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A theological re-description of the emergence of religion: In conversation with John Calvin on the *semen religionis*¹

ABSTRACT

Where does religion come from? This article suggests that this question may be addressed from the perspectives of various disciplines. An investigation of theological re-descriptions of the emergence of religion may provide insights on the relation between theology and the study of religion. The article explores John Calvin's views on the *semen religionis* as a case study of such a theological re-description. Calvin's account is then compared with Karl Barth's Christological account. It is observed that a fully trinitarian account of the emergence of religion may be required in this regard. The author concludes that any adequate theological account of this question would provide an ultimate perspective on the emergence of religion that cannot be captured under the generic rubric of "religion". To do so would amount to a form of reductionism.

INTRODUCTION

Where does religion come from? The emergence of religion can be accounted for from the perspective of a variety of disciplines. Although the question is formulated as a historical one, best to be discussed from the perspective of a history of religions, it has been addressed in several other disciplines, including Christian theology, sociology, palaeontology, the cognitive sciences (such as neuro-psychology), socio-biology and also genetic biology – the famous explanation of religion in terms of the "selfish gene" by Richard Dawkins and others. In this paper I will not discuss such recent accounts of the emergence of religion. Instead I will focus on theological accounts of the emergence of religion with specific reference to the reformed tradition. My hope is that the distinctness of the disciplines of "religion" and "theology" will be illustrated in the process.

Although the question is seldom formulated in precisely this way (it should not be confused with a theology of religions), such theological accounts of the emergence of religion are evident in the work of most major theologians, from Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin to Karl Barth. One standard approach to this question may be found in both Thomist and modern liberal positions. Here the emergence of Christianity is grounded in the emergence of the human species, human self-consciousness, experiences of transcendence and, subsequently, in the history of religion. Accordingly, Christianity is portrayed as one example of the generic phenomenon of religion. In this way its claims are often relativized from the outset. Although this may lead to a reductionist approach (in liberal and secular theologies), this is not necessarily the case since one may also allow for a hierarchy of increasing complexity where Christianity is portrayed as the highest manifestation of the human quest. This approach may be found in the work of Thomas Aquinas, Karl Rahner and Teilhard de Chardin alike.

1 This article is based on a paper read at a conference on "Claiming Conceptual Space: Re-imagining the Study of Religion and Theology: Changing Contexts and Social Discourses" hosted by Huguenot College and the Society for Theory of Religion and Theology, Wellington 6-9 April 2010.

In the reformed tradition such theological accounts of the emergence of religion are typically regarded as suspect. Here one may mention the critiques of relativism, reductionism but also of foundationalism. Often, this is captured under critiques of natural theology. To ground Christian views of the triune God in something else is to turn it into something that it is not. The deepest intuition embedded in such critiques is related to an affirmation of the sovereignty of God. If God is indeed the Creator of heaven and earth, the sovereign Lord of history and the ultimate destiny of the cosmos, then the emergence of religion must be understood with respect to the universal scope of such claims. Put bluntly, religion is the by-product of God's work; "God" is not merely a product of religious imagination.

One may argue that Calvin's notion of the *semen religionis* could be understood accordingly. He does not offer a closet form of natural theology, but seeks to demonstrate that the widespread presence of moral conscience and notions of the divine in other religious traditions could be understood in terms of the revelation of the triune God in God's works (of creation and providence).² In other words: Calvin seeks to offer a theological re-description of the emergence of religion. Of course, his point is that such religiosity remains insufficient for true knowledge of God and for salvation, but that it does render humans without a proper excuse. Clearly, this is a function of Calvin's famous insistence of God's sovereignty: nothing, not even sin or the devil, and therefore no form of religious expression, falls outside God's domain.

From the perspective of many modern theologies such theological accounts of the emergence of religion remain contrived. The core of the critique is that such theological claims cannot account for their own emergence. How is it possible to speak of God and from God's perspective in the first place? How does anyone know anything about God at all? If all discourse about that which transcends us come "from below", then those who speak with any degree of certainty about God (as if they could sit in on the eternal counsel of the triune God) are actually dishonest. Hermeneutically and historically, some form of natural theology is therefore regarded as inevitable. The problem with theological critiques of natural theology is that they become self-referential and circuitous. Accordingly, they rest on assumptions about the notion of the divine that are not acknowledged. In short, Christian truth claims simply has to be understood in terms of the history of religious ideas.

