge, that comes to us by virtue of his natural revelation.

There are two important aspects to this knowledge of God that are crucial to see. First, we should be clear about the context for this knowledge. It is not

<sup>22</sup> Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (new ed.; Philadelphia: James S. Claxton, 1866), 37.

<sup>23</sup> As a matter of fact, it would be difficult to improve on the Westminster Larger Catechism's description of God (# 7) as an apt description of what we know by virtue of God's natural revelation: "God is a Spirit, in and of himself infinite in being, glory, blessedness, and perfection; all-sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, incomprehensible, every where present, almighty, knowing all things, most wise, most holy, most just, most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth." This does not, of course, mean that every individual knows each and every one of these characteristics of God at all times. What it does mean is that they are all revealed in and through creation. Paul demonstrates how one might apply this revelational knowledge of God in his Aereopagus address in Acts 17:16-34.

knowledge in the abstract of which Paul speaks. He is speaking here of a knowledge that ensues on the basis of a real relationship. It is not the kind of knowledge we might get through reading about someone or something in a book or in the newspaper. The text of Romans is referring to relational, covenantal knowledge. It is knowledge that comes to us because, as creatures of God made in his image, we are, always and everywhere, confronted with God himself. We are, even as we live in God's world every day, set squarely before the face of the God who made us, and in whom we live, and move and exist. This, then, is decidedly personal knowledge. It is knowledge *from* a Person (the Triune God), *to* a person (us), and *of* a person, of the Person whom we have come to know by virtue of his constant and consistent revealing of himself to us.

This personal aspect of the knowledge that we have is made all the more prominent in v. 32. This verse serves as a transition between Paul's exposition of God's wrath revealed in ch. 1, and the natural revelation of God's law in ch. 2. Notice that Paul can affirm that those who are in Adam "know the ordinance of God." This knowledge of the ordinance of God is coterminous with our knowledge of God. To know God, in the way that Paul is affirming here, is to know (at least something of) his requirements. Along with the knowledge of God, in other words, comes the knowledge "that those who practice such things are worthy of death." Instead of repenting, however, we, in Adam, rejoice in our disobedience and attempt to gather together others who share in our rebellion. Therefore, because this knowledge is a relational knowledge, and because the relationship is between God and his human creatures, God ensures that we all know that the violations of his law in which we, in Adam, willingly and happily participate are capital offenses; they place us under the penalty of death. Our knowledge of God is a responsible, covenantal knowledge which brings with it certain demands of obedience (e.g., Rom 2:4).

Second, Paul is emphatic about the fact that this knowledge of God that we have is abundantly clear and is understood. There is no obscurity in God's revelation. It is not as though God masks himself in order to keep himself hidden from his human creatures.<sup>24</sup> The problem with the natural revelation of God, and on this we need to be as clear as possible, is not from God's side, but from ours.

With the preceding discussion in mind, and in the background, we can move to the material in Rom 1 that bears more directly on what we might call the irrationality of unbelief (this notion of irrationality will be a related point in our discussion of probability below). In clarifying what is meant by "truth" in v. 18, Paul, at the same time, begins to clarify what he means when he says that, in Adam, we suppress that truth. It is this suppression that is the cause of, and the impetus behind, the irrationality that is our sin.

As Paul is explaining what he means by "truth," he is also pouring content into the notion of "suppression" that he introduced in v. 18. It is in vv. 22, 23, and 25

<sup>24</sup> For an argument against God's existence based on his supposed hiddenness, see, e.g., J. L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993).

that we see Paul explaining just what suppression is. What we immediately notice in these verses is that the notion of suppression is characterized by what Paul calls an exchange. The suppression, which is part and parcel of our own sinfulness, is worked out, says Paul, by the fact that we take this glory of God (which is the truth we have from him) and exchange it for an image.<sup>25</sup>

This begins to explain the utter irrationality of creatures who remain in Adam. We have, as creatures made in God's image, the truth of God. To use Paul's strong and decisive terminology, we know God.<sup>26</sup> We have this knowledge of the truth by virtue of his (merciful) revelation to us. This knowledge of God comes to us through everything that God has made (which is as universal as one can imagine since it includes everything but God himself). Yet, instead of acknowledging God's revelation, instead of honoring him and giving thanks, we twist and pervert it, turning it into (exchanging it for) something false, a lie, something of our own imagining, something that we ourselves have invented. We take this truth, which should cause us to bow down and worship God, and we fashion it into an idol. It is necessarily the case, then, that all of us, in Adam, are experts in utter self-deception with respect to God, opting for lies and inventing idols.

We should remember here that our idolatry stems, not from ignorance, nor from a futile attempt to fill a void in our lives. It results, always, from a perversion of the truth, a twisting of reality.<sup>27</sup> It stems from denying "the way things are" and attempting to create a world of our own making. It is idolatry, therefore, which lies at the root of our sin, and thus at the root of our irrationality. In Adam, we convince ourselves that what we know to be the case is actually *not* the case. What we necessarily understand, we sinfully attempt to hold down. We willfully exchange our true knowledge of God, which he graciously gives, for false gods, lies, and images.

