Sola Scriptura and the Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism

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Abstract: Inspired by Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism (EAAN), we develop an argument—the "Scriptural Argument Against Dogmatic Protestantism" (SAADP)—that Protestants who accept the doctrine of *sola scriptura* cannot reasonably hold that Catholic and Eastern churches are in doctrinal error. If *sola scriptura* is true and Catholic and Eastern Churches have fallen into error, it is improbable that any Protestant can reliably form true beliefs about controversial points of Christian doctrine, including *sola scriptura* or suggestions that Catholic and Eastern Christians are in error. We evaluate potential responses to SADDP, considering how SAADP should affect ecumenical doctrinal debates.

Keywords: Scripture, Sola Scriptura, Protestantism, Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism, Alvin Plantinga.

Introduction

Alvin Plantinga's work was pivotal in the rehabilitation of Christian philosophy of religion in the latter half of the twentieth century. Most famously, Plantinga developed a "Reformed Epistemology," according to which propositional belief in central Christian doctrines can be rational even in the absence of publicly available evidence for their truth. Whilst Catholic reactions to Reformed Epistemology were initially somewhat critical,[1] in recent years Catholic epistemologists have offered more favourable evaluations.[2] Notably, several authors have argued that Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology resembles

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[1] See Kennedy (1988) and Zagzebski (1993).
[2] See Greco (1997); Baldwin (2016); McNabb (2018); Stacey (2018).

accounts of faith developed by prominent Catholic authors including Thomas Aquinas[3] and John Henry Newman.[4] We count ourselves amongst those Catholic philosophers sympathetic to Reformed Epistemology.

However, Plantinga does not merely claim that Christian beliefs can be rational and even "warranted" (known to be true) if true, in defensive vein. He also pursues an offensive apologetic strategy, by arguing that belief in one important competitor to Christianity—philosophical naturalism—is not similarly rational. Plantinga alleges that someone who believes that humans are the product of unguided evolution cannot rationally believe that naturalism (or much else!) is true. Plantinga calls this argument the "Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism" (EAAN).[5]

In this paper, we illustrate how Catholic and other Christian philosophers can use Plantinga's epistemology beyond merely adopting or adapting Reformed Epistemology. To this end, in Section I we outline Plantinga's EAAN, before introducing a parallel argument of interest to Catholic, Eastern and Protestant Christians alike: the "Scriptural Argument Against Dogmatic Protestantism" (SAADP). SAADP contends that Protestants are not rational in confidently believing that Catholic and Eastern churches have fallen into serious doctrinal error if they also accept the classical Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura*. In Section III, we motivate SAADP's first and most controversial premise, before considering responses to SAADP in Section IV. We conclude by reflecting on the consequences which SAADP might have for ecumenical debate or discussion.

Before beginning, we note two points. Firstly, although we use Plantinga's EAAN as inspiration for our version of SAADP, there are other ways to present its key insight. For instance, one could advance a similar argument in terms of "epistemic peer disagreement".[6] However, our presentation of SAADP illustrates the fruitfulness of theological engagement with Plantinga's religious epistemology and avoids some complexities of debates about peer disagreement. Equally, we hope that engagement with Plantinga's epistemology will make our argument more interesting to Reformed or Evangelical audiences, who may be sympathetic to both the doctrine of *sola scriptura* and the EAAN. Secondly, we do not claim that SAADP is a novel argument—it has roots in the work of Counter-Reformation authors including Robert Bellarmine and Francisco Suárez. Yet unlike Counter-Reformation polemicists (and parting from Plantinga's parallel intention in advancing EAAN), our principal intention is not to argue that

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[3] Brent (2008); Stacey (2018, 154–200) and (2021).

[4] Grimm, (2001); Wynn (2005); Stacey (2018), 201–252.

[5] The EAAN was initially offered in Plantinga (1993, 216–237) and developed in Plantinga (2000, 227–40) and Plantinga (2012, 307–350). For evaluations, see Beilby (2002); Mirza, (2011) Slagle, (2021).

[6] For an introduction, see Benton and Kvanvig (2021).

Protestants who believe that the Catholic or Eastern churches are in serious doctrinal error are *necessarily* irrational. Indeed, we suggest lines of reply to SAADP below. Rather, we hope to offer a constructive assessment of the rational structure of classical Protestant faith, which can help Protestants and other Christians engage in productive debate and/or ecumenical dialogue.

1. The Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism

As Plantinga puts it, according to Neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory biological diversity is the result of "natural selection winnowing random genetic mutation" (Plantinga, 2012, 12). Theists should not be alarmed by the word "random", as it merely indicates that there is no mechanism in creatures which guides the genetic mutations which drive evolutionary history. Neo-Darwinianism is not a philosophical thesis which implies that God lacks providential control over which mutations occur. To call mutations random is just to say that they are not produced by any *physical* mechanism directly aimed at generating mutations which are evolutionarily advantageous (i.e., beneficial for survival and reproduction) (Plantinga, 2012, 12).

Neo-Darwinians maintain that a species undergoes developmental change—including, the development of its cognitive faculties—due to random genetic mutations in its individual members. Often, these changes are harmful. However, sometimes they improve an individual creature's chances of survival and reproduction. For example, a mutation might enable an organism to reach food faster or to become undetectable to predators. In such cases, members of a species lacking this mutation are less like to survive and reproduce than members in which the mutation originally occurs, or than members which inherit that mutation. Eventually, over millions of years, genetic mutations can be so numerous that a new species emerges. Assuming—as we do—that this story is true and additionally that God has not guided the evolutionary development of our cognitive faculties, then our cognitive faculties do not seem to be aimed at producing true beliefs. Rather, they have developed under a blind process which selected them for their capacity to produce beliefs which encourage survival and reproduction. As Patricia Churchland claims,

> The human brain is, of course, a product of biological evolution… Looked at from an evolutionary point of view, the principal function of nervous systems is to enable the organism to move so as to succeed at the Four F's: feeding, fleeing, fighting, and reproduction.[7]

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[7] Quoted from https://patriciachurchland.com/, accessed 23 September, 2022. Based on Churchland (1987).