On the basis of such preliminary reflections I will investigate in this paper the theological account of the emergence of religion offered by John Calvin in terms of his notion of the *semen religionis*. I will compare that briefly with the Christological account offered by Karl Barth in his discussion of the "lesser lights".

JOHN CALVIN ON THE *SEMEN RELIGIONIS*

Calvin's views on the *semen religionis* are classically articulated in Book 1, Chapter 3 of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.³ The opening statement reads:

There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity (*divinitatis sensum*⁴). This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretence of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain

2 See my recent essay entitled "All theology is natural theology: In conversation with John Calvin on the human senses" (Conradie 2011).

3 I am using the English translation of Calvin's *Institutes if the Christian religion* by Battles Ford Lewis, edited by John T. McNeill (1960).

4 In his footnotes on *divinitatis sensum* and *semen religionis* McNeill (1960:43) comments that both terms refer to the "numinous awareness of God" and that this is closely related to conscience as a moral response to this awareness.

understanding of his divine majesty (I.3.1).

What Calvin regards as beyond controversy here may be granted to him, even by atheist critics. The phenomenon of religion is indeed quite widespread. An elusive sense of transcendence emerges in numerous contexts, including mathematics. Whether or not such an experience may be described as one of “the divine” may be disputed, but some numinous awareness of transcendence is recognised whenever you know that there is something that you do not know or grasp. The following statement is of course not beyond controversy, if only on the basis of gender concerns. Calvin here offers a theological re-description of this observation: “God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty.”

The term “seed of religion” appears within the same paragraph. Again Calvin moves from a generalised observation to a theological re-description that this amounts to a “tacit confession” that was “inscribed [by God] in the hearts of all”:

Yet there is, as the eminent pagan [Cicero] says, no nation so barbarous, no people so savage, that they have not a deep-seated conviction that there is a God. And they who in other aspects of life seem least to differ from brutes still continue to retain some seed of religion. So deeply does the common conception occupy the minds of all, so tenaciously does it in here in the hearts of all! Therefore, since from the beginning of the world there has been no region, no city, in short, no household, that could do without religion, there lies in this a tacit confession of a sense of deity inscribed in the hearts of all (I.3.1).

In a delightful further exposition Calvin pre-emptively but also refutes a Marxian critique of religion: Therefore it is utterly vain for some men to say that religion was invented by the subtlety and craft of a few to hold the simple folk in thrall by this device and that those very persons who originated the worship of God for others did not in the least believe that any God existed. I confess, indeed, that in order to hold men’s minds in greater subjection, clever men have devised very many things in religion by which to inspire the common folk with reverence and to strike them with terror. But they would never have achieved this if men’s minds had not already been imbued with a firm conviction about God, from which the inclination toward religion springs as from a seed.

Again, the closing sentence from this quotation offers a theological re-description of the emergence of the “inclination toward religion”. Calvin concludes on this basis that “actual godlessness is impossible”: “a sense of divinity which can never be effaced is engraved upon men’s minds” (I.3.3). “Engraved” is further qualified by “naturally inborn” and “fixed deep within, as it were in the very marrow”. In conversation with Cicero, Plato and Plutarch, Calvin adds that “it is worship of God alone that renders men higher than the brutes, and through it alone they aspire to immortality” (the concluding sentence of I.3). Religion is thus seen as something positive and ennobling.

On this basis the opening sentence of Book I.4 then reads: “As experience shows, God has sown a seed of religion [*semen religionis*] in all men [and women!]” The argument from experience is interesting here given subsequent controversies over natural theology. However, it should be noted that Calvin’s argument can only be valid as far as the presence of religiosity amongst “all men” is concerned. Experience cannot be used to confirm the theological explanation of such an observation, namely that it is the triune God who has sown this seed of religion in all men.

The rest of chapter IV of Book I is devoted to Calvin’s contention that such knowledge of God “is either smothered or corrupted, partly by ignorance, partly by malice”. This Calvin espouses with his considerable rhetorical skills. Essentially his argument is that, “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 honour him and to consecrate their lives to his will” (I.3.1). Irrespective of this critique, Calvin maintains in the conclusion to this chapter that: “Yet

that seed remains which can in no wise be uprooted: that there is some sort of divinity; but this seed is so corrupted that by itself it produces only the worst fruits. From this, my present contention is brought out with greater certainty, that a sense of divinity is by nature engraved on human hearts.” From this point of departure, Calvin then offers an account of where true knowledge of God (piety) may be found, namely on the basis of God’s revelation. He famously structures this in terms of knowledge of God as Creator (God as manifest in his created works – covered in the rest of Book I) and knowledge of God as Saviour (in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit – covered in Book II-IV).

