CALVIN AND NATURAL LAW

Paul Helm, Dept of Philosophy, University of Liverpool

Although the subject of Calvin and Natural Law is not a novel one, nevertheless it does seem to be worthwhile to take a fresh look at it, since often discussion of Calvin's theology takes place from prepared positions in which it is assumed that Calvin's attitude to such matters as natural law is clear and uncontroversial. In addition, this topic provides a convenient and illuminating case study within a wider historical enquiry about the relation of Calvin to his medieval and scholastic predecessors and to his Calvinist and Puritan successors. That such continuity exists at all has been questioned on a variety of fronts, and with the use of a variety of arguments, not all of them consistent with each other. I hope that we shall see that whatever Calvin's theological originality there are important elements of continuity between representative medievals such as Thomas Aquinas, the Reformer John Calvin, and representative Puritans such as John Owen.

In the Institutes one finds only two or three passages where Calvin explicitly discusses natural law. In Book II, Chapter II, discussing the bondage of the will, and the question of whether or not sin is due to ignorance, Calvin asserts that men have evidence of God's will quite apart from any special revelation. Alluding to Romans 2,14-15 Calvin says

> If the Gentiles by nature have law righteousness engraved upon their minds we surely cannot say they are utterly blind as to the conduct of life. There is nothing more common than for a man to be sufficiently instructed in a right standard of conduct by natural law (of which the apostle is here speaking). Let us consider, however, for what purpose men have been endowed with this knowledge of the law.[1]

Calvin then goes on to claim that men have the knowledge of the law in order to make them without excuse before God, saying that

> The purpose of natural law, therefore, is to render man inexcusable. This would not be a bad definition: natural law is that apprehension of the conscience which distinguishes sufficiently between the just and unjust.[2]

In this connection Calvin applauds Aristotle's distinction between incontinence and intemperance, and puts sin down to intemperance. Sin is action against knowledge.

Calvin, by implication, equates this natural law which all men know imperfectly, but with sufficient awareness as to render them without excuse, with the Decalogue. For the measure of how imperfectly men grasp the law of God unaided by special revelation is shown by comparing such unaided knowledge with the Ten Commandments.

> And if we want to measure our reason by God's law, the pattern of perfect righteousness, we shall find in how many respects it is blind! Surely it does not at all comply with the principle points of the First Table.[3]

When we return to Calvin's exposition of the Ten Commandments[4] in the Institutes we find him once again drawing a comparison between the Decalogue and what he calls 'that inward law' which 'in a sense asserts the very same things that are to be learned from the Two Tables.' Because men

are unteachable

> the Lord has provided us with a written law to give us a clearer witness of what was too obscure in the natural law, shake off our listlessness, and strike more vigorously our mind and our memory.[5]

This ought to be compared with a later passage in the Institutes

> The law of God which we call the moral law is nothing else than a testimony of natural law and of that conscience....[6]

Writing about the Fourth Commandment, Calvin distinguishes between those features of it which are ceremonial from those that are moral (and hence eternal and necessary, and hence in some sense natural). By Christ's coming the ceremonial part of this commandment was abolished (implying that the non-ceremonial part of it was not). And Calvin proceeds to identify the non-ceremonial elements. Later in the Institutes Calvin further elaborates his treatment of the law, making a distinction between moral, ceremonial and legal commands.[7] Both these matters, the question of the Sabbath, and the three-fold distinction between various commands, will be taken up later.

But how did Calvin use the phrase "natural law"? An answer to this question will enable us to get clearer about what he said, and to offer an evaluation. We shall consider four problems:

(i) What does the term 'natural law' mean for Calvin? In what sense is there a 'natural' law? What is the relationship of such law to the creation?

(ii) What is the connection between natual law and the revealed law of God, according to Calvin?

(iii) How, according to Calvin, do those who are aware of the natural law learn it?

(iv) What do the answers to questions (i) - (iii) show us about Calvin's relationship both to medieval treatments of natural law and to the later Calvinist and Puritan tradition?

(i) The meaning of 'natural law'. In English 'natural' can be contrasted with 'supernatural', used as equivalent to universal, to innate, to sinful, and as opposed to contrived or designed, and these are but a few of its most prominent meanings. This should make us cautious either in saying without qualification that Calvin does or that he does not have a positive view of natural law. I suggest that when Calvin uses it the term means, at least 'a law that is not in fact specially i.e. verbally revealed by God, though one that is revealable'. In addition, Calvin seems to mean by it 'universally distributed', known to all mankind. So what Calvin appears to say is that the law of nature is that law of God concerning man's relationship to God, and the relationship of men with each other which is know by all human beings. Calvin would also probably add that the natural law that is in keeping with human nature, the proper observing of which would cause human beings to flourish.

Already we can see, in our discussion of the first question, that it is difficult to keep apart questions about what the natural law is and how it is to be apprehended or understood. So let us consider the third question, returning to question (ii) in due course. We have already seen that the law of nature is, for Calvin, to be contrasted with what is revealed by God

in Scripture. Is this natural knowledge natural in a further sense, natural in the sense of innate, or is such knowledge acquired by observation? Is it like, or part of the sensus divinitatis, the innate sense of God, or is it acquired, like human beings acquire the rudimentary belief that some things are round? When Calvin says that

> to begin with, God's image was visible in the light of the mind, in the uprightness of the heart, and in the soundness of all the parts[8]

what he says clearly has implications for human knowledge. Was the knowledge that such an enlightened and integrated individual process innate? It would seem so, in that Calvin goes on to say that knowledge of the heavenly life 'was engraved upon his soul'.