If our cognitive faculties are only selected for their ability to produce beliefs which encourage survival and reproduction, why think that they are truth-oriented? Might there not be many false beliefs which promote survival and reproduction? If so, why think that the beliefs we have are true rather than simply evolutionarily beneficial? Why even think that the content of our beliefs plays a causal role in our deliberations? This worry is exacerbated when we reflect on our reasons for believing that our higher order cognitive processes are reliable.[8] Given all this, Plantinga has argued that if one accepts both metaphysical naturalism and the Neo-Darwinian model of our evolutionary origins painted above, one should conclude that the probability of one's faculties being reliable is low or inscrutable (Plantinga, 1993, 220–228; 2012, 316–339). From this insight, Plantinga develops what he calls the Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism (EAAN). Let N stand for naturalism, E stand for Evolution, and R stand for the reliability of our cognitive faculties. Finally, let P(X/Y) stand for "the probability of hypothesis X, given Y". EAAN proceeds as follows:

(1) P(R/N&E) is low.[9]

(2) Anyone who accepts N&E and sees that P(R/N&E) is low has a defeater for R.

(3) Anyone who has a defeater for R has a defeater for any other belief she has, including [belief in] N&E itself.

(4) If one who accepts N&E thereby acquires a defeater for N&E, N&E is self- defeating and cannot rationally be accepted.[10]

Conclusion: N&E cannot rationally be accepted.

According to Plantinga, by accepting E, a naturalist undermines the rationality of all her beliefs, including her belief that N&E are true. This is because accepting both N&E undercuts her warrant for thinking that R is true. N&E cannot be rationally affirmed together, at least on reflection (Plantinga, 2000, 229–235; 2012, 339–346).

We will not evaluate EAAN's success in this paper. However, we propose that Catholic and Eastern Christians can adapt EAAN to develop a similar objection against some forms of Protestantism which embrace the doctrine of *sola scriptura*: the claim that the Christian Bible is the sufficient and uniquely authoritative source of religious knowledge. We call our argument the Scriptural Argument Against Protestantism (SAADP). In this argument, CR (Confessional Reliability)

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[8] See Crisp, (2016).

[9] Unfortunately, Plantinga does not specify which type of conditional probability is involved in (1). See Neels (2022). We set aside this issue here.

[10] Plantinga (2012, 344–345).

stands for the proposition that any individual Christian's controversial theological beliefs are reliably formed, and DP (Dogmatic Protestantism) stands for the claim that Christians should not enter communion with the Roman Catholic or Eastern churches, since these churches have fallen into serious doctrinal error. SS stands for the proposition that *sola scriptura* is true. SAADP proceeds as follows:

(1) P(CR/DP&SS) is low.
(2) Anyone who accepts (believes) DP&SS and sees that P(CR/DP&SS) is low has a defeater for CR.
(3) Anyone who has a defeater for CR has a defeater for any other controversial theological belief she has, including DP&SS itself.[11]
(4) If one who accepts DP&SS thereby acquires a defeater for DP&SS, DP&SS is self-defeating and can't rationally be accepted. So,

Conclusion: DP&SS cannot rationally be accepted.

2. Explaining the Scriptural Argument Against Protestantism

The EAAN alleges that a *particular* sort of person has an undercutting defeater for her beliefs.[12] Namely, naturalists (those who believe that there are no Gods or god-like entities[13]) who believe that human origins lie in an unguided natural selection face an undercutting defeater for their belief in naturalism. In advancing SAADP, we should be similarly clear about its target. SAADP contends that some Protestants who accept DP&SS face an undercutting defeater for their belief in the truth of all their controversial theological beliefs, including DP&SS. Before discussing SAADP's plausibility, we should therefore explain who we are describing as "Protestants" and what we mean by *sola scriptura*.

For present purposes, Protestants are Christians who are not in communion with the Bishop of Rome, or with any Patriarchs of the ancient Eastern (e.g., Orthodox, Oriental or Assyrian) churches. Christians belonging to Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist, or Free churches, and Christians who do not belong to any denomination are Protestant.[14] Some, but not all, Protestants are *dogmatically committed*. These Protestants do not simply refrain from entering communion with the Roman or Eastern churches (say) for pragmatic reasons, or because they lack persuasive theoretical reason to do so, or because they harbour mild suspicions that those churches are in error on points of doctrine. Rather, they

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[11] Here, we mean theological beliefs which are controversial amongst Christians.

[12] On undercutting defeaters, see Plantinga (2000, 359).

[13] For this definition of naturalism, see Plantinga, "Introduction" in Beilby (2002, 1); Plantinga (2012, 169).

[14] Some Anglicans claim not to be Protestants; we will not adjudicate their claim here.

hold that full communion with these churches is inappropriate because they confidently believe that the Roman and Eastern churches have fallen into serious doctrinal error. Dogmatically committed Protestants are Protestant because they firmly believe DP. SAADP argues this belief of dogmatically committed Protestants that one should not enter communion with Catholic or Eastern Churches because the latter are in serious doctrinal error (i.e., DP) faces an undercutting defeater, for Protestants who also accept SS. Even if this defeater is not decisive, it should reduce the confidence of such Protestants in DP.

