

Religious Studies, Faith, and the Presumption of Naturalism

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Abstract

In a recent defence of what he calls “study by religion,” Robert Ensign suggests that alleged divine revelations represent public forms of knowledge, which should not be excluded from the academy. But at least according to two major Christian thinkers, namely Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, revelation is received by an act of faith, which rests on evidence that is person-relative and therefore not open to public scrutiny. If religious studies is to remain a public discipline, whose arguments may be evaluated by believers and non-believers alike, it should maintain its defeasible but not yet defeated presumption of naturalism.

Introduction

[1] In a recent article in the *Journal of Religion and Society*, Robert Ensign has put forward a vigorously-argued case in favour of the academic respectability of religious interpretations of reality. He argues that our programs in religion or religious studies should abandon what he calls the *Wissenschaft* principle: the idea that religion should be merely an object of study by entirely secular disciplines, rather than a means by which we interpret our world. The *Wissenschaft* principle, as spelt out by Ensign, is

based on a cluster of convictions. First among these is the belief that there are certain ideas that are “self-evident and universal,” capable of being known by any rational mind that has freed itself from all prior commitments ([16]). Appeal to such ideas allows one to attain a kind of knowledge that is unaffected by one’s context ([13]), knowledge that is “neutral, objective, essential, and value free” ([16]). Against this view Ensign cites the post-modern critique, which has revealed that “every human thought or system of thought is derived from the particular setting. . . of the thinker” ([17]). There are no foundational principles in the manner sought by the Enlightenment, least of all the *Wissenschaft* principle itself. The recognition of this fact opens the way to what Ensign calls “study by religion”: an approach that would allow religion, not merely to be the object of our study, but also to act as an interpretive lens through which we view the world. Such an approach would be “*allo-scientific*” in the sense that it would offer an alternative to scientific rationality ([35]). It would be of service to the whole academy, reminding us, for example, that there exist other forms of knowledge alongside the scientific ([39]), one of which is the distinctively religious means of knowledge, namely revelation ([40]).

[2] As Ensign notes, these arguments are not without precedent among scholars of religion ([29-34]), many of whom share his desire that theological perspectives be allowed to reshape the discipline. As one who feels uneasy about these suggestions, despite having contributed to them myself (Dawes 1996), there are various ways in which I might respond to Ensign’s arguments. I could suggest, for instance, that there *are* alternatives to philosophical foundationalism, whether empiricist or rationalist, that do not involve so radical a departure from the spirit of the Enlightenment. The philosophy of Karl Popper is nothing other than an extended effort to provide such an alternative, and more recent attempts will be mentioned below. We can therefore give up the crude foundationalism Ensign criticizes without being compelled to accept the epistemological relativism that he seems to endorse. But the present paper will focus on another aspect of Ensign’s argument. Ensign rightly notes that the distinctive form of knowledge claimed by believers is revelation. He goes on to argue that, contrary to the perception of secular critics of religion, revelation “is not a privatized form of knowing. History and practice have shown, on the contrary, that it is normally quite public” ([40]).

[3] What are we to make of this claim? It is, of course, true that the *means* of revelation – whether these be thought of as historical events or as prophetic

utterances giving rise to sacred scripture – are often public in nature. But one comes to know that these events or utterances *are* divine revelation by means of an act of faith. The question then becomes: Is *faith* “a privatized form of knowing,” or is it an act founded on public forms of evidence, open to the scrutiny of all? The present paper will try to answer this question from within the Christian tradition, for that is the tradition to which Ensign himself appeals. It will examine the understanding of faith found in the work of two thinkers, Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225-74) and John Calvin (1509-64), who represent at least important currents in Roman Catholic and Protestant thought. In the work of these theologians, does the act of faith give rise to a public form of knowledge? Are its grounds – the evidence on which it is based – open to scrutiny by believers and non-believers alike? If not, what are the consequences for religious studies?<1>

The Grounds of Faith

[4] Before proceeding with this investigation, a possible misunderstanding must be avoided. The expression “the grounds of faith” is ambiguous. The primary interest of both Aquinas and Calvin was in what I will call the *causal* sense of this expression. For both thinkers (in their different ways) the ground of faith is God himself, insofar as it is God who creates faith within the individual. In this causal sense, faith should not be regarded as the product of the human mind. It is the work of God. But there is a second sense of this expression, which I will describe as *evidential*. This refers to the grounds on which the individual recognizes that it is indeed God who has revealed those things that are to be believed. For both Aquinas and Calvin, faith is not without evidential grounds. For Aquinas (I will argue), these represent the grounds on which the act of faith is made; for Calvin, they are the grounds on which the believer is assured that what is known by faith is true. It is these *evidential* grounds of faith that are the focus of the present paper.

[5] To borrow some terms from contemporary philosophy, the distinction I have just made is not unrelated to that between “externalist” and “internalist” accounts of knowledge. Aquinas and Calvin offer an externalist account of faith. On the basis of their *causal* claim – that it is God who creates the act of faith within the individual – they also make *evidential* claims. They believe that there are grounds – reasons that are accessible to the believer and in this sense “internal” – on which one can know the truth of what is revealed. But when describing these grounds, they do so from an

externalist perspective, taking for granted that this “evidence” is produced by God. (We will see shortly what happens to their arguments if we do not share this assumption.) Any attempt to combine the causal and the evidential claim will lead to the age-old problem of the relationship of divine grace to human freedom. If faith is the work of God, can it also be said to be my work? Aquinas and Calvin will answer that question differently. Aquinas suggests that the evidential grounds of faith may enter into the very act of faith itself, as its motive. Calvin wishes to introduce these evidential grounds only after the event, as a confirmation of what is already believed.