> Man in his first condition excelled in these pre-eminent endowments, so that his reason, understanding, prudence and judgment not only sufficed for the direction of his earthly life, but by them men mounted up to God and eternal bliss.[9]

But whatever the exact position was originally, whether the knowledge of the natural law was innate or acquired, Calvin is clear that at present, in his sinful and fallen condition, man is unable by his powers ('naturally' in yet another sense) either to acquire or to reacquire and retain the knowledge of God's natural law in its entirety. Calvin is emphatic on this point, as being the plight of all fallen men, all men 'in Adam'. Yet he goes on to add that through the continued activity of conscience each man knows enough of God's original, natural law, as a result of which he is rendered inexcusable before God for his sin.

Now let us turn to question (ii). What is the relationship between natural law and the revealed law of God? A number of separate points need to be made here.

a) Enough has been said to make it clear that despite considerable opinion to the contrary[10] Calvin is not a divine command theorist. Given his position on natural law he cannot consistently take the view that what makes any principle a moral principle is simply the fact that God has commanded it, and that there are no limits to what God might command, and hence no limits to what might become a moral principle. He cannot take this position, because he holds that the morality of certain principles is grounded in their naturalness, and in part this means not merely that they are universally applicable, but that they are suitable to human nature, and become applicable independently of any explicit divine command. They are divine commands, they have the force of law, but God's commanding them does not make them moral, his forbidding them would not make them immoral. And not only cannot Calvin consistently take divine command position on morality, we find that in a number of places he explicitly rejects it. For example, in upholding the position that 'God's will is so much the highest rule of righteousness that whatever he wills, by the very fact that he wills it, must be considered righteous' Calvin nevertheless goes on to say

> We do not advocate the fiction of 'absolute might': because this is profane, it ought rightly to be hateful to us. We fancy no lawless God who is a law unto himself.[11]

Because God has no liability to render an account to others this does not mean that he is a law to himself, and therefore totally capricious. God's choice of law is necessarily governed by his own nature - it is God's choice - and by the character and situation of those to whom his command is addressed. The widespread belief to the contrary is perhaps due to a

failure to recognise Calvin's distinction between the secret and the revealed will of God. The revealed will of God is explicitly in accordance with God's moral character, as sketched above. What of God's secret will? Calvin insists that often the reasons for God's secret will are not available to us, and hence the rationale behind what God secretly wills is unknown. But this is not nominalism on Calvin's part, rather it is an assertion of human ignorance, perhaps of necessary human ignorance.

b) Part of the function of God's revealed law is to draw attention to and to focus upon the natural law. When Calvin in this way recognises that the natural law is obscure, and that therefore the revealed law of God is required to clarify and focus upon it, he does not mean that the natural law is essentially or inherently obscure, but that its obscurity is due to the obfuscating effects of sin. Just as the 'spectacles' of special revelation, God's word, are necessary in order properly to interpret physical nature[12] so the same spectacles are needed in order not to understand the full, precise content of the natural law. So that in a real sense the natural law is now never understandable and acceptable apart from God's revealed, more explicit and emphatic version of it.

c) But in certain important respects the content of God's revealed law goes beyond his natural law. In the first place, as we noted earlier, while natural law finds embodiment in the Decalogue, the Decalogue is not simply a verbalising of the natural law, but contains non-natural conventional, ceremonial elements. 'By the Lord Christ's coming the ceremonial part of this commandment was abolished',[13] indicating that the Mosaic re-publication of the law of nature contained figurative and proleptic features suited to that era of redemptive special revelation.

Does this mean that the New Testament amendment of the Sabbath teaching of the Decalogue amounts to a return to the pre-Mosaic law of nature? Hardly, since according to Calvin the Lord's Day of the New Testament is inextricably bound up with the fact of Christ's resurrection. So it might be said that while the law of nature, in Calvin's view, obliges all men to keep one day in seven, and perhaps oblige them to keep the seventh day (in Calvin's commentary on Genesis the seventh-day Sabbath is regarded as a creation ordinance[14]), it does not oblige all men everywhere and at all times to keep the seventh day as the Sabbath as the Jews under Moses ought to have and did, nor to keep the first day as the Christians ought to and do.

As a footnote to this particular discussion it is worth pointing out that in the Institutes[15] Calvin claims that there is an underlying fittingness, an appropriate orderliness, about the fact that the Lord's Day in the New Testament, whatever its differences from the Old Testament Sabbath, is observed in a pattern of 1 in 7. Is this appeal to order, and are all such appeals in Calvin, another way that he has of invoking natural law?

As the Old Testament Sabbath arrangement contained ceremonial elements, so there are other commands of God which are not all moral, namely the ceremonial laws. The ceremonial law

> was the tutelage of the Jews, with which it seemed good to the Lord to train this people, as it were, in their childhood, until the fulness of time should come.[16]

Further

> The judicial law, given to them for civil government, imparted certain formulas of equity and justice.[17]

(Would Calvin say that such formulas were a part of the natural law? I think that he probably would, though this merits further consideration.)