The controversy over how, according to Calvin, such knowledge of God as Creator is related to knowledge of God as Saviour cannot be discussed here.⁵ Instead, the question that I will address is what role this *sensum divinitatis* plays in relation to knowledge of both God as Creator and Saviour. These three themes should not be confused since knowledge of God as Creator can precisely not be equated with this *sensum divinitatis*.

The question is therefore whether a hermeneutical function could be attributed to the *sensum divinitatis*? Is knowledge of God as Creator built upon such a *sensum divinitatis*? And is knowledge of God as Saviour then built upon knowledge of God as Creator (i.e. what can be derived from God’s works as opposed to God’s words)? If so, would the emergence of religion have a certain historic and epistemic priority over Christian truth claims? Does the *sensum divinitatis* offer a “point of contact” for Christian apologetics or to relate the Christian faith to other religious beliefs – since the Christian faith emerged from such a *sensum divinitatis* in the first place? If some form of natural theology is indeed hermeneutically inevitable, how can the dangers of such natural theology (which Barth rightly fulminated against) be avoided?

Alternatively, is the order in which Calvin introduces these three themes perhaps merely for rhetorical and pedagogical purposes (the elusive “order of right teaching” in I.1.3). If so, is Calvin’s actual point of departure the faith in God as Saviour in Jesus Christ so that knowledge of God as Creator is merely an extrapolation of this faith? Then the *sensum divinitatis* could merely be seen as a rhetorical skill to exclude any other claims or excuses from the outset. This position would beg the questions raised in the introduction above, namely where Calvin obtained such knowledge of God in the first place. How did Calvin come to have such intimate knowledge of God? From Scripture and the fathers, yes, but where did that come from? What role did the emergence of concepts of the divine and (prior to that) concepts of transcendence play in the history of the Jewish-Christian tradition, the history of religions and indeed the history of humanity and of the earth’s biosphere? What role does human experience and the human senses play in coming to knowledge of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ?

It should be clear that a lot is at stake in this regard, also in terms of how the relationship between Christian theology and the study of religion and of religions may be understood. Not surprisingly, these questions are heavily debated in contemporary Christian theology. Such debates obviously influence Calvin scholarship as well. Given Calvin’s style of writing, which often allows creative tensions to remain unresolved, it is quite easy to merely read one’s own position into Calvin’s texts. This was already evident from the contrasting descriptions of Calvin’s position in the famous controversy between Brunner and Barth on natural theology (see Conradie 2011a & 2011b).

5 See my recent essay entitled “Calvin’s views on creation and salvation – on the distinction between ‘heaven’ and ‘earth’” (Conradie 2010). Calvin described the relationship between knowledge of God as Creator and as Redeemer in terms of a duplex cognitio Domini. Thomas observes that traditional Calvin interpreters (e.g. Warfield and Kuyper) assumed that Calvin treated knowledge of the Creator first because it comes first in experience. By contrast Barthian scholars reversed the order. Faith in the Saviour is the presupposition of the Christian confession of the triune Creator. John Thomas suggests that Calvin’s understanding of this relationship is probably a dialectical one. See Thomas (1992).

My sense is that Calvin's position is typically more dialectical and more dynamic, allowing for unresolved and creative tensions,⁶ than what commentators on him (including myself) can stomach. This applies to understanding the relationship between the *sensum divinitatis* and true knowledge of God, between knowledge of God as Creator and as Saviour, between God's works and God's words, between "general" and "special" revelation and so forth. One of the best recent expositions of these relationships is found in Randall Zachman's excellent study on *Image and word in the theology of John Calvin*. It may be helpful to briefly explore some of his crucial insights.