Secondly, we should outline what we mean by *sola scriptura*, since this doctrine is easily misunderstood or caricatured. We think that the joint acceptance of two central claims suffices for endorsement of SS as understood by the first Reformers[15] and as still affirmed by many (especially, Reformed and Evangelical) Protestant theologians.[16] Briefly, SS holds that the Bible is the *sufficient* and *uniquely authoritative* source of Christian doctrine. Thus Kevin Vanhoozer (2018, 339) endorses Matthew Barret's definition of SS: "only Scripture, because it is God's inspired Word, is our inerrant, sufficient, and final authority for the church." (Barrett, 2016, 10). Similarly, John Peckham, who endorses SS, "views the biblical canon as the uniquely authoritative, sufficient source of theological doctrine, adopts the biblical canon as the rule of faith, and denies the positing of any normative extracanonical interpretive authority" (Peckham, 2016, 73).[17] Finally, Timothy George interprets SS as the claim that "the Word of God, as it is communicated to us in the Scriptures, remains the final judge (*norma normans*) of all teaching in the church" (George, 2000, 206).

We gloss the two claims necessary for SS as follows:

> *Sufficiency*—All truths which one must believe to be saved—or to avoid falling into serious doctrinal ignorance or error—are explicitly taught in the Bible or can be deduced from truths which the Bible explicitly teaches.[18]

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[15] On early Protestant doctrines of Scripture, in addition to sources cited below, see Horton (2006) and Trueman (2016).

[16] For recent elucidations of a classical doctrine of SS, see e.g., George, (2000); Peckham (2016); Barrett, (2016); Collins and Walls, (2017); Vanhoozer, (2018). For a different defence of SS, which is perhaps inconsistent with DP, see Ziegler, (2022).

[17] On Peckham's full definition (2016, chapter 6), *sola scriptura* holds that: "(1) Scripture is the uniquely infallible source of divine revelation that is available to contemporary humans collectively; (2) Scripture alone provides a sufficient and fully trustworthy basis of theology; and (3) Scripture is the uniquely authoritative and final norm of theological interpretation that norms all others."

[18] The Westminster Confession (I.6) neatly summarises *Sufficiency*: "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from

According to *Sufficiency*, one should not claim that belief in any proposition which is not in fact taught in the Bible or entailed by Biblical teaching is necessary for salvation or the avoidance of serious doctrinal ignorance or error. Nevertheless, Catholic and Eastern Christians can embrace *Sufficiency* without accepting SS.

> *Unique Authority*—The Bible should be regarded as the uniquely authoritative source for deciding on the truth of Christian doctrine, such that Biblical teaching (i) trumps other sources of religious knowledge and (ii) possesses greater epistemic weight than other sources of religious knowledge.[19]

By (i), we mean that if one knows that the Bible teaches x, one should not abandon or suspend belief in x because of the deliverances of another epistemic source such as philosophical argument or church tradition—although such sources might help one to discern what Scripture teaches. Equally, one should not embrace a belief y because it is supported by another epistemic source if one knows that the Bible teaches that y is false. By (ii) we mean that no sources of religious belief are (at least individually, and perhaps collectively) more certain sources of religious knowledge than Scripture. That is, the epistemic probability that a doctrine is true given that it is taught by the Bible is greater than the epistemic probability that it is true, given evidence from any other epistemic source.

Early Protestants considered Scripture inerrant because of its divine inspiration,[20] but one can accept *Unique Authority* without endorsing Biblical inerrancy. One can also accept *Unique Authority* whilst recognising that there are sources of religious knowledge besides Christian Scripture (e.g., philosophical argument, Christian tradition, and private religious experience). Many Protestants accept that these sources of knowledge, including Christian tradition, possess authority (epistemic weight); albeit not Scripture's unique authority.[21]

Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men." For the Reformers on *Sufficiency*, see Muller, (2003, 310–22) and for a recent discussion, see Vanhoozer (2021).

[19] For early Protestant endorsements of *Unique Authority*, see e.g., the beginning of the Epitome of the Formula of Concord (1577) (translation available at https://bookofconcord.org/epitome/, accessed 13 March, 2022); Westminster Confession I.X; and Article XX of the "Thirty-nine Articles". On early Protestant views of tradition, see Muller (2003, 340–71).

[20] Muller, (2003, 300–310).

[21] For early Protestants endorsing tradition's authority, see Mattox (2006, 106–108); Billings, (2016, 18–21); Muller (2003), 340–353. For recent Protestant theologians, see George (2000), *passim*; Vanhoozer (2018, 348–451).

Holding *Sufficiency* and *Unique Authority* is sufficient for the acceptance of a "weak" doctrine of SS, which Catholics and Orthodox Christians reject.[22] But Protestants who accept these two principles might regard the Bible as simply one source of religious knowledge which is *primus inter pares*. Indeed, some modern Protestant theologians prefer the slogan "*prima scriptura*" to "*sola scriptura*".[23] It is compatible with "weak" SS that Christians can appropriately be highly confident in their religious beliefs—and hold that these beliefs are necessary for salvation—whilst claiming that that one cannot (easily) discover that they are true or necessary for salvation through Biblical exegesis alone. Perhaps such doctrines are taught in Scripture (*per Sufficiency*), yet one can only discover that they are taught therein via additional sources of religious knowledge such as Christian tradition.