[6] Given the context in which they are writing, it is entirely understandable that the account offered by both Calvin and Thomas is primarily causal (i.e. externalist). For modern sceptics, the key issue is evidential: What evidence *is* there – what evidence could there be – for their claims about God and about divine revelation? Although neither Aquinas nor Calvin entirely neglect this question, they were not writing for modern sceptics. For all kinds of reasons – social, psychological, and epistemic – such radical scepticism was at that time not an option (Febvre; MacIntyre 1974:74). Their audiences needed no convincing regarding the existence of the Christian God or the fact of revelation. But of course we moderns do. Although neither Aquinas nor Calvin were writing for us, there is no reason why we may not ask our own questions regarding the positions they adopt. If their positions are sound, they should survive our questions as well as those of their contemporaries.

Thomas Aquinas

[7] It is not easy to determine Thomas Aquinas’s attitude towards the grounds of faith, for reasons that relate to the distinction just made ([4]–[5] above). Aquinas’s primary interest is in what I have called the causal question (Shanley: 22): how does the grace of God produce the act of faith within the believer? The evidential question – how do we know that it *is* God who is speaking here? – was not his immediate concern. On the other hand, it is a corollary of Aquinas’s view that the causal question cannot be entirely separated from the evidential. If faith involves an act of the will and if that act of the will is not to be entirely arbitrary, there must be some grounds on which the individual believes. So Aquinas’s work does offer some answers to our questions. But to find those answers we must fill some of the gaps in his argument. In what follows, I have relied on Aquinas’s discussion of these matters in the *Summa Theologiae* as well as the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, and have filled the

gaps with the aid of some recent commentators, particularly Josef Pieper, Brian Shanley, and Alvin Voss.

[8] Aquinas's view may be approached by way of an important passage from the *Summa Theologiae*, namely his discussion of what he calls "the cause of faith." The first question dealt with here is the (causal) question of "whether faith is infused into man by God." It is worth citing Aquinas's reply in some detail.

Two things are requisite for faith. First, that the things which are of faith should be proposed to man. This is necessary in order that man believe any thing explicitly. The second thing requisite for faith is the assent of the believer to the things which are proposed to him. Accordingly, as regards the first of these, faith must be from God. Because those things which are of faith surpass human reason, and hence they do not come to man's knowledge unless God reveal them. . . . As regards the second, namely, man's assent to the things which are of faith, we may observe a twofold cause, either of one of external inducement, such as seeing a miracle, or being persuaded by someone to embrace the faith. Neither of these is a sufficient cause, since of those who see the same miracle, or hear the same sermon, some believe, and some do not. Hence we must assert another internal cause, which moves man inwardly to assent to matters of faith. . . . Therefore faith, as regards the assent which is the chief act of faith, is from God moving man inwardly by grace (ST II-II 6,1 = 1920:86).

In Aquinas's view, therefore, neither eyewitness experience of events such as miracles nor arguments in favour of faith are sufficient to produce faith (Shanley: 26). What is also required is another cause, namely the inward influence of divine grace. This, of course, is what Aquinas means elsewhere when he says that faith is a *theological* virtue (ST I-II 62,3 = 1920:151-52): an act which the human being is incapable of making for herself, but which is produced within her by the grace of God.

[9] This brings us to our evidential question. What does the grace of God do within the individual in order to produce faith? If it is God who brings about the individual's act of faith and if that act of faith involves an act of the will (SCG 3,148 = 1924:182-183), then what does God do within the individual to bring about this act of the will? It is here that we must fill the gaps in Aquinas's discussion. A defensible filling-in of the gaps suggests that the grace of God motivates faith by producing in the individual a desire for God as the first truth (ST II-II 1,1 = 1920:3-5). This desire

gives rise to an act of the will commanding the intellect to believe, an act by which the individual accepts what is revealed precisely *as revealed*, that is to say, on the authority of God. One's desire for God as the first truth leads one to recognize that it is God who has spoken these things. They are therefore to be accepted as true. In Christian tradition, we might add, it is believed that demons also have faith (James 2:19). But Aquinas distinguishes faith as theological virtue from demonic faith on precisely these grounds. The faith of demons is not a gift of grace, since it is not based on what Aquinas calls "an affection for the good" (*affectus boni*), but merely on compelling evidence that it is God who has spoken.

[10] In the case of those revealed matters that entirely surpass the reach of human reason (matters such as the Trinitarian nature of God), the will commands belief in the absence of any evidence, that is to say, in the absence of insight into the truth of the matters in question (ST II-II 1,5 = 1920:10-13). In the case of those matters which are also accessible to reason (SCG 1,3-4 = 1924:4-9), there *are* forms of evidence and reasoning that may be brought in (ideally after the event) to lend support to the act of faith (SCG 1,6 = 1924:11-13). It is on the basis of reasons of this sort that the demons believe (ST II-II 5,2 = 1920:78-80). It is worth noting that for Aquinas the act of faith is a meritorious act. But its merit depends on what grounds the individual's faith. The merit of faith is not diminished if one brings forward reasons to support what is *already* freely accepted out of love for God as the first truth. But there is no merit in believing merely on the basis of such reasons (ST II-II 2,10 = 1920:49-51).