ZACHMAN ON IMAGE AND WORD

How is knowledge of God possible in the first place? If God is essentially invisible, can God nevertheless be seen? Given Calvin's insistent emphasis on God's transcendence, he was able to fiercely reject human attempts to establish symbols of God's presence on earth. The scholarly consensus is that, instead, Calvin's theology "is overwhelmingly a 'theology of the word'" (Edward Dowey). The only feasible way of communication between God and the fallen world is through the Word. Knowledge of God is attained primarily through hearing rather than by seeing. The word is the primary means of grace.⁷ Yet, how can we hear that word? How has Calvin come to know what he claims to know about God? Through the biblical texts, yes, but how can we recognise the ordinary human words that we find there as *God's* words? How can we gain a sense of God's transcendence if it is indeed transcendent? How can we escape the sceptic conclusion that Calvin's claims amount to little more than his own constructions of the divine – which he communicated with considerable authority and rhetorical skill in his sphere of influence?

In his recent study Zachmann addresses these questions from the outset. He recognises that Calvin developed a highly sophisticated understanding of signification, especially through his views on the sacraments, to address these questions. In short, Calvin recognised that a sign can carry meanings that transcend the material signifier by far. In this sense he pre-empted insights emerging from contemporary palaeontology, namely that it is a distinguishing feature of the human species that we use symbols to communicate, giving us a competitive advantage above other animals. Calvin also recognised that such meaning (the signified) can only be discerned on the basis of the material signifier. In exegesis it is therefore crucial to understand the "spirit" of the text (that towards which it points and towards which it leads), but we gain an understanding of that which is signified only on the basis of the "letter" of the text.

We as humans can gain access to the material signifier only through the human senses. To his credit, Zachmann recognises to what extent Calvin emphasised the role of the human senses – not only the ear, but certainly also the eye, not to forget the role of smelling, tasting and feeling. Calvin often uses dramatic visual images for the knowledge of God – lightning, illumination, spectacles, blindness, seeing reflections as if in a mirror, being spectators in the theatre of God's glory, the "eye of faith", the role of fabric and clothing, and so forth. The role of the eye is also pertinent to perceiving gestures and actions. Zachman's (2007:20) book offers an extended commentary on the dialectic between image (accessible to the eye) and word (accessible to the

6 See Thomas (1992:123), with reference to Hermann Bauke who argued that a "complexio oppositorum is absolutely constitutive as a formal determination for Calvin's theology."

7 This emphasis on the verbal nature of salvation as a dynamic event, through which God's word of forgiveness is heard, is also evident in the contributions of South African reformed scholars such as Hennie Rossouw, Willie Jonker and Flip Theron – my teachers in philosophy and systematic theology, following their Dutch teachers such as GC Berkouwer and Oepke Noordmans. See my earlier article (Conradie 1992), also Rossouw (1963), Jonker (1981), Koornhof & Jonker (1987) and Theron (1987).

ear) in Calvin's theology. He shows that Calvin appealed as much to the eye and affections as to the ear and the intellect. In short he argues that...

[Calvin] insisted that the Word of God never comes to us alone but is always accompanied by the visible self-manifestation of God and the corresponding self-manifestation of the human heart. We must always hear the Word in order to be able to see the living image of God; but concomitantly we must always open our eyes to see the living images of God even as we hear the Word of God (Zachman (2007:2).

On this basis Zachman investigates the dialectic between manifestation and proclamation in Calvin's theology.⁸ He shows how visible signs and words are interdependent: the word (itself a palpable sign) explains the meaning of the sign while the sign reinforces the word, painting a picture of its meaning that is accessible to the senses. The ear guides the eye towards the meaning of the sign (the signified). Here Calvin draws on Augustine notion of the sacraments as "visible words". Zachman (2007:13) explains:

Unlike the use of rhetoric, in which words are used to portray the reality before the eyes of those who hear them, in the sacraments things are used to portray in a graphic and iconic way the words that God proclaims to us in the promise. The words are not only portrayed as in a painting in the sacramental symbols; they are essential to setting forth the analogical and analogical relationship between the symbol and the reality it represents.

One may conclude that Calvin recognised the role of experiences of transcendence through the human senses. These experiences help us to gain an understanding of that which is signified through a host of images and words. For Calvin, these signs clearly point towards God's presence, especially in Jesus Christ (the clearest image), but also through the Scriptures, Christian proclamation and the sacraments. Calvin describes such intimations of transcendence in terms of human receptiveness for what lies beyond – and not merely in terms of imaginative human constructions. He then re-describes such human experiences in terms of God's work in the world. In short, he maintains that God manifests Godself through multiple signs of God's presence (2). Such a theological re-description may be investigated further with reference to Calvin's famous emphasis on *accommodatio*: God accommodated Godself to the capacities of human beings so that we can measure God's immeasurableness by our small measure.⁹