Other Protestants have believed that Biblical exegesis provides the *only* certain source of religious knowledge, such that one should only hold religious beliefs with confidence or claim that they are necessary for salvation or the avoidance of heresy if one can discover that Scripture teaches or entails their truth through Biblical exegesis alone. Accordingly, we suggest that Protestants committed to a "strong" doctrine of SS hold another principle alongside *Sufficiency* and *Unique Authority*:

> *Necessity*—Christians should only claim that religious beliefs are necessary for salvation or for the avoidance of serious doctrinal error, if one can easily know that they are true through Scriptural exegesis.

Martin Luther seems to have endorsed *Necessity*, claiming against Erasmus that

> If [the 'dogma of free choice'] does belong to Christians or the Scriptures, it ought to be clear, open, and evident, exactly like all the other clear and evident articles of faith. For all the articles of faith held by Christians ought to be such that they are not only most certain to Christians themselves, but also fortified against the

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[22] Catholics can accept *Sufficiency*, but should reject *Uniqueness*, given the Church's teaching that like Scripture, the Church's tradition is divinely inspired, so that some Magisterial teaching on faith and morals is infallible (see *Lumen Gentium*, 25). Accordingly, *Dei Verbum*, 9 teaches that "both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence" (accessed via https://www.vatican.va), 24 September, 2022). Orthodox Christians typically claim that Scripture and tradition are inseparable from one another or from the Church's life, so that Scripture should not be seen as possessing "unique" authority over and against "tradition" or ecclesial reflection. See Florovsky, (1972, 46–48) and Stylianopoulos (2008, 24–25).

[23] Vanhoozer, (2018, 338).

attacks of others by such manifest and clear Scriptures that shut all men's mouths and prevent their saying anything against them….[24]

3. Defending SAADP's First Premise

Some naturalists reject EAAN's first premise: the claim that P(R/N and E) is low.[25] Likewise, we expect that many Protestants will deny that P(CR/DP&SS) is low. In this vein, whilst acknowledging the need for grace in the correct interpretation of Scripture, early Reformers made the doctrine of the "external clarity" of Scripture, which is still accepted by some modern Protestants, fundamental to their Biblical theology.[26] Thus the Westminster Confession (1646) asserts that,

> All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.[27]

We here understand the doctrine of "external clarity" as the claim that although some divine teaching in the Bible is hard to discern, Scripture's most important doctrines (at least, those necessary for salvation) can be identified by all literate and attentive Christian readers who have received salvific grace. As Kevin Vanhoozer explains, "clarity means that the Bible is sufficiently unambiguous in the main for any well-intentioned person with Christian faith to interpret each part with relative adequacy" (Vanhoozer, 1998, 315). Accordingly, Biblical exegesis is a *reliable* means of formulating true religious beliefs for properly disposed Christians in a state of grace, at least regarding beliefs necessary for salvation. If Protestants can reasonably claim that the Bible is "clear" in this way, they can further claim that any of their controversial beliefs which are necessary for salvation are reliably formed, if they are arrived at through attentive Scriptural exegesis. If some of these beliefs entail DP and/or SS, then through reading Scripture, one can come to know DP and/or SS if SS is true.

By contrast, Counter-Reformation authors argued that Scripture's meaning is not clear, but difficult to discern or "obscure". In this section, we first briefly consider one common argument for the clarity of Scripture, suggesting that most Protestants should not find it persuasive. We then draw on arguments for the

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[24] Luther (1969, 163). Cf. Article VI of the "Thirty-Nine Articles".

[25] See William Ramsey, Jerry Fodor and Evan Fales in Beilby (2002).

[26] See Mattox (2016, 104–5); Stanglin, (2014); Muller (2003, 322–40). For Luther's distinction between Scripture's "internal" and "external" clarity, see Luther (1969, 11).

[27] "Westminster Confession", I.7 (quoted from https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/westminster-confession-faith, accessed 13 March, 2022).

"obscurity" of the Bible developed by Robert Bellarmine[28] and Francisco Suárez[29] to show that it is likely that the central doctrines which God teaches in Scripture are *not* easily perceptible to all—or plausibly, any—Christian readers of the Bible through exegesis alone, without recourse to other sources of religious knowledge. Finally, we show how this supports the contention that (CR/DP&SS) is low.

First, why might Christians believe that Scripture possesses "external clarity"? The strongest argument for external clarity which we have encountered, which is paralleled in arguments given by the Reformers,[30] can be outlined as follows:

(C1)   God's Word is effective to accomplish His intended purposes.

(C2)   God intends His Written Word (i.e., Scripture) to provide—by itself—all well-intended Christian readers with knowledge of all important doctrines (i.e, those necessary for salvation).

Conclusion: All well-intentioned Christian readers can reliably gain knowledge of all important doctrines (i.e, those necessary for salvation) by reading Scripture.

What should one make of this argument? We grant that the first premise is plausible by the lights of Christian Scripture (see Isaiah 55:11). However, we judge that many Christians will reject (C2): indeed, no one will accept C2 unless they already endorse Strong SS. Yet notoriously, Strong SS itself has very limited support in the Bible. Some advocates of Strong SS have claimed that it is implied by 2 Timothy 3:16-17: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." But in brief, we don't think that this passage clearly indicates that reading Scripture is

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[28] Bellarmine, *De Controversiis* Vol. I, I.III.I (Bellarmine, 1586, Col. 156–161). We here draw on Christopher Washburn's summary in Washburn (2013).

[29] Francisco Suárez, *Tractatus de Fide Theologica* V.III.12 (Suárez, 1858, 146). Suárez offers a useful summary of Counter-Reformation arguments against the clarity of Scripture, claiming that Scripture is "in large part obscure" (*magna ex parte obscuram*), which is evident from experience and Scripture's own testimony (e.g., Psalm 118:129; 2 Peter 3:16). He gives further arguments for Scripture's obscurity from (i) the profundity of the Bible's subject matter, (ii) its sometimes concise exploration of the latter, (iii) the fact that Scripture's meaning is sometimes literal and sometimes allegorical ("metaphorical"), and (iv) the difficulty of understanding Scripture's meaning in its original language.