We can see from these statements, incidentally, the far-reaching hermeneutical consequences of Calvin's reliance upon natural law. The natural law, imparted at the creation is of permanent validity. It is re-expressed in the Decalogue. It cannot, therefore, be that law which was the schoolmaster of the Jews to bring them to Christ, and which according to Galatians 3:24,25 is done away with in christ, but rather the ceremonial and judicial laws which are non-natural or purely conventional in character. The natural law, shorn of its ceremonial and judicial elements, is re-expressed, endorsed and highlighted by Christ (for example, in the Sermon on the Mount), and by the Apostles in their correspondence.

II

How do these views of Calvin on natural law compare with the medieval outlook?

Any attempt to discuss this question has certain initial obstacles to overcome. There are those who have argued that Calvin 'make an entire break from the Scholastic conception of creation and existence'[18]. Two arguments are offered by Professor T.F. Torrance for this sweeping view. The first is that Calvin has a view of God's relation to the world as being dynamic rather than static. What this means, according to Professor Torrance, is that in Calvin's theology the idea of secondary causation[19] has no real place. But if Professor Torrance means what he says it follows that Calvin's own express commitment to secondary causation has to be explained away, and that Calvin's theological position becomes indistinguishable from pantheism. For a theology in which there is no secondary causation is one in which God is the only cause of everything that happens, and that rather than it being the case that I am typing this lecture, God is typing it. Not even the most rigid and uncompromising Christian theological determinist would go as far as this. To appeal, in support of such an interpretation of Calvin's theology, to his remarks about God's constant upholding of the creation is not in point here, since similar remarks can be found in the allegedly 'static' medieval tradition[20].

The second argument which Professor Torrance offers is that Calvin understands the doctrine of God in terms of verbs rather than abstract qualities or properties. This is not universally true of Calvin's treatment of God[21], but even if it were it would ignore the fact that for the medievals, with their supposedly static view of God, God is <u>pure act</u>, and it skates over the question of <u>what</u> verbs are used to explain the character of God.

Putting these arguments to one side, then, let us consider the medieval position as expressed by Aquinas. Aquinas discussed the theme of natural law at the greatest length in <u>Summa Theologiae</u> 1a 2ea, in considering what he calls 'the Old Law'. He maintains the following four positions.:

(i) 'The Old Law clearly set forth the obligations of the natural law, and over and above these added certain precepts of its own'[23]

The setting forth of the natural law in the Old Law was entirely appropriate since though with regard to the natural law 'man's reason could not be misled in principle ... it could be confused by the effect of habitual sin as to what ought to be done in particular cases'.[24]

(ii) There is a three-fold distinction to be drawn between moral, ceremonial and judicial precepts of the Old Law. This distinction provides that basic framework within which Aquinas discusses the nature of law.

(iii) 'The moral precepts, as disinct from the ceremonial and judicial, are concerned with matters which, of their very nature, belong to right conduct.'[25]

(iv) Because the precepts of the decalogue are, in all essentials, the natural law, they can be understood by natural reason. The precepts, therefore, contained in the decalogue are those the knowledge of which man has in himself from God. They are such as can be known straightaway from first general principles with but little reflection.[26] The precepts of the decalogue are concerned with matters which the mind of man can grasp instantly.[27]

Finally

> The moral precepts derive their force from the dictate of natural reason, even if they had not been expressed in the Law. Now they fall into three groups. Some are absolutely certain, and so evident as not to need promulgation, such as the commandments about love of God and one's neightbour, and others of the sort, as we have said , which constitute, as it were, the end of the precepts; and so no one could be mistaken about them. Others are more determinate in character, yet the reason for them can easily be seen even by the most ordinary intelligence. Yet since, in a few cases, human judgment may be misled about them, they need to be promulgated. These are the precepts of the decalogue.[28]

Reading these words of Aquinas' one cannot fail to be struck by a number of evident similarities and equally evident dissimilarities between his position and Calvin's. In discussing these, and especially the similarities, it is not being suggested that there is a causal link between the views of the two theologians, not is the existence of such a link being denied, but I am claiming that Calvin was, in general, a contented occupant of a general climate of thought of which Aquinas was a distinguished member, but also someone who did not hesitate to depart from elements in this climate of thought when he judged this to be necessary.[29]

What are the similarities and differences? Let us begin by making a broad and rough distinction between the ontological status of natural law, what the natural law is, and its epistemological status, how it is known. The relation between Aquinas and Calvin might roughly be expressed as one of considerable agreement about the first, but of considerable disagreement about the second.

There are important similarities. Both maintain that the Decalogue contains the natural law clearly set forth. Both subscribe to the three-fold distinction between moral, ceremonial and judicial precepts of the Mosaic Law. Both ground the goodness of natural law both in the character of God and in human nature, to whose flourishing the natural law conduces.

There is one crucial difference. Aquinas is much more sanguine than is Calvin about what human reason unaided by special grace can understand. For Aquinas the natural law is natural both in the sense that it is a divine law for human nature given at the creation, and in the sense that it is now successfully apprehended naturally, by unaided fallen reason alone. Because of this Aquinas does not stress, as Calvin does, the importance of the enlightening and focussing character of the Decalogue upon the natural law. For Aquinas the Decalogue has an epistemologically subordinate role

to the clearly apprehended natural law.