This re-description is based on a distinction that Calvin made (according to Zachman) between "dead images" that human beings create and the "living images" or "icons" of God's presence that God alone can create. This is not merely a difference in emphasis, because the distinction coincides with true and false forms of religion. Dead images can be identified in terms of the illusion that the image can somehow enclose, contain or circumscribe God's presence. Zachman (2007:8), explains this contrast in a paragraph worth quoting at length:

First, Calvin thought that living images live in the field of tension created by the essentially invisible, infinite and spiritual God becoming somewhat¹⁰ visible in finite reality. This field of tension that the God who cannot dwell in temples made by human hands nonetheless dwells in a Temple made by human hands – keeps the living image from creating the illusion that it can somehow enclose or contain God in itself, as is the case with dead images.

8 See also the analysis of the dialectic between manifestation, proclamation and emancipatory praxis by Tracy (1981:193-230).

9 See Balsarak (2009:372-8), Battles (1998:35).

10 Zachman (2007:53) emphasises that Calvin always says "somewhat visible" and not simply "visible".

He explains: "Since God is invisible, only God has the ability to render Godself somewhat visible in the beautiful fabric of the universe, which ... unveils God precisely by veiling God. Since God is invisible, only God has the ability to make living images of God that do not contradict, but maintain the essential invisibility of God, even as God renders Godself somewhat visible before our eyes". Note the theological re-description here in terms of God's action in the world.

Whereas Calvin thought that dead images were forged in an attempt to drag God from heaven, living images represent God's descent to us so that we might use them as "ladders" or "vehicles" whereby we might ascend to God.¹¹ Second, Calvin thought that living images transform the person contemplating them into the image of God, from one degree of glory to another, so that we might become more and more like God in order to be united to God. Dead images, on the other hand, attempt to transform God into our own image, in order to make the spiritual and carnal God finite, a prisoner of the image that we create to represent God. Third, living images have both an analogical and anagogical function relationship to the reality they represent. They refer the mind and heart of the one contemplating them to the reality being represented, by means of the similarity and dissimilarity they have with that reality, and raise the mind up anagogically to that reality. Dead images lack this analogical and anagogical relationship to God but instead contradict the reality they claim to represent and keep our minds firmly planted on earth. Fourth, living images not only represent and portray reality but also offer and present the reality being represented. To take but one well-known example, the bread and wine not only represent the body and blood of Christ; they also offer and present that body and blood to us for the nourishment of our souls unto eternal life. Dead images, on the other hand, simply present a reality that is and remains absent from the representation. Human beings are incapable of making images that offer the reality they represent – only God can do this.

On the basis of this affirmation and confession that God is present in and active through these living icons, Calvin then proceeds to explain the content and the significance of the Christian faith in elaborate detail. This insight enables him to re-describe everything else. On the basis of an investigation of Calvin's sermons and commentaries, Zachman (2007:3), traces Calvin's use of the dialectic between word in image in great detail and with reference to the major themes of the Christian faith. In each case he shows how we need the truth of God's Word in order to discern the beauty of God in God's works – so that we might be "ravished [a word that Zachman uses lavishly] with admiration for the beauty of God's goodness".

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THEOLOGICAL RE-DESCRIPTION

The ways in which a theological re-description of ordinary and extraordinary experiences is offered in this way, form a crucial step in the argument of this essay. Such theological re-descriptions may of course be explained in terms of the experiences from which they follow. That would, however, constitute a reductive explanation. It would fail to fathom how such a theological re-description is able to illuminate literally everything else. If the transcendent referent of a sign is indeed cosmic in scope, it offers an interpretative frame within which everything else is understood. The penultimate is understood in terms of that which is ultimate. For Calvin, Ultimate Reality is not a generic concept under which a number of divinities and ideologies may be encapsulated; the triune God is the Creator and Saviour of the entire universe and therefore the sovereign Lord over everything.

It is on the basis of such a theological re-description that Calvin addresses the question of the emergence of religion. All forms of religious expression, including Christianity, ultimately come from the symbolic presence of the triune God in the world. This is the work of God who has implanted in all people a certain understanding of the divine majesty (I.3.1). Historically, Christianity emerged from such a numinous awareness of God's presence. However, this does

11 Zachman (2007:15) also shows how Calvin draws on Augustine's notion of the sacraments: "The sacraments are like ... 'steps', 'ladders' or 'vehicles' by which we ascend from the temporal and visible world to the eternal and invisible God".

not imply that Christianity is merely one form of religion alongside others, that Christianity may be based on some generic form of religiosity. No, such religiosity is re-described in terms of the work of the triune God. All forms of religion, including deviant forms, become possible because God has not left us without witnesses (icons, images, symbols) of God's presence. Nothing (not even sin or the devil) is possible outside the sphere of God's sovereignty.