[30] See Luther (1969, 162): "In short, if Scripture is obscure or ambiguous, what point is there in God's giving it to us?"; cf. the Reformed arguments for clarity discussed in Muller (2003, 322–40).

sufficient by itself to make someone "proficient" and "equipped for every good work". By parallel, if one tells a child that they should eat vegetable to grow up strong and healthy, one does not imply that vegetables are sufficient by themselves for a healthy diet. Doubtless, much more can be said about Biblical support for SS, but for present purposes we will assume that it is fairly weak. [31]

If Scripture doesn't clearly teach Strong SS, then why might one believe it? Perhaps one might have strong non-propositional evidence (e.g., a powerful "seeming" as explained below) that Strong SS is true. But we will shortly suggest that there are strong reasons to judge that Scripture is not, in fact, "clear". Accordingly, we suggest that only those with a *very* strong seeming that Strong SS is true (or another strong seeming that directly or indirectly supports C2) should find this argument for Scripture's clarity persuasive, and we consider that most Protestants lack such seemings.

We now provide arguments against the clarity of Scripture, taking inspiration from Counter-Reformation authors. The first reason why it is difficult to discern God's teaching in the Bible without recourse to other sources of religious knowledge is that readers face a difficult task even when discerning the meaning of Biblical texts *qua* the intention of their human authors and redactors. The Bible is a collection of ancient texts written, edited, and collected across many centuries, in contexts foreign to modern people. It is often hard to discern the original intentions of the Bible's human authors because we have limited information about (i) the authors' identities, (ii) their literary context, (iii) their immediate intentions and background assumptions, (iv) the meaning of particular terms or phrases which they use, and sometimes (v) which words they wrote. As Christopher Washburn explains, Bellarmine observed that the Biblical texts include "a large number of figures of speech, tropes, metaphors, allegories, transpositions, irony, all of which make the text inherently more obscure" (Washburne, 2013, 61). After two centuries of "historical-critical" approaches to Biblical exegesis, including several "quests for the historical Jesus", we consider that these difficulties in Biblical interpretation are now universally evident to informed Christians. Further, we note that disputes about the intended meanings of Biblical authors do not just concern matters of peripheral importance for Christian doctrine. Rather, the intractability of key doctrinal disputes which led Protestants to confident belief in DP (e.g., concerning justification, the Church's authority, and the nature of Sacraments) is reflected in seemingly irresolvable debates between historical Biblical scholars about the beliefs of individual Biblical authors on these matters.

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[31] Bellarmine discusses the above argument at some length in *De Controversiis* Vol. I, I.IV.X (Bellarmine, 1586, Col. 238–241), alongside other arguments for the clarity of Scripture.

But secondly, as Bellarmine noticed,[32] it is unclear that even if one can reliably discern what Scripture's individual human authors taught on doctrinal topics, one can thereby identify what God means to reveal through Scripture. Firstly, Scripture's human authors make conflicting statements, and so one needs some principled way of resolving these apparent contradictions. Further, one must decide how to square the Bible's teachings with human knowledge gained through disciplines such as philosophy or cosmology. For instance, one needs to judge how the Bible's sometimes anthropomorphic descriptions of God are to be interpreted in light of philosophical accounts of God's nature. Finally, as Washburn paraphrases Bellarmine, "the primary task of the exegete is to discover not what the human authors intended but what God himself intended in the sacred scriptures, including any multiple meanings that are to be found [there]" (Washburn, 2013, 62). Phrased in terminology familiar to Reformation-era authors, it is not evident how (potential) "spiritual" or "allegorical" readings of Scripture are to be evaluated alongside the "literal" meaning of the text which one might discover through historical-critical exegesis. Perhaps, for instance, God intends much of Scripture—say, the descriptions of divine commandments to subject Israel's enemies to destruction[33]—to communicate truth only when it is read in some non-literal sense.

To be confident that one has identified divine teaching in Scripture, one therefore needs (i) a hermeneutic, which details (*inter alia*) the "sense" via which God intends to communicate truth through the Biblical text, how to resolve tensions between different parts of Scripture, and how one should integrate the teachings of Scripture with the deliverances of other sources of human knowledge (e.g., science or metaphysics). If one's hermeneutic refers to the original intention of the Bible's human authors, one also needs (ii) access to considerable accurate historical information concerning the latter. Lastly, one needs (iii) to carefully apply one's hermeneutic and knowledge to Scripture. We claim that it's very difficult for Christians to decide on the correct hermeneutic or to access accurate information needed to arrive at confident historical-critical readings of Scripture, unless they rely on extra-Biblical sources of religious knowledge such as Christian tradition, Magisterial teaching, or religious experience. The Bible itself supplies neither the hermeneutic, nor the historical record. And even with these tools in hand, their exegetical application is difficult and involves contestable judgements.

Unsurprisingly, these difficulties in interpreting the Bible are reflected in the huge diversity of logically incompatible readings of Scripture given by exegetes

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[32] Bellarmine, *De Controversiis* Vol. I, I.III.III (Bellarmine, 1586, Col. 167–172); Washburn (2013), 61–2.