Enough has been said about Scripture's teaching in Rom 1 to mention some initial concerns about some of Sudduth's formulations. At points, Sudduth vacillates between the natural knowledge of God *as knowledge*, on the one hand, and *as belief*, on the other. For example, in a discussion of Plantinga's epistemological model, Sudduth notes:

All other things being equal, the more firmly a person believes some proposition, the more warrant this belief will have for her. But it is plausible to suppose that, at least for some people in some circumstances, the *sensus divinitatis* produces a less than firm belief in God. (p. 87)

Sudduth affirms in other places that the *sensus divinitatis* is itself knowledge. Why the differences? Why affirm that it is knowledge, but also think it plausible that it

<sup>25</sup> This is another example of the inextricable link between man as image and the natural knowledge of God. The language Paul uses here harkens back both to the creation of human beings in God's image and likeness, and to the perversion of that creation through idolatry (see Ps 106:20; Jer 2:11).

<sup>26</sup> We should note that Paul's language in v. 21 leaves no doubt as to whether he is thinking merely about a capacity for knowledge, or about knowledge itself. It is not that we could, or might, or have the ability to, know God. It is rather, says Paul, that we know God.

<sup>27</sup> Again see Paul's approach to the philosophers at Athens (cf. Acts 17:16-34).

produces something less than firm belief in some people? This is likely because, in his use of analytic epistemology, no real categories exist for what Scripture is teaching us in Rom 1 and elsewhere. Epistemology, of late and historically, has bound itself to an understanding of knowledge such that it must always include its lesser cousin, belief. But we need to be all the more clear here that what God is telling us in Rom 1 is decidedly opposed to any notion of mere, or “less than firm,” belief; and it is opposed to defining *all* knowledge as (some version of) justified true belief.

It seems to me high time, however, if one is concerned to articulate a decidedly *Christian* epistemology,<sup>28</sup> to recognize the *epistemological* importance of man as image of God and, thus, the knowledge of God that comes to all by way of natural revelation. Because this knowledge includes at least the following characteristics, a Christian epistemology should take these points as central to its development. With respect to the natural knowledge of God, as it comes to us by way of creation, we should affirm:

(1) It is *clear*. As Rom 1 indicates, this knowledge that we have of God is such that it renders us inexcusable before God (v. 20). If it was ambiguous, or produced a “less than firm belief in God,” we would have an excuse before him.

(2) It is *true*. The knowledge that we have need not, and does not, sift through the philosophical paradigm of justified, or warranted, true belief. It does not partake of the notion of belief at all, but it comes to us, through all that is made, *as knowledge*. And because God is the one who implants this knowledge within us such that we are, in Adam, without excuse, there is no possibility of error for us. No one will be able to stand before God in judgment and say they were mistaken on what God revealed to them through creation. As with his special revelation, his natural revelation hits its mark every time.

(3) It *entails knowledge of creation*. It is God’s activity that ensures that we, always and everywhere, know him, but it is also that activity that ensures that we will know his creation; it is *through* that creation, and *because of it* that we know what we do know about God.

(4) It is *non-propositional*. The knowledge that we have of God, given Paul’s description of it, could, perhaps, be better characterized as (what Bertrand Russell called) a “knowledge by acquaintance.” Without inheriting the attendant problems of Russell’s category, we can at least affirm that what Romans is teaching us is that we have this knowledge just by virtue of the fact that we live and move in God’s world, a world in which he is perpetually and in every place making himself known to us in such a way that we intuitively, always and everywhere, know him. Because God is always and everywhere *present* to us, dynamically revealing himself and his character, we are always and everywhere “acquainted” with him, even if we devote ourselves to an instant and constant suppression of that knowledge. This does not mean that such knowledge *cannot* be propositional;

<sup>28</sup> That is, an epistemology that depends on Christian truth, and that does not undermine or subvert that truth.

it only means that it need not be and likely is not in its initial implanting by God (*cognitio insita*).

(5) It is *universal*. There has never been a time, nor will there be, even in eternity, when God's human creatures do not know him. Because entailed in being image of God is knowledge of God, all humans will always and in all places know him.

(6) It is the catalyst for *self-deception* for all who remain in Adam. This last point is serious, but we have neither the time nor space to develop it. At this point, we need only note that that which provides the *ground* for our knowledge is both *known and denied* by any who are not redeemed in Christ. This means that any notion of proper function in epistemology needs some significant revision and fine-tuning if it is going to be used at all in these discussions.