This emphasis on a theological re-description of the very emergence of religion suggests that discourse on an apologetic, kerygmatic or missionary "point of contact" is typically misconstrued. Calvin probably took the possibility and hermeneutic necessity of such a "point of contact" for granted. Moreover, he recognised that this applies to the emergence of the Christian faith as well. We can only come to faith by being led toward the symbolic meaning of signs that transcend their material signifiers. We can only fathom the presence of God through contact with such material signifiers (not directly or intuitively). The role of the human senses is therefore crucial. However, this does not imply that Christian truth claims can be based upon or explained in terms of such a point of contact (as Barthians may fear). This would turn Christianity into an epiphenomenon, a particular example of a generic form of religion. The availability of such a point of contact is re-described, from an ultimate perspective, as an act of the triune God's *accommodatio*. Moreover, according to Calvin's understanding of signification, it would be disastrous to focus on such a "point of contact" without sensing where the sign is pointing towards. As Zachman (49), points out, "The same powers of God that reveal God to us in a way suited to our finite capacities simultaneously reveal the infinite nature of God, due to the incomprehensibility of the powers themselves... Thus the living image of God that is clear enough for infants and children to contemplate, reveals that the powers of God set forth in that image vastly transcend all human understanding, and leave us with the experience of being ravished with astonishment, unable to speak".

Of course, Calvin continues to argue that the knowledge of God that is possible though God's symbolic presence in the world has become smothered and corrupted. It only leads to idolatry, vanity and hypocrisy. The difference between deviant forms of religion and "pure and real religion" (see I.2.2) is not to be understood in terms of the hermeneutic path that is followed (as elucidated in terms of a theory of signification). This path is the same for all human beings. Although we are blinded (and deafened) by sin, we retain some form of sensibility. As human beings we are still able to use and understand symbolic meaning. Or, to switch the imagery, we are still able to see, but the cloudy night around us is too dark to find our way – so that we got hopelessly lost. We need sustained light (more than a flash of lightning) to find our way home.¹²

The difference therefore cannot be understood in terms of human efforts. According to such a theological re-description, true knowledge of God only becomes possible through God's own work – through God's electing grace. This has to do with the (s)election of particular signifiers where God's symbolic presence emerges with a certain clarity (providing enough light) – in the history of Abraham's children and adopted children as the economy of God's self-manifestation. This follows from the confession that Jesus Christ is indeed the Light of *the World*. This story provides

12 See Calvin's wonderful image: "Certainly I do not deny that one can read competent and apt statements about God here and there in the philosophers, but these always show a certain giddy imagination. As was stated above, the Lord indeed gave them a slight taste of his divinity that they might not hide their impiety under a cloak of ignorance. And sometimes he impelled them to make certain utterances by the confession of which they would themselves be corrected. But they saw things in such a way that their seeing did not direct them to the truth, much less enable them to attain it! They are like a traveler passing through a field at night who in a momentary lightning flash sees far and wide, but the sight vanishes so swiftly that he is plunged again into the darkness of the night before he can take even a step, let alone be directed on his way by its help. Besides, although they may chance to sprinkle their books with droplets of truth, how many monstrous lies defile them!" (II.2.18).

the spectacles that enable Christians to see God's presence everywhere else; it provides the light that illuminates the whole world.¹³ As Zachman points out, Calvin was passionately interested in the contemplation of the universe (especially astronomy and anatomy) as a living image of God (19, 25-54). In his commentary of Romans 1:19-20 Calvin said that we were "endowed with eyes for the purpose of being led to God himself, the Author of the world, by contemplating so beautiful an image" (54).

KARL BARTH ON THE "LESSER LIGHTS"

In his mature work (see the *Church Dogmatics* IV.3.1, section 2) Barth returned to the theme of the possibility of knowledge of God outside the revelation in Jesus Christ (his understanding of natural theology). In this discussion he also offers an account of the question addressed here, namely on the emergence of religion. He retains a distinct Christological focus on the basis of the notion of the existence of "lesser lights".