[11] Let us pause for a moment to summarize the argument. For Aquinas, what is known by faith is not known on the basis of the reasons which may (legitimately) be brought forward in its favour. There are indeed such reasons (a fact which distinguishes Aquinas from Kierkegaard), but they ought not to be the grounds on which the individual believes. Indeed they do not seem sufficient to support the act of faith. Faith therefore relies on considerations that (as Aquinas writes) "are sufficient to move the will but not the intellect" (Shanley: 32; Pieper: 37; Voss: 52). In other words, the grounds on which the individual believes are not primarily cognitive. As Aquinas himself writes, "faith has certitude on the basis of something outside the order of cognition, something belonging rather to affect" (Shanley: 32; Pieper: 37; Voss: 52). "Affect" (here Aquinas uses the synonym *affectio*) should not be taken here in our modern sense of mere emotion. It does involve desire, but for

medieval writers *affectus* is “the organ of the soul that can create an act of will to reach towards and enjoy an object” (Steinmetz). Since this *affectus boni* (“desire for the good”) is what motivates the act of faith, it may be more fully described as a desire for God that enables the individual to recognize in the revealed message the voice of the one who is the object of that desire.

[12] Without suggesting that John Henry Newman is an authoritative interpreter of Aquinas, there is a passage in his Oxford sermons of 1826-43 that expresses very clearly what I understand Aquinas to be saying. In Newman’s words, “we *believe* because we *love*” (1970:236). A person has faith, he writes,

on these two grounds, – the word of its human messenger, and the likelihood of the message. And why does he feel the message to be probable? Because he has a love for it, his love being strong, though the testimony is weak. He has a keen sense of the intrinsic excellence of the message, of its desirableness, of its likeness to what it seems to him Divine Goodness would vouchsafe did He vouchsafe any, of the need of a Revelation, and of its probability. Thus Faith is the reasoning of a religious mind, or of what Scripture calls a right or renewed heart, which acts upon presumptions rather than evidence; which speculates and ventures on the future when it cannot make sure of it (1970:203).

Newman describes faith as “a reaching forth after truth amid darkness, upon the warrant of certain antecedent notions or spontaneous feelings” (1970:297). The feelings involved are not mere emotions; they represent “the moral perception” which is innate within each of us (1970:60). On the basis of this understanding of faith, we might note, unbelief is a very serious matter. It does not represent a simple cognitive failure (as though the unbeliever merely fails to grasp the strength of the evidence). Rather, it suggests a faulty ethical orientation, a failure in the heart of the unbeliever to be correctly oriented towards the good. If the unbeliever’s heart were correctly disposed, she would grasp (intuitively, as it were) the truth of the message.

[13] A possible objection to this interpretation of Aquinas is that it seems (at first sight) to make this greatest of Catholic theologians into a semi-Pelagian. It might be read to suggest that for Aquinas the grace of God takes the individual only so far on the path to faith, by arousing a correct internal disposition. The act of faith itself would be the work of the individual concerned. If my presentation gives this impression, it needs to be corrected. For Aquinas, it is not merely the *motive* for the

act of faith that comes from God; the very *ability* to make the act of faith is also his gift. Faith is entirely God's work (SCG 3,152 = 1924:190-192). But the grace of God embraces rather than bypasses the will of the person believing (ST I 22,2): "for Aquinas, I am free not *in spite of* God but *because of* God" (Davies 1998:184; SCG 3,148 = 1924:182-183). The grace of God (the causal ground of faith) therefore creates the act whereby I freely choose to believe on the basis of a correct ethical orientation (the evidential ground of faith). Further discussion of this notoriously difficult issue must be left to scholars of Aquinas.

John Calvin

[14] When we approach the work of the sixteenth-century Reformer, John Calvin, we find once again that his questions are not identical with our own. Calvin is a theologian, not a philosopher of religion. Calvin, too, is primarily interested in the causal question. He is (if anything) even more insistent than was Aquinas that faith is the work of God. Nonetheless, he was less able than was Aquinas to neglect the evidential question, on account of the Reformers' attacks on the authority of the late medieval Church. The question of *how we know* that something is revealed by God had become a key issue in the debates separating Reformed from Roman Catholic Christianity. In what follows, I will be relying on Calvin's treatment of these matters in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559).

[15] Calvin's primary target is the Roman Catholic position. More precisely, it is the position of those who would bolster the authority of the Church by arguing that the authority of Scripture rests on the judgement of the Church (Inst. 1.7.1 = 1961:75). But to argue against this view is to raise the question: On what grounds, then, *can* we be certain that Scripture is the word of God? In one respect, of course, Aquinas and Calvin are here taking different paths. For Aquinas, there is an element of freedom about the act of faith that is lacking in Calvin's discussion. Calvin is not discussing (even indirectly) what might motivate the act of faith. Rather, he is discussing how those who have faith might be assured that their faith is well founded. But in other respects, it is striking how close Calvin's attitude is to that which I have reconstructed from the work of Aquinas.

[16] We have seen that Aquinas regards the faith of demons as quite different from the faith that is a product of divine grace, since it rests merely on intellectual grounds.

In a similar way Calvin regards those who demand rational proofs of the authority of Scripture as “impious men” (*homines profani*, Inst. 1.7.4 = 1961:79 [“unbelieving men”]). It is true that powerful arguments can be produced in favour of the authority of Scripture. But if one relied on those arguments alone, its authority would always remain in doubt (Inst. 1.8.1 = 1961:81-82). Such arguments are not strong enough to provide the confidence the believer requires (Inst. 1.8.13 = 1961:92). Calvin, like Aquinas before him, insists that their proper role is merely supportive. At best, they merely confirm what is already known for certain on other grounds. What are those other grounds? The authority of Scripture, for Calvin, rests on the way in which it bears witness to itself in the heart of the believer. In this sense, faith in the word of God rests on nothing other than the word of God (Inst. 1.7.4 = 1961:79). More precisely, God testifies to the authority of his word by way of the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. This provides a certainty that goes beyond anything reason could provide, a certainty which is (in Calvin’s own words) based on “what each believer experiences within himself” (Inst. 1.7.5 = 1961:80-81).