These five points (and there are likely others) with respect to knowledge could go a long way in revising and articulating just what human knowledge is, at least initially. What is sometimes sought by philosophers in epistemology is a "clear and distinct idea" such that one can begin to explain just how it is that humans know anything at all. If the exposition of Rom 1 above is correct, that "clear and distinct idea" is actually clear and distinct *knowledge* of God. And, as we have said, because such knowledge comes through the things that are made, entailed in this knowledge of God is knowledge of the creation through which it is given. Such knowledge comes from the outside, in. It is not self-produced, nor does it originate with us. Rather, it forms the foundation for anything and everything else that we know, and it places knowledge within its proper context—the context of God revealing himself to his human creatures, always and everywhere, throughout all of history and into eternity. In other words, whereas virtually all of philosophical epistemology wants to begin with *beliefs* and attempts to move from there to a notion of knowledge, it seems the better way to begin is with true, clear, and universal *knowledge*, given by God, which then provides the foundation for anything else that we claim to believe or know.<sup>29</sup>

This notion of the natural knowledge of God may not radically affect much of what Sudduth has proposed and argued in his book. Much of what he says is consistent with what we have detailed above. What it may do, perhaps, is call into question an epistemological model that attempts to adapt a notion of warrant and proper function for its exposition of knowledge generally, and of knowledge of God, more specifically.

### 3. A Probable Problem

The second aspect of Sudduth's proposal, worthy of much more discussion than can be given here, is his notion of the legitimate employment or use of

<sup>29</sup> The notion of "foundation" here should not be confused with *foundationalism*. The structure of foundationalism suffers from the same maladies that other epistemological options do. The foundation described here is *revelational*, and for that reason has its source and its initial character in the One who gives and implants it in us.

probability in the apologetic presentation of theistic arguments. We have noted this above, but in order to get the central idea of Sudduth's contention, it will be helpful to set out his reasoning:

... [C]onsider the apologetic use of theistic arguments. Evidence to which the Christian appeals in an apologetic context need not be the Christian's (partial much less complete) actual ground of belief in God, nor is this dialectically entailed by the fact that such evidences have been offered in support of theistic belief. Reasons *for* believing a proposition are not necessarily reasons *why* one believes. Hence, the Christian's use of probabilistic reasoning does not place the Christian in the position of undermining his own faith by carrying an implicit concession that "*I* . . . can only have probability with respect to Christian belief." . . . [C]onditions implicated in *showing* a proposition to be true are not necessarily the same conditions implicated in a person's *knowing* a proposition to be true. . . . Since the conditions implicated in showing and knowing are not necessarily the same, if showing does no more than make a belief probable, it would not follow that the belief can be no more than probable. (pp. 181-82)

It is not possible to know exactly what Sudduth means here by "probabilistic reasoning." The literature is replete with differences about just what probability *is*, in various circumstances, and how it might be employed. So, it may be that our discussion below is wide of the mark of what Sudduth means to affirm. It may be the case that, like Joseph Butler, for example, Sudduth is using the notion in a more generic way such that more precision is not immediately needed. In any case, given the importance of this discussion in apologetics, it deserves at least an initial attempt at clarification.

Given that the entire discussion in this book is on natural theology, it is likely that by "probabilistic reasoning" Sudduth has in mind, at least, arguments that seek to demonstrate the relationship of available evidence to one's belief or disbelief in God. Perhaps, for example, as some have argued, the existence of so much evil in the world offers powerful evidence against God's existence. Some would say, then, that the existence of God is unlikely or improbable with respect to the evidence of evil in the world. So, while it may not be that the existence of evil is incompatible with the existence of God, it could be that the presence of evil offers strong evidential support against the existence of God, or it points to a low probability that God exists. Perhaps one approach to such an objection, as advocated by Sudduth, would be to set forth theistic arguments in such a way that they are *probable* rather than demonstrable, or certain, with respect to theism. Sudduth presumably wants to affirm that arguments that are only able to conclude for the *probability* of God's existence may, nevertheless, be useful natural theological arguments in cases like this. Perhaps, as he indicates, theistic arguments, even if probable, can go a long way toward supporting what people know, but deny or suppress, with respect to God. Is this a tenable apologetic notion for a Reformed, Covenantal approach?

It should be noted, as we attempt to answer that question, that probability is a notoriously difficult notion to pin down or precisely delineate in situations like these. Though it may be the case that a specific probability calculus is exact in its own formulations, the content poured into such equations can be

elusive. There are (at least) three kinds of probability that could be (more or less) relevant to this kind of discussion. It may be helpful to take note of them as we think about the evidential (or probable) objection to, or arguments for, belief in God.

The first kind of probability might be called frequency probability. Here probability is determined by the frequency of truths in certain reference classes. The reference class chosen is relative to the person's noetic structure or set of beliefs. And there is no reason to think that the theist and atheist or nontheist have the same noetic structure. I judge that this is likely not the kind of probability to which Sudduth refers.

The second kind of probability is often called logical probability. This kind would express a logical relation between A and Q. If  $P(A/Q) = 0$ , there would be complete inconsistency between A and Q; if  $P(A/Q) = 1$  then entailment is expressed between A and Q. But if the relation is between 0 and 1, then the relationship between A and Q is probable. This kind of probability may have some application to Sudduth's proposal, but we will not pursue that here.