Barth (1961:38-165), begins the lengthy section in the English translation) with an uncompromising and extended affirmation that Jesus Christ is indeed the "Light of Life". He insists that Jesus Christ is not merely one light amongst many others, the clearest perhaps (1961:87), or one with particular illuminating power. Jesus is not merely one among many witnesses, or the leading witness, one which is perhaps normative. That would fail to do justice to the ultimate nature of the Christian confession that Jesus Christ is indeed the Light of the world. It would employ the existence of such lesser lights as the point of departure and interpret Christ in that light. Instead, Barth claims that, if Jesus Christ is indeed truly God, the existence of the lesser lights should be understood in such light. Barth says: "these lights shine only because of the shining of none other light than His" (1961:96).

Barth (1961:92) also addresses the question how this confession emerged in the first place. He is well aware (as were the biblical authors) of the presence of nations other than Israel and the historical impact of their histories, religions, pieties, orders and divinities. However, this awareness does not imply that some validity is ascribed to such divinities or that possible alternatives to the Christian confession are even considered. Barth's account of the emergence of religion is evidently not historical or phenomenological, but confessional in nature. If Jesus Christ has been the light of the world before the foundations of the world, then religions (including Christianity) could only emerge on that basis. Barth draws conclusions from this confession with remarkable consistency.

Nevertheless, Barth (1961:114) acknowledges that there are "other words" besides the one Word. These include first and foremost the words of the prophets and of the apostles. These words do not stand beside it in their own right or by their own light. They are not independent, but are best understood in the light of the Light of the World. Moreover, there are true words that are spoken outside the Bible and the church. The church, Barth says, must admit that there are such words since it would be foolish and ungrateful not to do so. This does not imply that words saying anything contrasting to the one Word must be accepted. However, such other words can illumine, accentuate, explain or confirm the biblical witness in a particular time and situation by speaking from a different source and in another tongue (1961:115). Barth concludes that such words "will lead the [Christian] community more truly and profoundly than ever before to Scripture" (1961:115).

13 Zachman (2007:41) says: "The assistance of the Word does not replace the image of God in the universe but rather clarifies our weakened vision so that we can see more clearly the powers of God set forth in the works of God. In this way Scripture acts as spectacles for bleary-eyed people". See also Postema (1992:142).

Where do these lesser lights come from? In a sub-section on the world as *creatura* Barth (1961:136-151) affirms that these lights have a light of their own, provided to them by God through the creation of the world (Gen 1:3) and maintained through God's faithfulness with a view to the reconciliation in Christ. The lesser lights constitute the theatre, the setting or location within which the Light of Life shines forth (1961:137). These lights remain distinct from God and from the one Light and are not extinguished by this Light (1961:139). They confirm that the world in which the church has to work has not been abandoned by God. Barth thus affirms: "The divine work of reconciliation does not negate the divine work of creation" (1961:139).

To explain the veracity of these lights, Barth uses the image of partial segments of a circle. These segments may be on the periphery, but can be identified as pointing towards the centre. They contain true words only insofar as they refer back to their origin in the one Word (1961:122-123). These lights offer "terrestrial truths" but no divine disclosures (1961:141). Because of their presence the world is not absolutely deaf or dumb. We live with this ability to communicate and cannot live without that (1961:141). The lesser lights are only created lights, but they certainly provide some light (1961:144-5). The world contains its own mysteries (alongside its mere existence, rhythms, contrariety, regularity and freedom – which Barth also examines), but this remains the world's mystery, not God's mystery or even that of the revelation of God (1961:149). In what they reveal, the lesser lights also conceal and declare this mystery; they do not provide information on why or wherefore the world exists (1961:150).

How, then, do these lesser lights relate to the Light of the World? Here Barth maintains both a sharp distinction and a relatedness. The distinction is necessary in order to preclude a natural theology that would suggest that the lesser lights reveal anything about God. They only illuminate the world. Barth's affirms that against any Gnostic tendencies:

They cannot be compared or considered together as though for all their difference they were only two rays from one and the same light, or two sides, aspects or parts of one and the same truth. This would imply an original truth superior both to the truth of the world and to that of God. The truth of God would then be, like that of the word, a mere manifestation of this original, superior and proper truth. ...In God's self-declaration in Jesus Christ we do not have a mere irruption of some higher, original and true light, and therefore a mere expression of truth, but the one true light of the one truth above or alongside which there can be no other, rival truth (1961:152).