For Aquinas, natural law is knowable and known by the natural reason of man as he now is. The knowledge of the content of the Decalogue is not, it would seem, innate, but it follows at once from the knwoledge of first principles. Thus from the self-evident moral principle that one should do evil to no one it follows that one should not kill. Aquinas says that 'all the precepts of the decalogue are related to them (the primary and general precepts of the law of nature) as conclusions to general principles'.[30] This is true even of the fourth commandment, which follows from the (to Aquinas) self-evident principle that some time ought to be set aside for the worship of God. What is not part of the natural law is that this span of time should be one day in seven, or the seventh day, but then both these features, according to Aquinas (and certainly the fact of the obligatoriness for Jews in the Old Testament worship on the seventh day) are ceremonial precepts due to the historically-conditioned circumstances in which the Decalogue was promulgated.

It follows from this that for Aquinas the Decalogue has a supplementing function. It provides a primary set of theorems from the axioms of the natural law, theorems which each person could have worked out for himself from innate moral principles, at least insofar as they do not (as with the fourth commandment) involve a ceremonial element, but which God in his goodness has provided. These are precepts of the middle range. In addition there are precepts of the far range which 'wise men' find by careful examination to be implied by both the basic moral principles and the precepts of the middle range. Such a principle might perhaps be that it is permissable to kill an enemy in the prosecution of a just war.

The contrast with Calvin at this point could hardly be sharper. Whereas for Aquinas the revelation of the Decalogue complements the natural law which is recognised by all, for Calvin, though those without benefit of special revelation know that there is a natural law and have some sense of its content, what that moral law is, what it contains, can only be known clearly, not through reason alone, but through a reasoned understanding of special revelation. It is only with the hindsight that special revelation provides that the content of natural law can now be recognised for what it is.

Furthermore, it is only with the proper motivation and the moral power that regenerating grace gives that there is even the prospect of keeping the moral law. (Only the prospect because, as Calvin's interpretation of Romans 7 indicates, he takes the broadly Augustinian position that the life of the regenerate is characterized by conflict between moral weekness and aspirations to keep the law of God.) So that intellectually the natural unregenerate man fails to recognise the moral law for what it is, and particularly the first table of the moral law, and morally fails to keep it.

> If we want to measure our reason by God's law, the pattern of perfect righteousness, we shall find in how many respects it is blind![31]

Against this unremittingly black picture Calvin offers two elements of relief, though elements which are not sufficient to take him back to Aquinas' position. The first element is that though no men recognise the natural law in its fulness nevertheless all men recognise enough of it to render them inexcusable. It is not as if they do not have a clue. They are given clues, they recognise these for what they are, but they culpably do not follow up the clues. So they are without excuse. They are condemned for their failure to keep even those elements of natural law that they

recognise.[32]

In the second place Calvin concedes (if this is the correct word) that

> men have somewhat more understanding of the precepts of the Second Table (Ex. 20:12ff) because these are more closely concerned with the preservation of civil society among them.[33]

To whom is Calvin referring here? Perhaps not only to those who have no benefit of special revelation, but to those who have that benefit but who remained natural men, unregenerate and unenlightened. The reason for suggesting this is that Calvin writes in the immediate context of 'the common judgment of human reason', and of the failure in our keeping of the law. But even such general understanding of the Second Table as there is is superficial and one-sided.

> For the natural man refuses to be led to recognise the diseases of his lusts. The light of nature is extinguished before he even enters upon this abyss. While the philosophers label the immoderate incitements of the mind as 'vices', they have reference to those which are outward and manifest by grosser signs. They take no account of the evil desires that gently tickle the mind.[34]

The difference between Aquinas and Calvin regarding the apprehension of the law of nature encapsulates the Reformation conflict. It was conflict about the primacy, or otherwise, of special revelation, about the extent of human sinfulness, and about the need for power of God's regenerating grace. In the case of Aquinas (as also in the case of those philosophers such as Cicero with whom Calvin sharply disagrees in Institutes II.II.2) Calvin would hold that there is an under-estimation of the noetic effects of sin. The idea that sin is solely a matter of sensuality prevails with them, whereas for Calvin sin affects the understanding, not by destroying it but by depraving it. It is not completely wiped out, but it is choked with ignorance, as a result of which the will cannot strive after what is right.

In my view the relative positions of Calvin and Aquinas on natural law has a precise parallel in their respective views on natural theology.[35] We might legitimately discuss what importance Aquinas' natural theology has for his religious epistemology as a whole[36] but there is no denying the fact of his natural theology. By reason alone, starting from self-evident principles, any rational man may conclude that God exists. This is what Aquinas thought Paul was teaching in Romans I. Calvin, it seems to me, is much more cautious. It would be wrong to suppose that he thinks that there is no natural knowledge of God. But it would be equally incorrect to suppose that Calvin is committed to a full-orbed natural theology.[37] Rather what we find in Calvin here is precisely what we find in his treatment of the natural law, namely that man has from the creation around him clues about the existence of God which he - predictably but cupably - fails to follow up.

But why, if natural law plays the subordinate and residual role that we have been arguing for in Calvin, does he find it important to insist on natural law? Was it indeed important? Or is the reference by Calvin to natural law something that is in fact alien to his real view? We shall discuss these questions later.