The third kind of probability is most likely what Sudduth has in mind. It is often called subjective, or personalist, or epistemic probability. This kind of probability, like the logical form, utilizes an inductive process for the sake of belief support, or belief revision. Here the idea is that one's belief, A, may be shown to be more or less probable, given Q, and given as well a person's background knowledge (K). In other words,  $P_s(A/Q \& K)$  is the strength of S's belief in A, given that S now has come to learn Q, and given K. Because this kind of probability deals more directly with the degree or strength of belief, it has central epistemic implications and is likely more conducive to the kind of probabilistic reasoning to which Sudduth alludes. In cases like this, for example, a person, S, would assign to a particular proposition a real number between 0 and 1. So, the probability of A on Q for S— $P_s(A/Q \& K)$ —would have a value indicating how likely A would be for S if Q were the available evidence, and given K. If S's claim is that the probability of the existence of God based on available evidence and S's background knowledge is less than .5— $P(G/E \& K) < .5$ —then what we would know about the existence of God in relation to the available evidence would, in this kind of probabilistic reasoning, be a piece of S's autobiography (since the probability here is probability *for S*).

But there are significant problems with this kind of probability. At least two come to mind. The first problem is that there is no objective way to assign values to probabilities in such cases. And if values *are* assigned, there is no reason to think they are what the arguer says they are. Second, subjective, epistemic, personalist notions of probability require that the person assigning probability is *rational*. "Of course, subjective probability varies from person to person. Also, in order for this to be an interpretation of *probability*, so that the relevant axioms are satisfied, not all persons can count—only rational, or 'coherent' persons should count."<sup>30</sup> This

<sup>30</sup> Robert Audi, "Probability," *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 651.

becomes a problem as we begin to think clearly about just what it means to *be* rational, of which, more below.

Included in this notion of probability is some notion of epistemic *certainty*, as well. As with probability, this notion is without firm definition, but it likely includes the idea that a proposition is epistemically certain to the degree that it is warranted and no other propositions that we know of undermine or otherwise negate it. In such cases, however, just what is warranted will depend to a large extent on what we include or exclude in our evidential set of propositions, given our background knowledge.

And now our clarification and discussion of the *sensus divinitatis* above becomes inextricably linked with our discussion of probability. “How?” you might ask. Here we can consult and adapt the penetrating discussion of probability given by Plantinga.

In chapter 14 of *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga evaluates certain evidential arguments against theism based on the problem or persistence of evil. We need not enter the details of his entire evaluation, but there are certain aspects of it that could help us clarify notions of epistemic probability and certainty.

In his evaluation of certain atheological, evidential arguments from evil, Plantinga says:

What I want to argue first is that if classical Christianity is true, the perception of evil is not a defeater for belief in God with respect to *fully rational* noetic structures—any noetic structure with no cognitive dysfunction, one in which all cognitive faculties and processes are functioning properly. But from the point of view of classical Christianity . . . this includes also the proper function of the *sensus divinitatis*. Someone in whom this process was functioning properly would have an intimate, detailed, vivid and explicit knowledge of God; she would have an intense awareness of his presence, glory, goodness, power, perfection, wonderful attractiveness and sweetness; and she would be as convinced of God’s existence as of her own.<sup>31</sup>

It is important that we state again just what the *sensus divinitatis* is. It is not, in the first place, *what we do* with what God reveals. That is an important matter, and is taken up by Paul centrally in Rom 1:18ff. If one takes the *sensus* to be our *response* to God’s revelation, as Plantinga seems to, then problems persist with respect to Paul’s own argument, not to mention with respect to theology generally. Yet, this seems to be what Plantinga takes the *sensus* to be. Note again:

For, of course, according to Christian doctrine itself, none of us human beings enjoys this pristine condition of complete rationality. The *sensus divinitatis* has been heavily damaged by sin; for most of us most of the time the presence of God is not evident. For many of us (much of the time, anyway) both God’s existence and his goodness are a bit shadowy and evanescent, nowhere nearly as evident as is the existence of other people or the trees in the backyard. Relative to a fully rational noetic structure (one of an un-fallen human being, say) knowledge of the facts of evil may constitute no defeater for

<sup>31</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 485.

theism; relative to the sorts of noetic structures we human beings actually have, however (so the claim goes), they do. Given the noetic results of sin (see chapter 7), the typical believer in God does have a defeater in the facts of evil.<sup>32</sup>

This notion of the *sensus* seems wide of the mark of what Scripture teaches about it and of what Calvin has in mind. Perhaps we could say that, indeed, there has been “damage” to the knowledge of God that we have by way of God’s natural revelation. But the “damage” is not with the *knowledge/truth* per se, but with what we do with it as/when we have it.<sup>33</sup> The damage presupposes our possession of knowledge/truth itself; it does not, nor could it, negate such knowledge. Paul’s point is that we suppress *the truth*, which just *is* the knowledge of God. Because this knowledge comes to us by way of God’s activity, and not ours, it gets through, always and everywhere, *as truth and as knowledge*. We take that knowledge that we have and culpably suppress it by way of exchange and idolatry. It seems that, at least in places where Sudduth wants to adapt Plantinga’s epistemological project, he falls prey to the kind of weakened notion of the *sensus* that denies the universal possession of real and true knowledge of God, and thus may not be able to do justice to the relationship between the *sensus* and a Reformed, Covenantal apologetic approach to natural theology.