Barth maintains that the lesser lights cannot be regarded as independent sources of light but can only reflect the Light of the World: "But as this light rises and shines, it is reflected in the being and existence of the cosmos which is not created accidentally, but a view to this action and therefore to this revelation. As it shines in the cosmos, it kindles the lights with which the latter is furnished, giving them the power to shine in its own service. The latter cannot do more than become bright in this light. They cannot replace the one light and truth of the divine self-declaration" (1961:153). What is reflected in these lesser lights is God's faithfulness to God's creatures as demonstrated in the revelation of grace in Jesus Christ (1961:153). The Light of the World gives a new radiance to the world. In this way Barth refused to merge the lesser lights with the Light of the world but also avoids their separation (towards the "unfortunate doctrine of two kingdoms" (1961:151).

This exposition therefore does not relativize Barth's critique of natural theology. He insists that by way of natural theology nothing more than "abstract impartations concerning God's existence as the Supreme Being and Ruler of all things" (1961:117) can be attained. He contrasts this with the self-impartation of God who acts as Father in the Son through the Holy Spirit and affirms the clarity and the testability of the biblical witnesses to such self-impartation. Indeed, he has no desire to leave the "sure ground of Christology" (1961:117).

In my view Barth's confessional logic is impeccable here. However, his position still requires an explanation as to how this confession was reached in the first place. What connotations are attached to the confession that this Jesus is indeed "truly God" (*vere Deus*)? What notion of divinity is at stake here? Here Calvin's use of semiotics and his recognition of the role played by the human senses are superior to Barth's Christological short-cut. Since Barth denies any (independent?) human capacity to know God and the one Word of God, he is forced to regard true words of God as "miraculous" (1961:118). Instead, he focuses on the capacity of Jesus Christ to create human witnesses inside and outside the sphere of the church: "He will use his capacity to make of men, quite apart from and even in the face of their own knowledge or volition, something which they could never be of themselves, namely, His witnesses" (1961:118). Barth emphasises that this comes through no human capacity by insisting that human beings are blind and deaf through sin and need to be healed by Jesus before they can become such witnesses. The difference with Calvin is striking on this point.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A TRINITARIAN ACCOUNT

While the account of the emergence of religion in the work of John Calvin is *theo*-logical (or patrological) in nature, Barth's account is distinctly Christological. One may surmise that several contemporary theologians would tend towards a pneumatological account in their theological reflections on dialogue with people of other living faiths. Accordingly, the Spirit of God was also present amongst our African ancestors – long before the missionaries arrived with their message of Jesus Christ as Saviour. The presence of the Spirit offers an account of the emergence of religion through the rise of human consciousness, wonder, story-telling and reflection. This may also explain how first Israel and then the early Christian church could draw upon the notion of the divine embedded in other religious traditions, even though it also adapted and transformed such connotations within its own all-encompassing orientation of faith in the triune God. Admittedly, such a pneumatological account of the emergence of religion would confirm Barth's worst suspicions.¹⁴

These observations would suggest that only a fully trinitarian account would be able to do justice to Christian reflection on the presence of other religions. Such a trinitarian account is to the best of my knowledge not readily available and certainly cannot be developed here.

Instead, it may be necessary to return to the relationship between a theological account of the emergence of religion and other possible accounts. This may aid a better understanding of the relationship between such disciplines.

My contention is that a theological account of the emergence of religion may be legitimate if regarded as a (trinitarian) re-description of insights derived from other disciplines. In this way justice may be done to such insights without reducing the universal scope (the ultimacy) of the Christian convictions from the outset. Although such a re-description may indeed become self-referential, this is a function of entering and inhabiting the "strange new world of the Bible", where everything else may be viewed from the particular perspective or vision that the Christian confession invites. If such a vision of the world and what may transcend the world is indeed ultimate, it is not possible to view it objectively, as it were from the outside. One can express that only from the inside by "indwelling" this story (Leslie Newbigin) and by living and acting accordingly. Such inhabitation is indeed typical of the language of Christian piety, prayer and proclamation.

14 In his polemic with Emil Brunner Barth commented: "It seems that behind his re-introduction of natural theology a 'new' doctrine of the Holy Spirit wants only too logically to break forth. Against this doctrine it will be even more necessary to protest." See also Barth (1937:45-46).

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