[17] It is very difficult to give a *philosophical* rather than a *theological* description of Calvin’s inner testimony of the Spirit. What Calvin seems to be offering is a kind of phenomenology of belief, a description of the experience of being a believer that draws attention to the certainty that accompanies it. In general, there are at least three reasons to distrust such phenomenological accounts. There is the highly debatable assumption that what the speaker relates as his own experience will correspond to that of every similarly-placed human being (Dennett: 67). There is the not unrelated danger that the experience being “described” may in fact be being evoked in the listener by the very act of describing it (Proudfoot: 8). Finally, there is the danger that such accounts will “mistake theorizing for observation” (Dennett: 67-68, 94), filling the phenomenological gaps with claims that are the product of our own (unconscious) inferences. But in this context we may set such difficulties aside. We may take Calvin at his word and assume that an experience similar to that he describes does take place within the believer. After all, this corresponds to what many believers report: often, at least, religious faith does seem to be accompanied by a sense of certainty.

[18] But what lies behind this certainty? Calvin, of course, relying on his causal account of how faith is produced, would simply reply “the Holy Spirit.” But that answer cuts no ice with the sceptic, who is not prepared to concede this assumption. (Indeed it involves a circularity which ought to be problematic even for Calvin.)

What the sceptic requires is a *non-theological* account. One author who has attempted this is Paul Helm. While the argument of this paper does not rest on the accuracy of Helm's exposition, his description may shed further light on our discussion. Helm defines Calvin's view of faith in the following way: "A religiously believes *p* if A assents firmly to *p* (where *p* is taken to be [a] revealed proposition) because A intuits, in grasping the meaning of *p*, that it is revealed by God" (114). What is the nature of this intuitive knowledge? In Calvin's view, Helm suggests, "God authenticates himself to men in Scripture and enables them to discern this fact by arousing and satisfying certain distinctive needs" (106). The certainty of faith, in other words, depends on the way in which the Bible is able to answer the questions and satisfy the desires which are aroused by a suitably receptive reading of the Bible.

[19] There are two matters that ought to be clarified immediately. First of all, what Calvin is putting forward is not an *argument from* religious experience, namely an inference from a particular experience to its cause. It is simply a *description* of an experience, namely the feeling of confidence that arises from the believer's encounter with the Bible. Secondly, while Calvin uses the language of self-authentication, what he is describing is not (strictly speaking) a self-authenticating *experience*, namely an experience that is self-evidently from God (Helm: 105). For Calvin, it is the *Bible* that is self-authenticating. But the Bible demonstrates its authority *by way of* an experience, namely the confidence that arises in the heart of the one who reads it in faith.

[20] We have already seen that Aquinas sees faith as rooted in affectivity rather than mere cognition. In Calvin the affective dimension of faith is more pronounced. Indeed he attacks the theologians of his day for what he regards as too intellectualist a view (Inst. 3.2.33 = 1961:581). In the *Institutes* Calvin refers to the conviction of faith as "a conviction that requires no reasons," although he immediately adds that it is "a knowledge with which the best reason agrees" (Inst. 1.7.5 = 1961:80). In another passage he admits that the knowledge of faith "consists in assurance rather than comprehension" (Inst. 3.2.14 = 1961:560), since what is known by faith is more "felt" than "understood" (Inst. 3.2.14 = 1961:559), while elsewhere he suggests that the seat of faith is in the heart (*in corde*) rather than in the head (*in cerebro*) (Forstman: 101).

Faith and Knowledge

[21] Two conclusions emerge from this brief analysis of the (evidential) grounds of faith in Aquinas and Calvin. The first is that the grounds on which the believer claims to know the truth of an alleged divine revelation are private (i.e. person-relative and incommunicable) rather than public (i.e. intersubjectively-accessible). The second has to do with the reliability of the process by which faith is grounded. Only the first of these is essential to my argument, but the second emerges from a discussion of the first.

Person-Relative “Knowledge”

[22] It is difficult to find the correct terminology for the distinction I am attempting to make. A number of traditional contrasts could be employed – private versus public knowledge, subjective versus objective knowledge, personal versus impersonal knowledge, first-person versus third-person knowledge – but each is potentially misleading. What needs to be kept in mind is the context of the present discussion, which is that of the study of religion in the academy. If the (evidential) grounds of faith were public, as Robert Ensign suggests, then they would be available to anyone who was able to take part in the discussion. In particular, they could be understood and assessed by believers and non-believers alike. The evidence that, for instance, the Bible is divinely revealed would be “on the table” for anyone capable of understanding the arguments involved. In this sense it would be intersubjectively-accessible (Clayton 1989: 7). But what we find in Aquinas and Calvin is that the key (evidential) grounds of faith – those that are indispensable and not merely supportive – are what I will call “person-relative.” They are person-relative not in the weak sense that any knowledge may be person-relative (only certain people can understand Gödel’s proof), but in the strong sense that some people are forever barred, in principle, from the evidence in question. They can have no knowledge of that evidence for reasons that have nothing to do with their intellectual capacity.