Let’s attempt to flesh out the possible problems with probabilistic reasoning and theistic arguments. Here we may be able to follow and adapt an argument cited and analyzed by Plantinga, an argument against theism based on the evidence of evil in the world.<sup>34</sup> In this case, however, what we will eventually need is an evidential argument *for* theism, one that is epistemically more probable than not.

Initially, let’s make sure we understand that to which the theistic argument is addressed, that is, the non-theism of S. Here, we could say, to use just one example, S affirms that statements reporting the observations and testimonies upon which knowledge of, say, design and order in the universe is based, bears a certain significant negative evidential relation to theism. That is, S thinks that statements and testimonies reporting observations of design and order are best explained without reference to theism. If so, then we have a good *prima facie* epistemic reason to reject theism—that is, a reason that is sufficient for rejecting theism unless overridden by other reasons for accepting theism.

But just what are those “statements and testimonies” and what is the “significant negative evidential relation” that it bears to theism? We could let “O” stand for statements reporting the abundance and complexity of order and design in the universe and the testimonies one has encountered concerning observations

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 487.

<sup>33</sup> As Berkouwer says, “But for Paul the important thing is the break between the revelation of God and the reaction of man to that revelation” (G. C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955], 149).

<sup>34</sup> Much of the language of the argument reproduced and analyzed by Plantinga will be used and quoted here, though adapted to our particular overall purpose. See Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 470-75.

others have made of the complexity and design in the universe. So, we could say, “O” is that which bears a significant negative evidential relation to theism.

As Plantinga notes, and as we saw above, however, with respect to epistemic probability, “O is person relative: each of us will have her own O, and my O may differ from yours.”<sup>35</sup> In many cases where theistic arguments are relevant, it is the case, therefore, that my “O” is not the “O” of S (the non-theist). In such cases, S may have his own O, which he thinks bears a significant negative relation to theism.

But what is this “significant negative evidential relation to theism?” Let’s say S is committed to a Humean notion such that “the important question is whether or not any serious hypothesis that is logically inconsistent with theism explains some significant set of facts about order and design much better than theism does.”<sup>36</sup> It seems, thinks S, that there *is* such a serious hypothesis—naturalistic evolution (NE); it is NE that accounts for the abundance of design and order in our universe. So, for S, we have another claim, C:

C: NE explains the facts O reports much better than theism does.

At this point, we need a rough and ready explanation of the kind of probability that is relevant to our discussion. As we noted above, we can call it epistemic probability. It just so happens that we have one:

Relative to K, p is epistemically more probable than q, where K is an epistemic situation and p and q are propositions, just in case any fully rational person in K would have a higher degree of belief in p than in q.<sup>37</sup>

Given the difficulty of adequately defining epistemic probability, it is best simply to take this explanation as initially adequate, with one more clarification.

What does K include? What goes into an epistemic situation? . . . [L]et’s say initially that K, for a given person S, would include at least some of the other propositions S believes, as well as the experiences S is undergoing and perhaps has undergone; it would also include what S remembers, possibly a specification of S’s epistemic environment, and no doubt more besides.<sup>38</sup>

So, the argument consists of C—NE explains the facts O reports much better than theism does—and, if C is true, then we have a *prima facie* good reason for rejecting theism. The claim, in other words, is that the antecedent epistemic probability of O on NE is much greater than on theism, and because NE is a serious hypothesis and is inconsistent with theism, we can reject theism.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 470.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 472. Plantinga is interacting with, and quoting here, Paul Draper’s evidential argument from evil.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Given our discussion of epistemic probability above, K could be S’s background knowledge.

Since the claim is that the truth of C gives S a *prima facie* good reason to believe that theism is less probable than not, the natural question is, “less probable with respect to *what?*”

The answer must be K. The idea is that the truth of C gives me a *prima facie* good reason for thinking that theism is improbable with respect to my noetic situation; hence, unless I can find some reasons *for* theism, the rational thing to do is to give it up. We could put this by saying that . . . my knowledge of the truth of C gives me a defeater for theism, unless I can find some reasons for it; alternatively, it gives me a potential defeater for theism, a potential defeater that will be *actual* unless I can find those reasons for theism.<sup>39</sup>

So much for S’s commitment to non-theism. He thinks that NE, given O, is more probable than theism. In such a case, is it a probable apologetic argument that is needed? Is this the point where we attempt to insert probable reasons for theism?