III

So far we have been looking back at the medieval tradition which Calvin inherited, and to his modifications of it. What we have seen is that

though Calvin is patently an heir of the medieval natural law tradition he is nonetheless sharply critical of it. It is now time to look forward from Calvin, to his 'Calvinist' and Puritan successors.

In recent years it has been alleged that the intellectual and religious climate of Calvin's thought was sharply different from that of his successor Beza and the later Calvinists in Germany and Holland and Scotland and England. While Calvin was warm, personal, evangelical and Christ and Bible-centred in his thinking, Beza (for example) was cold and rationalistic, concerned to develop a system rather than to proclaim the gospel. In this emphasis it is alleged that he was followed by the tradition of Calvinist scholasticism (leavened to some extent by covenant theology) leading in turn to the Dordt divines in Holland and on the Continent and the Westminster divines in Great Britain. In this system Christ's atonement was limited to the elect, faith became at one and the same time exclusively intellectual and plagued by doubt, and religion became a covenant between divine and human bargain hunters. The result was legalism, the loss of personal assurance, and a virtual overthrow of the spiritual gains of the Reformation by its would-be successors.[38]

In my view this account is wrong in general and in virtually every particular, though the task of demonstrating this would be a long one.[39] But in discussing the relation of Calvin to his successors we are inevitably entering into this disputed territory. What I shall aim to do in what follows is to look at the position of a representative Puritan, John Owen, on the question of natural law. I shall argue that Owen's position, although much more elaborate than Calvin's, is so much like it in essentials that it would be flying in the face of the evidence to suppose that there was any substantial difference of outlook between them.

There lies tucked away (if this is the correct expression for a 200-page monograph) in Owen's monumental commentary on Hebrews, an elaborate discussion of the Sabbath. Owen was writing at a time in England when numerous options on the Sabbath were being canvassed. In setting out and defending his basic view - that the Christian is to observe the first day of the week as a Continuation of the Old Testament Sabbath, but shorn of its Old Testament ceremonial elements - Owen provides us with numerous interesting observations of the natural law, what it is, how it is known, what its relationship to the Decalogue is and so forth. He expresses his basic position as follows:

> Whereas it is confessed that the separation of some portion of time to the worship of God is a part of the law of our creation, the light of nature doth and must still, on that supposition, continue to give testimony to our duty therein. And although this light is exceedingly weakened and impaired by sin in the things of the greatest importance, and as to many things truly belonging unto it in our original constitution so overwhelmed with prejudices and contrary usages that of itself it owns them not at all, yet let it be excited, quickened, rectified, by Scripture light, it will return to perform its office of testifying unto that duty, a sense whereof and a direction whereunto were concreated with it.[40]

What is Owen saying here? Three things, each of which echoes what we have found Calvin saying.

(a) There are natural laws, 'the law of our creation', which are known of and understood through the light of nature, natural reason. Owen distinguishes God-given positive laws, those that have no intrinsic reason to be laws for the human race, but are purely conventional, (such as the

command to Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit, or the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament or the New) from moral laws. Moral laws are unalterable, being based upon the nature of the things concerned, and the nature of God the law giver, who is supremely good. Some laws have both moral and ceremonial elements, they are what Owen calls moral-positive.[41] Thus the fundamental law of nature on which the fourth commandment is based is that some part of our time ought to be separated to sacred uses. Owen adds that since as a matter of fact God has indicated at the creation that the time should be one day in seven, and this is known - so Owen seems to say - innately, 'it will be a matter of no small difficulty to find what is purely positive therein'.[42] Is the principle of one day in seven purely positive, and not natural, or is the principle of the seventh day positive and not natural? Happily we do not need to follow Owen in the thorough and (it must be said) sometimes strained discussion of this particular topic.

But what a striking similarity to Calvin! It is true that, unlike Owen, Calvin does not elaborate upon the distinction between different kinds of law, but the essence of Calvin's position lies in the distinction between moral and ceremonial laws and in his identification of the moral law with the law of nature. Owen agrees. There is, as well, a more explicit Thomism in Owen at this point. Aquinas linked the libligatoriness of the divine moral law to human nature. Perhaps for Martians, with a different nature, a rather different Decalogue would be appropriate.[43] Owen does the same.

> For it was not possible that such a creature (as man) should be produced, and not lie under an obligation unto all those duties which the nature of God and his own, and the relation of the one to the other, made necessary.[44]

Nevertheless, these differing degrees of explicitness should not cause us to ignore a fundamental agreement between John Calvin and John Owen, and between the two and Thomas Aquinas, on the law of nature.[45]

(b) Further, Owen is emphatic that man in sin canot truly judge what the law of nature is. Because of this, to say that something is a law of nature is not, for Owen, to say either that all men agree on this fact, or that all men would agree on it if asked. For Owen, a law of nature is not a law which is natural because all men consent to it, but because it is given by God at the creation to be the proper end of human nature.

> This law, therefore, is that rule which God hath given unto human nature, in all the individual partakers of it, for all its moral actions, in the state and condition wherein it was by him created and placed, with respect unto his own government of it and judgment concerning it.[46]

But there is an endemic human ignorance of this law of nature due to sin. Men do not know where, under God, their true interests lie.