[23] Does Aquinas’s view of faith represent a public form of knowledge, of the type to which Ensign appeals? On the basis of Aquinas’s causal account, the grounds of faith might seem entirely objective, since they are nothing other than God himself. Insofar as his evidential claim is grounded in his causal claim, it seems unassailable. But if we are not prepared to concede the causal claim — the plausibility of which, after all, rests on the evidence that may be brought in its favour — the evidential claim seems much more problematic. For Aquinas, the “knowledge” (if it be so

called) to which faith gives rise is based on a decision freely made by individuals, a decision grounded not in any intersubjectively-accessible evidence that may be brought in its favour, but on an interior disposition, an orientation of the person towards God. This interior disposition, this desire for God as the first truth, does not represent a form of evidence that is open to public scrutiny. Aquinas's own words confirm this conclusion. He writes that to know something by faith is to know it by way of "a certain interior light," which "raises the mind to the perception of things that it cannot reach by means of its natural light" (SCG 3,154 = 1924:194). An interior light is surely not an intersubjectively-accessible form of knowledge.

[24] Nor does John Calvin's view fare any better. Once again, Calvin's argument appears to work if we concede his causal claim. If, for example, we accept that the believer's sense of certainty could *only* be caused by the Holy Spirit, then we would have to conclude that it has the most objective of groundings, namely God himself. But once we refuse to concede this, once we even *entertain the possibility* that this certainty may have some other source, it becomes clear that it is in no sense *public* evidence (Helm: 177-178). It is a sense of conviction, a sense of certitude, which has felt evidential force only for those who enjoy it and who firmly believe its source to be God.<2> Unlike, for instance, an inferential argument from religious experience, it is not a form of evidence or argument whose merits or demerits can be scrutinized by believers and non-believers alike. The felt evidential force of this "inner testimony" is strictly person-relative. (Actually, this is not quite true. The alleged *merits* of this experience – its felt evidential force – cannot be demonstrated publicly, but one can demonstrate its *demerits*, as I will do in a moment.) Calvin's doctrine of election (I leave aside the difficult question of its relation to Aquinas's) only highlights this fact. The inner testimony of the Spirit is a form of "evidence" or assurance that is available only to those whom God has chosen. Calvin can therefore dismiss those who question the authority of Scripture simply by suggesting they are not among the elect (Dowey: 106).

[25] It follows that for both Aquinas and Calvin faith represents a kind of personal illumination, a person-relative or (if one prefers) first-person experience that is by definition incommunicable (Inst. 1.4.5 = Calvin 1961:81). Of course, while the believer's own experience is not directly accessible to others, she may still testify to it. By describing it to others, she may invite them to experience an analogous inner illumination of their own. Indeed the believer could even argue that in this sense the

evidential force of her experience *is* intersubjectively-accessible. It is intersubjectively-accessible insofar as anyone may have a similar experience who approaches the Bible in the right spirit. The truth in question *is* a public truth insofar as any person is able to make the same act of faith and arrive at a similar sense of certainty.

[26] There are at least two problems with this argument. The first is theological. To argue that anyone may attain the same sense of certainty is to assume that faith *is* an option which is open to all, rather than a gift of God which he bestows on those whom he chooses. As we have just seen, the latter is Calvin's view (if not Aquinas's). Of course, it may be that God offers this gift to everyone. This would admittedly resolve the problem, but it leaves a second objection unanswered. This second objection is more directly philosophical. It has to do with whether faith, as described above, has the characteristics one would expect of any reliable source of knowledge.

Some Epistemological Reflections

[27] The central argument of the present paper rests on one claim: namely, that the grounds on which things are said to be known by faith are not intersubjectively-accessible. But the discussion has reached the point where a second question needs to be addressed, the question of the reliability of faith as a means of accessing reality. The two questions are in principle distinct, but the context demands that I address the second issue as well as the first. If faith is understood in the manner of Aquinas and Calvin, two problems present themselves immediately.

(a) A Subjective Truth-Theory

[28] The difficulties are most evident in Calvin's exposition, although I believe they are also present in Aquinas's. As long as Calvin continues to speak in theological terms, relying on his own causal account of faith, his argument might seem unobjectionable. If the Holy Spirit inspired Scripture, one would expect that the same Spirit will attest its authority within the heart of the believer. The problem is that Calvin is appealing to the internal testimony of the Spirit precisely in order to defend the authority of Scripture. In this context, his argument is viciously circular. By describing the experience in question *as* the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit (the latter a biblical term), Calvin is simply relying on biblical authority in order to

demonstrate biblical authority. (I will return to this problem in a moment.) In any case, in order to understand what Calvin is talking about, I have tried to translate this “inner testimony” into non-theological terms. In so doing, I have suggested that it represents a firm sense of certainty (or assurance) born of the believer’s encounter with the biblical message. But one we refuse to concede Calvin’s causal claim, what evidential force should we attribute to this confidence? Even if one finds oneself among those fortunate people who enjoy this assurance, should one regard it as a reliable indication of truth?

[29] To argue that one should seems to be adopting an extreme form of what Karl Popper describes as a *subjective* theory of truth (1963:227). Such theories imply that the truth of a proposition is reliably indicated either by some quality of the proposition or by the state of mind that accompanies its contemplation. The best-known subjective theory of truth is that of Descartes, who contended that ideas can be known to be true by virtue of the fact that they are clear and distinct. Clarity and distinctness are the qualities that make such ideas self-authenticating. The particular subjective theory of truth implicit in Calvin’s view suggests that ideas can be known to be true by virtue of the sense of certainty that accompanies them. (For a cautious enunciation of precisely this principle, in a Roman Catholic context, see Newman 1947:266.) But whatever may be said about other subjective theories of truth, this one seems untenable, both on religious and on epistemological grounds. Religiously, there exist apparently incompatible doctrinal systems, each of which seems capable of giving rise to seemingly analogous feelings of certainty among its adherents. Epistemologically, it has long been evident (especially from developments in mathematics and physics) that a feeling of certainty, even a feeling of self-evidence, is not by itself a reliable indication of truth (Hahn).