Now Sudduth thinks that apologetic arguments are not aimed at producing belief in God in anyone; rather, they are aimed at showing theistic belief to be justified or warranted for a theist (p. 106). If Sudduth is correct, it is the purpose of theistic arguments, at least in part, to show that

D: Theism explains the facts O reports much better than NE

is more probable than C *for the theist* (T). So, our theistic argument is meant to provide epistemic support for T’s belief that D, such that S’s belief that C need not accrue to T, or such that S’s belief that C is not probable for T. That belief, C, we could say, rests in the claim that the antecedent epistemic probability of O given NE is much greater than the antecedent probability of O given theism. Our theistic argument from design is meant to call C into question, to give reasons for theism, thus providing for the probability of some degree of warrant for T, by way of epistemic probability. How might such an argument proceed?

Suppose that one of the keys to S’s belief that C is the literature available from those who hold to NE, and who have argued the existence of so-called “Junk DNA.” That literature, we could say, is a central part of O for S. It argues that, given that upwards of 95 percent of human DNA does not encode proteins, the notion of an intelligent designer seems ludicrous; more probably, no *intelligent* designer would design such a vast amount of useless, “junk” DNA in a human. However, the good news for T is that there is an increasing amount of current scientific literature that now argues that much of our non-encoding DNA provides other essential functions for human beings. To call such DNA “junk” would be scientifically unfeasible, given these latest arguments. So, T contends that O for S needs significant revision; and, once revised, O now tends more toward theism than its denial. Or, minimally, T contends that theism, given O for T, is more probable than not, and thus a rational option for T such that S cannot level the charge of irrationality against T based on T’s theism.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 473.

Given this scenario, at least one thing is obvious: the arguments on both sides are surely based on some kind of probability, as are so many scientific arguments, contrary to popular belief. The findings of ten years ago are now being undermined and negated by (some) current scientific research. Assuming some consistency in research methodology, this must mean that both theories partake of (some version of) epistemic probability; beliefs are negated or revised based on what scientific hypotheses one accepts. But is it the case, in this example, that T is offering a probable argument for theism to S?

If it is the case, then at least the following would have to be true. If A is theism and Q is the discovery of *useful*, rather than “junk,” DNA, then T is arguing that  $P_T(A/Q \ \& \ K) > .5$ . That is, T is arguing that the discovery that so-called “junk” DNA is, as a matter of fact, useful, should allow that O changes the probability quotient for T. Theism could obtain a higher degree of warrant, for T, given that “junk” DNA is no longer considered to be junk. The *design* of what had been considered “junk” DNA increases the probability of the existence of an intelligent designer, rather than the probability of NE.

This kind of argument surely falls under the “showing and knowing” distinction that Sudduth affirms. T is attempting to *show* S that the probability of theism is greater than S concedes, given the latest research on the (probable) usefulness of what was considered to be “junk” DNA. That is, T is arguing that O should be adjusted for S, or at least that T’s O, which includes the testimony of scientists on the usefulness of what was thought to be “junk” DNA, is properly included in T’s O, and thus gives some (probable) degree of warrant to theism for T. However, it would also be the case that, if T were asked, he would be clear about the fact that the use or lack thereof of human DNA was not the foundation of, or basis for, his believing in God. Thus, T’s *showing* is not in any direct way related to his *knowing*. T’s probabilistic reasoning is not the basis for his belief in God.

But the problems that plague this kind of “showing and knowing” example might be too weighty to make such an argument tenable, from a Reformed perspective. For example, as we have already seen, “O” itself is person relative. S might simply judge that the jury is still out on “junk” DNA, given the vast differences that obtain in scientific evidence of the usefulness of human DNA over the past decade. This might mean that S will have to adjust O, but there is plenty of research out there from scientists who still argue for NE as the only viable option. Will S now hold that T’s belief in God is justified or warranted, given Q? Perhaps, but if he does, the best S could say is that theism is warranted *for* T, though not for him. Perhaps, in this case, T may hold theism without the charge of irrationality from S. So, T’s theism is judged rational for T, though S will continue to hold his non-theistic beliefs, and hold *those* as rational for himself. But, if such is the case, the question of truth seems tangential, at best, to one’s belief. If NE is deemed rational for S, while theism is deemed rational for T, what might be the relation between what is rational and what is true? Does this mean that rationality itself is person-relative? Furthermore, is this what Christian apologetics is really meant to do in such circumstances?

It seems that, as with Plantinga and Sudduth, if the *sensus divinitatis* is damaged or otherwise weakened and inefficient, then perhaps the best one can hope for is a granting of a degree of warrant for theistic belief from those who do not believe in God. Perhaps our highest hopes, given sin's effects, are that other non-believers will not call us foolish for believing in God, but will allow to us some kind of person-relative rationality. Maybe the best we can hope for is a level playing field of rationality; my belief is warranted (to some degree) for *me*, and your opposing belief is warranted (to some degree) for you. But neither this view of the *sensus divinitatis* nor of apologetics can stand up to biblical scrutiny.