> For although we may have some due apprehensions of the substance of it (the natural law) from its remaining ruins and materials in our lapsed condition, yet we have no acquaintance with the light and glorious lustre, that extent of its directive beams, which it was accompanied withal, when it was in him as he came immediately from the hand of God, created in his image. We have lost more by the fall than the best and wisest in the world can apprehend whilst they are in it.[47]

Sin has brought in not only ignorance but a great diversity of moral outlook, a confused pluralism. Owen was as acutely aware of the facts of

cultural moral relativisim as was his more famous pupil John Locke,[48] and as any modern Christian.

> At present we know the light of nature is so defective, or so impotent in giving indications of itself, that many nations left destitute of divine revelation, or wilfully rejecting it, have lived and approved themselves in open transgression of the law of it.... All idolators, polygamists, fornicators, and those who constantly lived on spoil and rapine, approving themselves, or not condemning themselves in what they did, are testimonies hereof.[49]

It is perhaps worth noting that Owen (and the whole tradition) would not have been abashed by the objection put to their position in a recent survey of attitudes to the Sabbath by Richard Bauckham. He suggests that while an early Puritan writer on the Sabbath, Nicholas Bownde, adopted the equivalent of natural law, moral law and the Decalogue

> in the seventeenth century, however, English thinkers seem to have had difficulty with the idea of a natural law requirement of one day's rest in seven. Natural law theory was growing more rational, and the content of natural law could not so easily be determined simply from Scripture. Certain expedients contrived to bring natural law as close a possible to the Sabbath commandment, but by and large the Puritans abandoned as untenable the notion that the Sabbath law is wholly 'natural'.[50]

This is, of course, a somewhat sweeping generalisation. The diversity of religious thinkers and thought in seventeenth century England is perhaps rivalled only by twentieth century California. It is also a somewhat confused statement. It is one (rather odd) thing to say that the content of natural law could not be determined from Scripture. it is another to say that attempts were made to bring the (independently known) natural law as close as possible to Scripture. But it is clear how Owen, at least, would have responded to such a general criticism: Natural law is logically distinct from Scripture, but under present circumstances is only known in its fulness through Scripture, and therefore the claim that there is a detailed natural law is only accepted by those persuaded of this by Scripture.[51]

Later in the same book[52] A.T. Lincoln provides what he regards as two powerful arguments against considering the idea of a sabbath of one day in seven to be natural. The first is that if the proportion of one in seven is allegedly natural, why it it more natural than one in six? The answer to this that Owen would have given is that while the proportion of one day in seven is natural it is known to be so only through the spectacles (as Calvin would have put it) of special revelation. There was never any question of demonstrating this fact (as far as Owen was concerned) to all rational men, nor of getting an unsolicited acknowledgement of it from all men. Dr Lincoln's second point is that an appeal to some period of time as natural is to be made in terms of human nature as it ought to be. Quite so. Neither Owen (nor, I suspect, Zanchius, about whom Dr Lincoln is writing at this point) appealed to 'natural law discoverable by human reason as it is and without the aid of special revelation'.[53] Such a criticism is, I suggest, based on a misunderstanding of the mainstream Puritan and Reformed conception of natural law.

But what is the force of saying that some particular injunction is a part of the natural law, if the apprehension of that natural law is at present hedged about with such difficulties, and in fact can only be apprehended with the help of the special revelation? Why not rest satisfied with an appeal to the commands of special revelation? There are two answers to

this question. One answer must be in terms of the distinction between nature and convention. To suppose that the sabbath and all divine laws were only explicit specially revealed commands, with no grounding in the created nature of things, would allow that they were conventional, a law made merely as a result of divine fiat, and of arbitrary, temporary and adventitious character. But the moral law arises out of the very nature of divine creation. And the second reason is that only by assigning priority to natural law can a satisfactory account be given on the inexcusability of all men, both those who have special revelation and those without benefit of it, and only thus can the true meaning and depth of divine grace be secured.

IV

Having sketched Calvin's doctrine of natural law, and seen important elements of continuity between it and classical medieval treatments on the one hand, and the Calvinistic and Puritan tradition on the other, we are now in a position to see the inadequacy of certain other views of Calvin's position.

In a paper 'The Reformation and Natural Law',[54] A. Lang took the view that the idea of natural law was foreign to the genius of Reformed theology, and therefore that such references to natural law as one finds in Calvin are a medieval hangover which ought to be expunged from a properly Reformed account. An essentially similar idea has been taken up, of course, with great energy by Karl Barth,[55] and developed *in extenso* in relation to Calvin by William Nielsel,[56] T.F. Torrance,[57] and T.H.L. Parker.[58] These books, in the words of Arthur Cochrance

> showed that Calvin's so-called concessions to natural theology are considerably less than is generally supposed and must be interpreted in the light of his Christology and theology of revelation.[59]

In examining the writings referred to one finds many of their typical statements lacking in clarity and definiteness, and where different positions can be distinguished the views attributed to Calvin can be seen to be inconsistent with what we have been learning about him.

To show this exhaustively would be an exhausting undertaking. We must confine our attention to two or three representative statements.

(i) From Arthur Cochrane

> It would do violence to Calvin's thought to consider man's existence, or any natural law governing it, outside of Christ or the Word. The order of nature is created, established and revealed in Jesus Christ. Nature is to be seen within grace.[60]

What does it mean, to see nature within grace, or to consider the natural law inside (or outside) Christ? One thing that it could mean is this: creation is through Christ, and the act of creation is an act of his grace. This would be a position that, I would judge, Calvin would Unswervingly endorse.[61] But I suspect that Cochrance has more in mind than this.