[33] For a recent defence of allegorical readings of the Old Testament, see Swinburne (2018, 210–224).

of all denominations, including Protestant authors. In other words, the variety and discrepancy of Christian readings of Scripture, which is highly predictable given Scripture's obscurity, indicates that even with the grace which God typically affords them, most Christians cannot through their sincere individual efforts at exegesis reliably discern what God means to teach in Scripture. The epistemic prior probability that any individual Christian can do so is very low. Of course, Catholic and Eastern Christians typically agree that one can be confident that Scripture teaches certain doctrines, including doctrines which are confessionally controversial such as the doctrines of the Trinity and the "real presence". But Catholic and Eastern Christians need not claim to be confident that the Bible teaches these doctrines because of Biblical exegesis alone—rather, they can claim confidence that the Bible teaches these doctrines because (say), their church traditions have authoritatively interpreted the Bible as teaching these doctrines. Likewise, they can claim to be confident in the adoption of a particular Biblical hermeneutic because it is endorsed by their church tradition or magisterium.

Protestants who believe that Scripture is "clear" can, of course, follow Luther (1969, 111–12) in offering explanations for doctrinal divergence. Principally, they may suggest that one of sin's noetic effects is a natural hostility towards divine truth, or at least difficulty in comprehending the latter. Thus, sin inhibits the correct interpretation of Scripture. Additionally, they may claim that some disagreement about the interpretation of Scripture is the fruit of failure to endorse Strong SS which leads exegetes to interpret Scripture using extra-Biblical sources (which obscure Scripture's plain teaching, producing divergent readings) or the attempt to apply Scripture to topics on which God does not intend Scripture to teach (say, technical points of philosophical theology).

Yet these observations appear inadequate to defend the claim that Scripture evinces "external clarity" as defined above. First, it is infamously not only Christians who reject Strong SS and consult extra-Biblical sources when interpreting Scripture who disagree about Scripture's meaning. For instance, as Bellarmine notes, the Reformers disagreed about what the Biblical teaches concerning the Eucharist. Secondly, even if divergences in Biblical interpretation are due to sin, they are nevertheless widespread amongst Christians. This indicates that either (i) salvific grace is not sufficient to reliably ensure the correct interpretation of Scripture or (ii) that few practicing Christians possess salvific grace. The last option does not seem especially attractive in itself, because it claims that few Christians are saved. Moreover, if one adopts it and claims the ability to interpret Scripture accurately then one must be certain that one is in a state of grace. We imagine that most Protestants will therefore concede that even if Scripture is "clear" in some sense, it is false that all literature and attentive

Christian readers can reliably come to understand all important Christian doctrines simply by reading Scripture.

Given Scripture's obscurity and widespread disagreement on controversial points of Biblical exegesis, we judge that P(CR/DP&SS) is low by the best epistemic lights of most Christians.[34] This is because on both strong and weak versions of SS, Biblical exegesis is the pre-eminent means by which Christians can reliably discern religious truth, including the truth of DP. According to SS, all central Christian doctrines are taught in Scripture (*Sufficiency*), and knowledge that Scripture teaches some doctrine is the most certain evidence of its truth (*Unique Authority*).

On the strong version of SS, Biblical exegesis the *only* means of deciding which doctrines are necessary for salvation or the avoidance of major doctrinal error. So, if one cannot know that a religious belief is taught in Scripture, one's confidence that it is true is likely to be relatively low. Indeed, in the spirit of *Necessity*, many Protestants who endorse the stronger version of SS may believe that one can *only* form religious beliefs with much confidence if one believes that they are taught in Scripture, because one has engaged in Biblical exegesis. But we have argued that engagement in Biblical exegesis, without recourse to other sources of religious knowledge likely does not reliably yield true beliefs about what God teaches in the Bible. So, any individual Christian is unlikely to reliably form true controversial confessional beliefs through Biblical exegesis alone: P(CR/DP&SS) is low for strong SS.

P(CR/DP&SS) is also fairly low on "weak" SS, which endorses *Sufficiency* and *Unique Authority* but not *Necessity*. We consider that aside from appeal to private religious experience or divine guidance in one's Biblical exegesis (see below), the most promising source of religious knowledge which is potentially acceptable to Protestant Christians is Church tradition (i.e. the theological writings of Christians in the first few centuries of the Church's history).[35] If consulting tradition is a reliable doxastic practice when forming doctrinal beliefs, and one can demonstrate by appeal to tradition that some doctrine which entails DP&SS is taught in Scripture, one can reliably come to believe DP&SS. But if DP holds, it is unlikely that consulting Christian tradition without appeal to further sources of religious knowledge is a reliable doxastic practice. *Pace* the claims of early Reformers that some Patristic texts support Protestant interpretations of

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[34] In fact, the condition that DP obtains does little work here. P(CR/strong SS) is low generally, although since strong SS is rejected by Catholic and Eastern churches, it entails DP.

[35] Protestants may have reasons for believing DP which are not based on "special" divine revelation (e.g., philosophical arguments), but many Protestants are cautious about our ability to make theological judgements without recourse to revelation. But it seems unlikely anyone could know SS except through special revelation.

Scripture,[36] many early Christian beliefs and practices are rejected by Protestants. So, if DP&SS is true, consulting tradition is unlikely to be a reliable source of religious knowledge on controversial theological topics.

Moreover, since there is a diversity of views on such matters in the writings of the Fathers, a Christian who wants to use tradition as a reliable guide to doctrine will need a hermeneutic to help them read the Fathers, similar to the hermeneutic required for Biblical interpretation. We suggest that many Catholic and Eastern Christians have such a hermeneutic—or, an additional source of religious knowledge—in the ongoing, Spirit-guided "Magisterium" of their church. But Protestants typically reject the claim that God guides the Church's Magisterial teaching to ensure its reliable accuracy on controversial doctrinal matters (although we discuss the epistemic and dialectical position of Protestants who believe that God has specially guided their church's interpretation of Scripture below). Accordingly, it is unlikely that one can arrive at knowledge of confessionally controversial beliefs (including DP&SS) through Biblical exegesis guided or supplemented by Christian tradition.