Let's think about this another way. Suppose Christian apologetics is aimed at defending the Christian faith *as true*. Suppose the defense offered is not simply meant to provide warrant for the one believing, but is rather meant to explain and testify to the very truth of Christianity itself in order, if God so wills, to change the mind and heart of the unbeliever. Suppose, as well, that the *sensus divinitatis* is what Scripture says it is. That is, suppose that all people everywhere know the true God, but, in Adam, continually and earnestly seek to suppress that truth in unrighteousness.

If this is the case, then, as we have said, any notion of proper function with respect to our cognitive faculties needs a serious and radical revision. Remember our statement above, that epistemic notions of probability require that the person assigning probability is *rational*. But if all of us, in Adam, always and everywhere suppress the truth in unrighteousness, then our cognitive faculties, at root, are fundamentally *irrational*.<sup>40</sup> If, say,  $P_s(A/Q \& K) < .5$ , even after S notes the current research against the idea of "junk" DNA, this will be the case, not only because of what S takes O to be, but, fundamentally, it will be the case because K includes the fact of S's suppression of the truth in unrighteousness. That is, given Scripture's account of our natural knowledge of God, *included in K* for everyone who remains in Adam is the fact that they will refuse to have God in their thoughts and lives; this refusal is, at bottom, irrational. It opposes the truth of the matter. It is contrary to the way things really are. So, any current research on "junk" DNA that shows it not to be junk will either be held in abeyance by S in hopes that other research negates it, or it will be deemed virtually irrelevant, or there will be some other form of rejection and suppression of the truth, given O, for S, and K. In other words, S will always and everywhere hold to the improbability (or impossibility<sup>41</sup>) of theism, no matter what facts are presented, given

<sup>40</sup> As Plantinga notes with respect to the function of the *sensus*, "Someone in whom this process was functioning properly would have an intimate, detailed, vivid, and explicit knowledge of God; she would have an intense awareness of his presence, glory, goodness, power, perfection, wonderful attractiveness, and sweetness . . ." (*Warranted Christian Belief*, 485). The problem, as we have said, is not that the *sensus* is malfunctioning, but that we suppress this intimate, deep, and personal knowledge of God that he reveals to us. The irrationality, therefore, is *not* with respect to the *sensus* per se, but to our cognitive faculties that take that knowledge and hold it down and exchange it for a lie, rendering our thinking foolish and our hearts darkened.

<sup>41</sup> For an argument against the impossibility of theism, see K. Scott Oliphint, "Something Much Too Plain to Say," in *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church; Essays in Honor of*

that his background knowledge will inevitably include a suppression of the knowledge of God that he has. He will start in the wrong place, so will invariably end in the wrong place. As Plantinga notes (with respect to the problem of evil as a defeater for Christian belief), “The atheologian can properly claim that evil constitutes a defeater for Christian belief, therefore, only if he already assumes that Christian belief is false.”<sup>42</sup> Once one begins with the assumption that the Christian God does not exist, an argument from probability will merely state that assumption in other ways. So also, once S begins with the suppression of the truth and knowledge of God in unrighteousness, S’s arguments will be different ways of stating that suppression, not of establishing or considering its contrary.

But maybe we’ve chosen an example that is too restrictive or narrow to serve the larger purpose. Maybe there are probable arguments of another sort that can comport with a defense of Christianity. What about one of the standard, more general arguments from design? Suppose the Reformed apologist argues that O is the set of propositions, statements, and testimonies to the fact that the universe is so complex in its design that theism must be more probable than not. Rather than pointing to a specific datum, such as the presence, or not, of “junk” DNA, the apologist is pointing to more of a cumulative case for design, a case that includes the larger scope of the universe itself. In that case, the argument might look something like this:

1. Human artifacts are products of intelligent design or purpose.
2. The universe resembles these human artifacts.
3. Therefore, the universe is (probably) a product of intelligent design or purpose.
4. But the universe is vastly more complex and gigantic than a human artifact.
5. Therefore, there probably is a powerful and vastly bigger and more intelligent designer who designed the universe.

Or, in terms of our probability formula, the probability of theism, given the design and complexity of the universe, is greater than .5.

There are at least two problems with this argument, which, by now, should be familiar to us. First, the epistemic probability of 3 above depends on one’s background knowledge, K. If, embedded in one’s background knowledge is a fundamental *dysfunction* with respect to one’s acknowledging the knowledge of God that is resident in every one of us, then the clear implication will be the rejection of 3, given K. Second, what is needed for 3 is a notion of epistemic certainty. If, as we noted above, a proposition is epistemically certain to the degree that it is warranted and no other propositions that we know of undermine or otherwise negate it, that certainty is dependent on what propositions are warranted for us. Given Rom 1 and our rebellious commitment to suppress and hold down what we know to be the case with respect to God, we will not ascribe warrant to any proposition that moves toward an affirmation of the true God.