(b) A Circular Argument

[30] Throughout this discussion, I have insisted that I am writing from the position of the sceptic, who will not accept *without question* the causal view of faith put forward by Aquinas and Calvin. But is this refusal the sign of mere atheistic prejudice? If it is true that an externalist account of faith (one that sees it as the work of God) can offer the justification we desire, why should I resist it? The reason is simple. The problem with the externalist perspective on the evidential grounds of faith – from the point of view of the modern sceptic – is that it assumes the truth of

that which it is trying to prove. Recall that for Aquinas the act of faith is only possible if both the intellect and the will are properly disposed (ST II-II 4,2 = 1920:61). In what does this proper disposition consist? The customary answer is: it consists in an acceptance of certain conceptions of God and of human nature, conceptions that predispose one to religious faith (Pieper: 60-63). It follows that this view of the cognitive reliability of faith takes for granted – not merely “the possibility of the existence of God,” as Shanley suggests (25), but also – many of the very beliefs which the act of faith is supposed to ground. (See also Newman 1947: 316-317, 321, 374.) This circularity may not have been a problem in the thirteenth century, when such conceptions were taken for granted, but it is surely a problem today.

[31] This vicious circularity becomes very clear in the work of Calvin. For Calvin, the self-authenticating character of Scripture can be known only by those who have already (to some degree) accepted its authority, who are prepared to read it as a word from God addressed to them. As Karl Barth writes, “the Bible cannot come to be God’s Word if it is not this already” (219). Adopting Helm’s less theological terminology, we can say that it is only by identifying one’s needs in biblical terms that one can experience the satisfaction of those needs. If one no longer identifies one’s needs in biblical terms, the Bible will no longer appear self-authenticating (Helm: 106). It was a slightly different expression of this circularity that led David Friedrich Strauss (1808-74) to describe Calvin’s doctrine as “the Achilles’ heel of the Protestant system” (136). How do we know that what we experience within us is indeed the testimony of the Holy Spirit? Calvin’s answer (against the enthusiasts of his day) is that we know it is the testimony of the Spirit if it accords with Scripture (Inst. 1.9.2 = 1961:94). But how do we know of the authority of Scripture? By way of the inner testimony of the Spirit.

[32] What then can we say? Religious faith in the manner in which it is understood by Aquinas and Calvin cannot be regarded as yielding a reliable form of knowledge. It is true that the act of faith can give rise to a sense of certainty within the individual. While that sense of certainty may be all the individual requires, the question remains as to its reliability as an indication of truth. But on the face of it, this sense of certainty seems a most *unreliable* indication of truth. To invite others to experience this sense of certainty is to invite them to experience a fact that is of considerable psychological but little epistemic interest.

(c) A Response: The Work of Alvin Plantinga

[33] Perhaps the only way of avoiding this conclusion is to deny that faith *requires* evidence or argument. This is precisely the strategy adopted by Alvin Plantinga, who insists that religious faith may be regarded as “properly basic,” in the sense that it is not the result of argument or of appeal to evidence (Plantinga 1981; 2000:175). It simply arises within the individual when she is placed in the appropriate circumstances. Calvin’s account of the supernatural mechanisms by which faith is produced do offer an (externalist) warrant for this faith, but this causal account need not be convincing to the sceptic. Indeed Plantinga willingly concedes that to the sceptic it will seem to suffer from a fatal circularity, since it appeals to the authority of Scripture to support the authority of Scripture (1998:305; 2000:351). But Plantinga defends his position from this charge by noting that he is not writing for the sceptic. He is writing for those for whom Christian belief is already a given. The circularity would only be a problem if the warrant were the *basis* of the person’s belief. But that is precisely what it is not (Plantinga 2000:352). Since religious belief is basic, it requires so such foundation.

[34] Plantinga’s project requires more extensive discussion than can be offered here. But even if it were successful, it would cause no damage to the central argument of this paper. On the contrary, it would lend it further support. If Plantinga is right in arguing that faith does not require evidence or argument, then there is no point in my arguing that Calvin’s sense of certainty proves nothing. It does not need to prove anything. But in its admission that Calvin’s arguments (Plantinga’s “warrant”) have no force for the non-believer, his work merely highlights the principal claim I am making: that faith represents a person-relative and not an intersubjectively-accessible form of alleged knowledge.

The Presumption of Naturalism

[35] If we understand faith in the ways outlined by Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, then it will be difficult to argue that it should be the basis of a publicly-recognized academic discipline. The above argument has suggested two reasons why this is the case: the person-relative character of the grounds on which faith-claims are thought to be true, and the unreliability of such a procedure as a means of accessing reality. For the rest of this paper, I wish to leave aside the question of the epistemic reliability

of faith (which Plantinga argues the believer may take for granted) and rest my case solely on its person-relative character. The problem with basing an academic discipline on faith-claims is that faith does not represent an intersubjectively-accessible form of knowledge, the grounds for which are available to believers and non-believers alike. It is true that both Aquinas and Calvin recognize the existence of public forms of evidence in support of faith. But even in the thirteenth or the sixteenth century these grounds did not seem sufficient to produce faith; they were certainly not sufficient to give faith its distinctive confidence and certainty.