A second, slightly different thing that he could mean is that it is only by the will of Christ that nature is made known. This, again, would be unexceptionable to Calvin.

A third thing, radically different from the first two, is that nature is

made known (its true character, a man's proper relationship to it, and so forth) only ever by Christ's incarnation and words. But this, as has already been shown, Calvin would reject as emphatically as Thomas Aquinas. It is one thing to say that Christ ordains nature. It is another thing to say Christ reveals nature. It is a third thing to say that Christ reveals nature only through his incarnation and his word. As we have seen, the answer the Calvin would give to the claim that Christ reveals nature only through his word is to ask: to whom are we supposing that Christ reveals nature by his word? And when? In the pre-lapsarian situation God gives man his law by some innate or near-innate process which it is difficult for us to understand. In the post-lapsarian situation that law is focussed first by the Decalogue and then, further, by Christ's own teaching, which shows the inwardness and depth of human wickedness, and holds out the law as the pattern of believing discipleship.

(ii) From J.B Torrance

> When creation is alternatively interpreted 'in the light of nature' it leads too readily to the arbitrary God or the contract God according to one's interpretation of 'nature' and 'natural law'. It obscures the clear teaching of the bible that the God who is Father, Son and Holy spirit in his innermost Being created all men for sonship, love and communion. But we only have that understanding of creation when creation is seen in the light of its fulfilment in Christ 'by whom and for whom all things are created.[62]

> The separation between Nature and Grace amounts to a pre-Reformation medieval view that grace presupposes nature and grace perfects nature - a departure from the emphasis on Calvin that nothing is prior to grace.[63]

What are we to make of such comments? For Calvin all that we have is from God and we do not deserve it. It is the gift of his grace. Nothing is prior to grace, nothing is apart from grace. But why is it thought to follow from this that God did not graciously create man, wonderfully endowed, in a framework of natural law, discernable without the help of special revelation? Certainly, then, in Calvin there is no idea of nature apart from grace as a separate, autonomous realm. Calvin did not believe in the eternity of matter, nor in some basic dualism of God and matter. but it surely requires separate argument based upon the data we have of Calvin's to show that he did not teach that there was a fundamental moral structure between the Creator and man which it was possible for man to violate, and which man did violate.

(iii) In his treatment of man's position in creation in Calvin's Doctrine of Man Professor T.F. Torrance omits any consideration of natural law.

> In Calvin's view the key to the whole doctrine of man in creation and destiny is the idea of thankful response to the unbounded grace of god.[64]

The idea of law plays no part in the creation of man, since the idea of law is incompatible with grace. What are we to make, then, of Calvin's repeated insistence, for example, that the Scripture speaks of God's hostility towards us? According to Professor Torrance this is a purely didactic effect on God's part.[65] These are 'didactic devices' of Calvin's, though Professor Torrance allows that Calvin is not consistent in carrying them through.[66] However, according to Professor Torrance we can be sure that his position is far removed from that of later Calvinist theology

which

> too often turned Calvin's didactic devices into dogmatic procedure, producing a doctrine of the fall of man and of human depravity apart from the context of grace, and interpreting grace as God's answer to human depravity.[67]

These remarks prompt certain questions. As we have noted, the emphasis on creation as the gift of God's grace is true to Calvin, and in this sense Calvin's thought proceeds within a fundamental 'context of grace'. But how else are we to understand Calvin's understanding of Christian theology than in redemptive terms, and how else understand redemption than in terms of law? And finally, what is one to make of the alternative interpretation that Professor Torrance suggests, that 'Calvin's doctrine of the fall of man and of sin is a corollary of the doctrine of grace in forgiveness and salvation'?[68] If this means that according to Calvin we can only achieve a full grasp of what fallen-ness means from the perspective of divine forgiveness and salvation, well and good. But Professor Torrance seems to mean, in using the word 'corollary' that in some obscure fashion the fall of man is itself dependent upon the gospel. If he does mean this, and if it is proper to speak of the fall of man in its own right, and of the gospel as the gospel of forgiveness, how else is this to be understood than within a basic framework of law? And in what respect is it unlike Calvin to interpret grace as God's answer to human depravity?

V

Finally, it might be objected that in concentrating upon Calvin's insistence that fallen men cannot fully discern natural law apart from Scripture we have neglected the positive aspect of Calvin's teaching on natural law, that though there is total failure as regards both the understanding of and the keeping of the First Table of the Law yet

> Men have somewhat more understanding of the precepts of the Second Table because these are more closely concerned with the preservation of civil society among them.

And Calvin elaborates this in connection with the closing chapter of the Insistutes, on civil government.[69] Many Calvinists, often taking their inspiration from Abraham Kuyper, have stressed that Calvin taught a doctrine of common grace, and have often stressed this in opposition to the idea that Calvin appeals to natural law. Have they been correct to do so? If their aim has been to be faithful to Calvin, I would suggest not. Common grace is not a rival to natural law as understood by Calvin. The term 'common grace' as used by Kuyper and others is in effect an answer to the question of why it is that the results of human nature are not as bad as they could be, and ought consistently to be. The answer is that God undeservedly restrains sin, and equally endows men with a variety of creative gifts in society and culture.[70] But how is this restraint exercised? One central way - as Calvin showed - is by mean of the remnants of the natural law at work through conscience. Only if by 'natural law' one meant a standard of goodness known totally independently of the will of God, and kept by natural strength, by powers that did not have their source in God, would natural law and common grace be antithetical.