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*Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.* (ed. Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 361-82.

<sup>42</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 492.

"But wait," you rightly protest, "haven't theistic proofs such as this been employed by the Reformed in order, at least, to answer the atheist and skeptic? And isn't it true that God is the designer and orderer of the universe? Aren't we just arguing the plain truth of the matter in such cases?"

The answer to all of these questions is yes. The problem, however, is that while  $\beta$  is epistemically certain for the Christian apologist, it is, at best, only probable, and probable to a less than .5 degree for the unbeliever, given the dynamic of the suppression of truth, which is included in K; given, in other words, the radical cognitive *dysfunction* that unbelief entails. Is it the case, then, that because such propositions are improbable for the unbeliever they should never be used? Sudduth's book addresses that question, of course, but the difference here is that the probability that inheres in such arguments does so due to the cognitive dysfunction of S, in the first place, and therefore is *probable* with respect to S, not with respect to the Christian apologist.

In other words, since it is the case, as Sudduth notes in places, that the *sensus divinitatis* just *is* knowledge of God, could it be that the probability argument above could be offered to S in *support* of that natural knowledge that is had but suppressed? If so, then  $P_s(A/Q \& K)$  being .5 or less would be meant to support what is naturally known (though suppressed), and thus testify explicitly to that which is already known (but suppressed) by S.

Perhaps it could, but what would the status of that argument be if, in fact,  $\beta$  were only probable both for T and for S? Sudduth would likely say that, since the argument was about showing and not knowing, nothing with respect to the foundation of our belief would be affected. But would the argument itself betray ideas contrary to Christian truth in this case? It seems that they would. If the "showing" partakes of epistemic probability for T and for S, whereas the "knowing" does not, how might the two ever meet? That which is probable cannot be, by definition, epistemically certain, whereas Christianity, and propositions entailed by it (e.g., the universe is designed by God) must be. In other words, K is determinative in any and all such arguments.

Not only so, but if K is going to undergo any kind of radical change in S, then S must move from one who is in Adam to one who is in Christ. To put the matter more in Sudduth's terms, one must move from *improperly* functioning, or *dysfunctional* cognitive faculties, to cognitive faculties that are, in principle, restored to their proper function. That movement is only possible if S is given the opportunity to "connect" his true knowledge of God, which he suppresses, by way of natural revelation with the true knowledge of God as it is given in Jesus Christ. Only the Holy Spirit can "connect" the two kinds of knowledge, but he uses the truth to do that. There can be no true and right "belief in God," therefore, unless it is belief in the Lord Jesus Christ (John 17:3). Any theistic belief other than faith and trust in the true God through Jesus Christ, then, is just more suppression of the true knowledge of God in unrighteousness.

In other words, theism is unwarranted in every form, save that which is had in and through Jesus Christ.<sup>43</sup> Given that all men know the true God, any acknowledgment of a god that is not the Triune God of Scripture is a perversion of that knowledge, a suppression, an exchange of the truth for a lie. Since that is true, apologetics should be less concerned about the warrant of theistic beliefs (since no theistic belief has warrant unless it is *Christian* theistic belief) and more centrally focused on presenting and arguing for the truth as it is found in Christ. That will include presentations of just who this true God *is*, but it must also include the sure and certain truth that is found only in Christ. The only way to “connect” natural revelation with special revelation is in the presentation of *the* Revelation, which is Christ himself. In that case, there is no room available for a Reformed apologist for an appeal to that which is, for him, probable, in a proper defense of Christianity.

It is long past time to bring these reflections to a close. Sudduth’s book surely allows for much more discussion than I have been able to include here. Hopefully, much more will be produced. In the end, as I stated earlier, this book is the finest available for a fascinating and helpful analysis of discussions in philosophy of religion on the Reformed objection to natural theology. Someday, perhaps, volume two could include a collaborative effort between the best of theology in this area and the best of philosophy on this subject.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> This is a sweeping statement that needs and deserves much more discussion than I can give it here. Briefly, though, it is possible, even likely, that I am using the notion of “warrant” here in a different way than it is often used in philosophy. The notion of warrant that I am using includes within it the actual truth of the matter, so that it ties the rationality of one’s knowledge to what is actually the case. It may be, on the other hand, in some philosophical discussions, that propositions can have warrant, at least to some degree, though they may not be true. What I am concerned to maintain is that one who holds to a theism that is not Christian theism is holding to an idolatrous notion, given what Scripture teaches in Rom 1:18ff. and elsewhere.

<sup>44</sup> Thanks to Michael Sudduth for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. It should be noted that, some months subsequent to the writing of this review, Sudduth announced his conversion to Vaishnava Vedanta.

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