[36] Faced with this situation, what is the scholar of religions to do? On the one side, there is Ensign's "study by religion" option, which (at least in its traditional form) involves appealing to forms of assurance that cannot be intersubjectively examined (and that on closer examination may merely beg the question). On the other side, there is the option actually adopted by the founders of religious studies in the nineteenth century, namely to make religion the *object* of study rather than (as Ensign suggests) the interpretive lens *through which* we study. If we wish our discipline to be a public form of enquiry, utilizing forms of evidence and argument that may be scrutinized by believers and non-believers alike, the second is the option we should reaffirm. The rest of this paper will be devoted to examining a particular expression of this option, which I will describe as the presumption of naturalism.

[37] What do I mean by this phrase? I should deal first of all with that most contested of terms, namely naturalism. There are various types of philosophical naturalism. There exists, for example, an *ontological* naturalism, which holds that "every real entity either consists of or is somehow ontically grounded in the objects countenanced by the hypothetically completed empirical sciences" (Moser and Yandell: 4). A weaker position is *methodological* naturalism, which insists that in order to be considered reliable, claims about the world should have been arrived at, or at least should have survived criticism by, the methods of the natural sciences. The position I am wishing to advocate here is still weaker. It makes no positive claims about the nature of real entities or about the methods by which we may come to know them. It is content to leave these questions open. The naturalism which forms the basis of my presumption of naturalism is entirely negative in its scope. It merely excludes the supernatural. More precisely, it excludes *explanations or interpretations whose interpretive or explanatory force depends on the beliefs, symbols or narratives of one or more religious traditions*. It is, in this sense, a "soft"

rather than a “hard” naturalism (Olafson: 7-8). I freely admit that such a negative definition of naturalism does not tell us very much (Nielsen: 29), but it is all we need to distinguish secular from theological approaches to religion.

[38] Three points may be made immediately about this minimal definition of naturalism. First, it does not fall prey to the charge levelled by Moser and Yandell, namely that it is self-defeating. There is nothing self-defeating about the idea that supernatural explanations are to be excluded from a discipline to the extent (and only to the extent) that they rely on claims whose basis is not open to intersubjective scrutiny. Second, my argument suffers no injury from postmodern critiques of objectivity. If the secular study of religion strives for objectivity, it is for that entirely defensible form of objectivity that is constituted by intersubjective testability (Popper 2002:22; Clayton 1989:9). Finally, there is nothing which would limit my argument to religious matters. In the context of the study of religion, my argument supports naturalism in that it (provisionally!) excludes religious explanations. But it would also exclude from the academy *any* explanation or interpretation that appealed to person-relative forms of evidence. If some allegedly “scientific” claims could be shown to rest on similar grounds, they, too, would be disqualified.

[39] I should emphasize that what I am advocating here is a *presumption* of naturalism. The phrase calls to mind Anthony Flew’s famous essay on the presumption of atheism. Indeed there may be a sense in which my position is a corollary of Flew’s, although the grounds on which I am arguing for it are different from his. It is a presumption in the same sense as intended by Flew, namely one which resembles the legal presumption of innocence. It is a starting point for enquiry and the default position to which one falls back in the absence of good evidence to the contrary. But it is a presumption rather than an assumption (Flew: 33), since it could (in principle) be defeated. It could be defeated by showing that the grounds on which I have argued in its favour no longer apply. To defeat the presumption, one would need to show that there existed a form of intersubjectively-accessible evidence or argument in favour of the truth of the doctrinal scheme of a particular religious tradition. By intersubjectively-accessible, I mean simply that this evidence and argumentation would be such that its probative force could be recognized by believers and non-believers alike. (Of course, there are all kinds of reasons why the non-believer may withhold her assent [Newman 1947:125-126] – perhaps out of a feeling that there *must* be an error somewhere – but she would have to admit that the

arguments as presented are sound and that she can find no fault with their premises.) Note that this task goes far beyond that of demonstrating the existence of a God who corresponds to the God of a particular revealed religion. It also involves the provision of intersubjectively-accessible evidence in favour of the divine authority of a particular means of revelation (whether the Bible, the Qur'an, or some other document of religious history).

[40] To remain with our example of Christianity, it is worth noting how rarely this task has been attempted. Of course, this fact reflects, not only the difficulty of the project, but also the particular view of faith that this paper has attempted to illustrate. However, there are exceptions – one thinks, for example, of the great eighteenth-century apologist William Paley (1743-1805), from whom Newman distanced himself for precisely this reason (1947:322-24) – and it is these that might offer a way of defeating the presumption of naturalism. Among contemporary philosophers of religion, Richard Swinburne is perhaps the best-known advocate of a publicly-defensible theism. Swinburne even attempts to defend adherence to a particular religious tradition, on what he believes to be intersubjectively-demonstrable grounds (1981:173-97; 1992:85-97). But whatever the merits of Swinburne's position, the thinker I will focus on here is not a philosopher but a theologian, namely Wolfhart Pannenberg. Pannenberg's position is particularly interesting since it involves a redefinition of faith. To this extent it involves a departure from the traditional understanding examined above, but one which (if it were to succeed) would move the evidence for Christianity entirely into the public realm.