4. Possible Replies to SAADP

SAADP is a "debunking objection". Debunking objections do not try to demonstrate the falsity of S's belief that p but aim at showing that S cannot rationally believe that p.[37] We have argued that given weak or strong SS and DP, it is unlikely that Christians can reliably form true beliefs about controversial doctrines such as SS and DP. We have not argued that SS and/or DP are false, but rather that reflective Protestants have a defeater for DP&SS.

Are Protestants without response? We lack space to consider all potential responses to SAADP; indeed, we have only provided motivation for one of its premises. But one common way in which Reformed Epistemologists have responded to debunking arguments of various kinds is by arguing that while the propositional evidence from a third person perspective might render the probability that "one's (relevant) beliefs are reliably formed" (i.e., R) is low, one can have non-propositional evidence that makes R very probable on one's overall evidence. Most obviously, one might have the type of non-propositional evidence which recent philosophers term a "seeming" or "appearance"—i.e. a state which involves "felt veridicality":"the feel of a state whose content reveals how things really are" (Tolhurst, 1998, 299). According to many philosophers, including Plantinga, such evidence can contribute to the justification and/or

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[36] See Muller (2003, 342).

[37] On debunking arguments in philosophy of religion, see McNabb (2018, 25–133); Thurow (forthcoming).

warrant of beliefs, perhaps in proportion to their strength.[38] Plantinga's EAAN evaluates R's probability from a purely propositional perspective. Maybe—considering non-propositional evidence such as seemings—even if (1) of EAAN is true, (2) is nonetheless false.[39]

Let's apply this to SAADP. From a third-person perspective, one might wonder how confident a dogmatically committed Protestant who accepts SS can be—given DP&SS—that her theologically controversial beliefs are reliably formed (i.e., that "Confessional Reliability" (CR) is true in her case). As stated above, this throws into question whether her belief in DP&SS itself is reliably formed and thus whether she can rationally believe DP&SS. Looking at her peers, S might gather that given DP&SS the chances of her reliably forming true beliefs on controversial points of Christian doctrine (especially, through Biblical exegesis) are low. Nonetheless, maybe even if from a third-person perspective it is unlikely that her interpretation is reliably accurate, this Protestant might have an overwhelming "seeming" that whilst DP&SS are true, CR is true in her case. If so, she can reasonably hold that (2) of SAADP is false as a generalisation and (more importantly) false in her own case.[40] Alternatively, she might merely have a powerful seeming that DP&SS are true (or, that some propositions which entail DP&SS are true), even if she does not have reason to believe that she is generally a reliable judge on points of doctrinal controversy.[41]

While we grant that Protestants might reply to SAADP in this way, we suspect that many reflective Protestants lack strong "seemings" either that DP&SS are true or that their theological judgements and/or Biblical exegesis are reliably accurate even though P(CR/DP&SS) is low. To reply to SAADP without abandoning DP&SS, they will likely need to (rationally) hold a belief which explains why—or, makes it probable that—given DP&SS, CR is true of themselves, although false as regards many other Christians. They must rationally believe some proposition Z, such that in their own case, P(CR/DP&SS&Z) is high. Following Plantinga, we think that Z cannot be an *ad*

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[38] For Plantinga on "seemings", see Plantinga (2000, 110–111). For an introduction to seemings and their contribution to justification, see Tucker (2013).

[39] McNabb (2018, 31); cf. Bergmann, "Common Sense Naturalism" and Sosa, "Plantinga's Evolutionary Meditations" in Beilby (2002).

[40] Although perhaps reflection on SAADP should nevertheless reduce her confidence that she can reliably interpret Scripture and so also her credence in DP&SS.

[41] Some philosophers hold that there can be "inferential" seemings—that is, seemings that some proposition is true (or, probably true) *in light of* another proposition or some other evidence (see Huemer, 2016). If this is so, then our Protestant above might believe DP&SS *in light of* the Bible's teaching on the basis of one or more strong inferential seemings. Accordingly, we are not assuming here that seemings which might ground rational belief in DP&SS are wholly unrelated to the reading of Scripture.

hoc proposition such as "remarkably, my Biblical exegesis is always correct".[42] Plausibly, they need to affirm a proposition such as

(A) The Holy Spirit has specially guided me and my interpretation of Scripture such that the process responsible for my interpretation of Scripture is reliable. Or,

(B) The Holy Spirit has specially guided my tradition and its interpretation of Scripture such that the process responsible for my tradition's interpretation of Scripture is reliable.

So, to retain rational belief in DP&SS, perhaps a particular Protestant must believe that the Holy Spirit is guiding her (A) or her tradition (B) in ways that He has not guided the interpretation of other Christians. This belief might affect her understanding of SS. Her reasons for accepting SS would not be grounded solely or primarily in Scripture, but also in her belief in (A) or (B)—claims for which she might have assorted propositional or non-propositional evidence. In her understanding, for one to reliably form true religious beliefs, one needs the Spirit's special guidance in addition to Scriptural exegesis.

Such a Protestant would not quite have a classical Protestant view of Scripture. On our understanding, the early Reformers generally rejected the claim that redeemed Christians need God's *special* guidance (beyond salvific grace) to interpret Scripture on essential points of doctrine, given its "external" clarity. Some classical Remonstrant theologians claimed that even non-Christians could easily discern the Bible's central teachings.[43] Following Counter-Reformation authors, we argued that the doctrine of Scripture's "externality clarity" is implausible. But if Protestants appeal to (A) or (B) to resist SAADP, they must revise the classical Protestant understanding of Scripture to accommodate their appeal to the Spirit's special guidance.