Thus in Calvin's attitude to the law of nature we can discern not only important elements of continuity between Calvin, his medieval forbears and his Calvinist successors, but also a common focus for tendencies within Calvinism, about the relationship between Christian faith and the wider culture, that have often been thought to be fundamentally at variance with

each other.

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2. Institutes II.2.22

3. Institutes II.2.22

4. Institutes II.8

5. Institutes II.8.1

6. Institutes IV.20.16

7. Institutes IV.20.15

8. Institutes I.15.4. See also II.8.1.

9. Institutes I.15.8

10. A recent example can be found in Professor Keith Ward's Rational Theology and the Creativity of God (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982) p.172

11. Institutes III.23.2

12. Institutes I.6.1

13. Institutes I.2.8

14. Commentary on Genesis (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, reprinted by Baker Book House, 1979) p.106

15. Institutes II.8.32

16. Institutes IV.20.15

17. Institutes IV.20.15

18. T.F. Torrance Calvin's Doctrine of Man (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949) p.29

19. Institutes e.g. II.4.2-8

20. T.F. Torrance op.cit. p.29

21. e.g. Institutes I.10.2

22. e.g. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologiae 1a 25.1

23. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theolgiae Ia 2ae 98.5 (All page references to the Summa Theolgiae are to Volume 29 of the Blackfriars edition, London: Eyre & Spottiswoode 1963- p.23)

24. Aquinas op.cit. p.37

25. Aquinas op.cit. p.59

26. Aquinas op.cit. p.65 Compare Bishop Joseph Butler 'Let any plain honest man, before he engages in any course of action, ask himself, Is this I am going about right, or is it wrong? Is it good, or is it evil? I do not in the least doubt but that this question would be answered agreeably to truth and virtue, by almost any fair man in almost any circumstance'. (Fifteen Sermons III.4)

27. Aquinas op.cit. p.83

28. Aquinas op.cit. p.105

29. e.g. Instead of concentrating upon Aquinas parallel remarks could instead have been made about Calvin's relation to Scotus. See, for example, the selections from Scotus in Philosophy in the Middle Ages edd. A. Hyman and James J. Walsh (Indianapolis, Hackett, 1973) p.601 ff. Alan Donagan, The Theory of Morality (Chicago, University Press, 1977,) p.6 endorses the general similarities (and dissimilarities) between Aquinas and Calvin on natural law.

30. Aquinas op.cit. p.67

31. Institutes II.2.24

32. Institutes II.2.22

33. Institutes II.2.24

34. Institutes II.2.24

35. For development of the point see the present author's Divine Revelation (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1982) Ch.I.

36. In a number of unpublished papers Professor Arvin Vos of Western Kentucky University has argued that Aquinas's commitment to natural theology has been over-emphasised.

37. B.B. Warfield Calvin and Calvinism (New York, Oxford University Press, 1931) pp.41-2

38. See R.T. Kendall Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649 (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979)

39. A small beginning in this task has been made in my Calvin and the Calvinists (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982) and also 'Calvin and the Covenant: Unity and Diunity' (Evangelical Quarterly, forthcoming). For other evidence of a fundamental continuity between Calvin and his immediate successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza, see Irena Backas "Aristotelianism" in some of Calvin's and Beza's 'Expository and Exegetical Writings on the Doctrine of the Trinity' in Histoire d'exegese au XVIe siecle edd. O. Fatio and P. Fraenkel (Geneve: Librairie Droz 1978).

40. John Owen An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews ed. W.H. Gould (London, 1855, Reprinted Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1980) II.275

41. Owen op.cit. II.330

42. Owen op.cit. II.331

43. Aquinas Summa Theologiae I.IIae 91, 93, 94, 100

44. Owen op.cit. II.336-7

45. See also the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) Ch.I.1

46. Owen op.cit. II.342

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48. e.g. An Essay Concerning Human Understanding I.2.2.

49. Owen op.cit. II.357

50. Richard Baukham 'Sabbath and Sunday in the Protestant Tradition" in From Sabbath to Lord's Day ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) p.324

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52. A.T. Lincoln, From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical and Theological Perspective p.391

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60. Cochrane op.cit. pp.182, 204

61. e.g. Commentary on Colossians 1.15-17

62. J.B. Torrance 'Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology' in The Westminster Confession in the Church Today, ed. Alasdair I.C. Heron (Edinburgh, St. Andrew Press, 1982) p.51

63. J.B. Torrance 'Calvin and Puritanism in England and Scotland - some basic concepts in the development of "Federal Theology" in Calvinus Reformator (Potchefstroom: Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1982) p.273

64. T.F. Torrance op.cit. p.25

65. T.F. Torrance op.cit. p.19

66. T.F. Torrance op.cit. p.20

67. T.F. Torrance op.cit. p.20

68. T.F. Torrance op.cit. p.19

69. Institutes IV.20. Both A. Lang (op.cit.) and John T. McNeill ('Natural Law in the Teaching of the Reformers' Journal of Religion, 1946) concentrate on this aspect of Calvin's teaching on natural law.

70. Institutes II.1.1., II.3.4.