[41] Setting himself in opposition to Karl Barth and the other dialectical theologians – especially Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) – Pannenberg insists that the revelation of God in human history is a *public* revelation, open to “anyone who has eyes to see” (1968:135). He strongly opposes the idea that divine revelation can be recognized only by the eyes of faith, arguing that this smacks of the secret knowledge of Gnostic teaching. If this is the case, one might respond, why do we need faith? Pannenberg's answer is that we do not need faith to fill some gap in our knowledge of the past. If this were the case, he argues, one would have to abandon being a Christian; such a faith would be little more than “a state of blissful gullibility” (1968:138). True faith, Pannenberg argues, relies on facts that can be reliably and independently established. But it remains faith – an act directed towards what it is not yet known – insofar as it directs the person in trust towards the future. For Pannenberg, the key fact which he

believes can be reliably established and on which faith can rest is the resurrection of Jesus.

[42] Here is a theological program which, if successful, would defeat the presumption of naturalism. I have argued elsewhere that at least in this respect Pannenberg's program is *not* successful. His arguments in favour of the resurrection of Jesus rely (as he willingly admits) on an acceptance of the apocalyptic vision of history. But he can offer no independent evidence of the truth of that vision (Dawes 2001: 335-341). It is also significant that when discussing the place of Christianity among the world religions, Pannenberg lapses into an understanding of the evidential value of personal experience that comes remarkably close to the tradition he claims to have rejected (Pannenberg 1971:104-5; Dawes 2001:328-329). Given the difficulties facing his project, this lapse is hardly surprising. But until his initial project, or something closely resembling it, can be shown to have succeeded, the presumption of naturalism remains undefeated.

A Final Objection

[43] I will end by anticipating a further argument from the defenders of theological approaches to religion. This will take us back to Robert Ensign's essay, with which I began. The exponents of communitarian theologies (such as that of George Lindbeck, whose work Ensign cites with approval) will probably respond to such criticisms with a *tu quoque* argument. If theology has problems grounding its claims, they will argue, those problems are more widely shared. The most naturalistic disciplines, no less than theology, hang in mid-air (as it were), being unable to trace their own principles back to secure foundations. (This seems to be what is behind the anti-foundationalist critique to which Ensign refers.) It is not only in the field of theology that we find traditions of thought whose starting-points are entirely contingent and whose standards of judgement are internal to the traditions in question. The same phenomenon is to be found in ethics (MacIntyre 1988), and the sciences (Lakatos; Laudan; MacIntyre 1977). "Every such form of enquiry," as MacIntyre writes, "begins in and from some condition of pure historical contingency, from the beliefs, institutions, and practices of some particular community which constitute a given" (1988:354). If this is the case, what is to stop the theologian from adopting as a starting-point the beliefs, institutions, and practices of her particular (religious) community?

[44] There is much truth in these general epistemological observations, which at first sight do seem to offer a basis for theological claims. Indeed I adopted this very argument in an earlier essay (Dawes 1996), about which I now have some reservations. (I am no longer convinced that the starting-point of the modern scientific tradition was as contingent as this argument suggests.) However, in the present context, such arguments are simply beside the point. Even if one accepts such radically anti-foundationalist views of knowledge, they offer no grounds for abandoning the presumption of naturalism, as here defined. That presumption is based on the essentially person-relative grounds on which religious assertions are customarily made (a fact to which I did not pay sufficient attention in my earlier work). Theological approaches to religion are unacceptable in a public forum *not* because their starting points are contingent, but because the decisive grounds on which they are held to be true are not accessible to believers and non-believers alike. As I have argued, this presumption of naturalism would be defeated by the development of public norms of rationality which would allow one to defend religious interpretations of reality over against their naturalistic rivals and to adjudicate between competing religious traditions. Attempts have been made to provide such norms for the fields of ethics (MacIntyre 1988) and science (Lakatos; Laudan; MacIntyre 1977). There have been some attempts to do the same for the field of religion. But they have not met with widespread acceptance even among Christian thinkers, whose tendency has been to retreat still further into the person-relative character of faith (Dawes 2001). There are therefore good reasons why scholars of religion should continue to insist on naturalistic explanations.

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Notes

1. I am grateful to Dr Heather Dyke and Andrew Craig of the Philosophy Department at the University of Otago for discussions that have contributed to the development of this article, and to the anonymous reviewer for the *Journal of Religion and Society*, who forced me to clarify a number of ambiguities.

2. The circularity of Calvin's account suggests a possible psychological explanation of the sense of certainty involved. It suggests that the assurance of faith is one of those socially-constructed higher cognitive emotions, the existence of which depends on belief in the (in this case, supernatural) mechanisms thought to be responsible (Griffiths: 146). Other examples would include the 'wild-pig syndrome' of the Gururumba people of Papua New Guinea, thought to be produced by ghost possession, the phenomenon of running *amok* in some southeast Asia societies, and (in our own culture) the symptoms of hysteria recorded by nineteenth-century or of multiple-personality syndrome recorded by twentieth-century psychologists (Griffiths: 140-141). In the case of the assurance of faith, belief in a supernatural mechanism seems plausible, since the real mechanisms operate in ways that are

largely unconscious and to this extent inaccessible to introspection (Griffiths: 149-155; note 3 below).

3. Of course, if one chooses to pursue a psychological explanation of this phenomenon, Plantinga's claim that religious belief is *basic* belief seems problematic. The absence of a conscious process of inference (to which Plantinga appeals) does not necessarily mean that no process of inference is involved. The recognition of non-conscious forms of information processing is now widespread among social and cognitive psychologists (Nisbett and Wilson; Allen and Reber) and there is at least a possibility that this is what is going on here (note 2 above). But to argue this way is to adopt the position of the sceptic, which Plantinga argues the believer is free to ignore.