Still, this revision may not be drastic, because the Reformers always insisted that accurate Biblical exegesis requires grace (Scripture's "internal clarity").[44] Apparently rejecting the doctrine of "external clarity" as parsed above, modern Anglican theologian John Webster thus claimed that "[P]erspicuity is not to be thought of as in any simple way a property of Scripture antecedent to acts of reading. Scripture is clear because of the Spirit's work in which creaturely acts of reading are so ordered towards faithful attention to the divine Word that through Scripture the light of the gospel shines in its own inherent splendour." (Webster, 2003, 94).

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[42] Alvin Plantinga, "Reply to Beilby's Cohorts," in Beilby (2002), 268.

[43] Stanglin (2014, 41–9).

[44] Mattox (2016, 99–101); Stanglin (2014, 42–44).

Yet even if the belief of some Protestants in DP&SS is not rationally undermined by SAADP, because it strongly seems to them that DP&SS or CR is true in their case, or because they rationally believe (A) or (B), an important dialectical conclusion still follows. These Protestants should not immediately attempt to rationally persuade Catholic or Eastern Christians to embrace DP and/or SS by arguing that Scripture teaches DP and/or SS.

From the perspective of a Protestant who holds (A) or (B), Catholic and Eastern Christians lack the Spirit's special guidance, without which one's Biblical exegesis is unreliable on controversial matters. Accordingly, such a Protestant presenting Catholic or Eastern Christians with Scriptural arguments for controversial conclusions (including DP or SS) must regard their interlocutors as ill-equipped to reliably form religious beliefs on the relevant matters through Biblical exegesis. Equally, Catholic or Eastern Christians (perhaps after reflection on SAADP), may judge that they themselves are not equipped to reliably form religious beliefs on controversial matters through Biblical exegesis which is not guided by their church's tradition or Magisterium. But one cannot rationally convince someone to embrace a belief by encouraging them to form beliefs using some belief-forming procedure which does not reliably yield true beliefs, or at least which they reasonably believe does not reliably yield true beliefs. So, Protestants should not generally seek to persuade non-Protestants of DP or SS by appealing to Scripture's teaching. At best, attempts to do so would be efforts at truth-directed but non-rational persuasion. Rather, Protestants who believe (A) or (B) alongside DP&SS should first aim to persuade their Catholic or Eastern Christian interlocutors of (A) or (B), before discussing controversial matters of Biblical interpretation.

Similarly, Protestants whose strong seemings give them reason to believe DP&SS or to hold that (2) of SAADP is false in their case, should still seek to persuade Catholic or Eastern Christian who find SAADP plausible—at least, as sufficient reason for they themselves to personally reject DP&SS—that SAADP is unsuccessful, before arguing for the truth of DP or SS through Biblical exegesis. Since seemings cannot be shared (although, they can of course be reported), it might be that such Protestants are not in a dialectical position to rationally convince their interlocutors that SAADP does not provide sufficient reason for them to reject DP&SS. Perhaps dogmatically committed Protestants can nevertheless aim to demonstrate DP by showing that some Catholic or Eastern Christian doctrines are so obviously at odds with one another or with the Bible's teaching that they present a *reductio ad absurdum* against the Catholic or Eastern faith. Alternatively, they may hope that upon consulting Scripture, their interlocutors will experience powerful seemings which support DP&SS. But given the sophistication of non-Protestant exegesis and the variety of seemings

which result from engagement with Biblical texts, we think that such strategies are unlikely to succeed.

Equally, if Catholic or Eastern Christians find SAADP persuasive, they should openly acknowledge this in debate or dialogue with Protestants. Whilst they might offer Protestant interlocutors who reject (1) or (2) Biblical reasons to reject positions such as DP and SS as a matter of dialectical strategy, they should acknowledge that in their own view, attempts to interpret Scripture which are not guided by the Church's Magisterium (vel sim.) are not reliable means of forming true beliefs on controversial doctrinal topics.

Conclusion

We now summarise our argument. First, we introduced Plantinga's EAAN and used its structure to develop an argument (SAADP) that Christians cannot rationally believe DP and SS. SAADP alleges that by believing DP&SS, Protestants face an undercutting defeater for all their controversial theological beliefs, including firm belief in DP&SS.

Having explained what we mean by DP and SS, we provided motivation for SAADP's first premise, which claims that given DP&SS, the chances of an individual Christian reliably forming true beliefs on doctrines which are controversial amongst Christians are low. To reliably discern God's teaching in Scripture, one needs to carefully apply an appropriate hermeneutic (selected from many available hermeneutics) to the Biblical text. One might also need access to considerable historical information about the Bible's human authors. It is unlikely that any individual Christian can do this unless her reading of Scriptures is guided or supplemented by another source of religious knowledge—most plausibly the Magisterial teaching of a Christian church. But if DP&SS holds, then it is unlikely that such sources of religious knowledge are available to Christians.

We next explored potential responses to SAADP. We saw that Protestants can reply to the argument by rejecting its second premise. Firstly, they might have strong non-propositional evidence that DP&SS are true or that their confessional beliefs including DP&SS are reliably formed. Alternatively, they might believe that their Biblical exegesis is reliable because it is specially guided by God to ensure its accuracy. Yet if Protestants reply to SAADP in either of these ways, they should avoid trying to persuade other Christians of DP's truth through immediate recourse to Scriptural arguments that the Roman or Eastern churches have fallen into serious doctrinal error.[45]

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[45] We're grateful to an anonymous reviewer for their comments.

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