
JEAN SENEBIER (1742-1809) AND 'REASONABLE CALVINISM'

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Abstract

Jean Senebier (1742-1809) is now primarily remembered as one of the librarians of the Library of Geneva and as a naturalist who investigated plant physiology and contributed to the discovery of the process of photosynthesis. Despite some exceptions, his theological and religious thought has not received the attention it deserves. In this exploratory essay, it will be investigated whether there is continuity of discontinuity between his theological and religious ideas and those of a number of important representatives of what has been called 'reasonable Calvinism', such as Jean-Alphonse Turretini (1671-1737), Jacob Vernet (1698-1789), and Charles Bonnet (1720-1793), whose work Senebier knew all too well. After having introduced Senebier, I shall first characterise the religious and theological views of the three abovementioned 'reasonable Calvinists'. Next, I shall discuss Senebier's views on the relation between reason and revelation. It will become clear that despite some differences there was an important continuity between the religious and theological views of Turretini, Vernet, Bonnet and Senebier.

Keywords: Book of Nature, Scripture, human reason, Enlightenment Calvinism, history, Physico-theology

1. Jean Senebier (1742-1809) - minister, librarian and naturalist

Jean Senebier (1742-1809) was born in a Genevan bourgeois family (for his biography, see [1, 2]). After studying Philosophy and Theology at the Academy of Geneva which was founded by Calvin in 1559, Senebier was ordained minister in 1765. The Academy provided training for ministers and it prepared upper class adolescents for important public positions. It also served as a place where bourgeois adolescents could complete their education before entering the professional world [3]. In 1768 Senebier competed in a prize competition on the 'art of observing' organised by the Dutch Society of Sciences in Haarlem. The topic of the prize competition was proposed by the Genevan naturalist Charles Bonnet (1720-1793) [4]. Senebier's essay was awarded the second prize. His essay was published in 1772 [5]. Three years later, he developed his essay into a monograph entitled *L'art d'observer* (1775). A second and extended edition later

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appeared as *Essai sur l'art d'observer et de faire des expériences* (1802) [6, 7]. In 1769 or 1770 Senebier became minister at the parish of Chancy which is situated at roughly fifteen kilometres from Geneva, the city of Calvin. In 1773 he moved back to Geneva to become one of the two librarians of the Republic of Geneva (see [8] for further details). In 1779 he published a catalogue of the manuscripts preserved at the library of Geneva, and seven years later he finished his *Histoire littéraire de Genève* (1786) [9, 10]. Apart from translating the scientific work of the Italian physiologist Lazzaro Spallanzani (1729-1799), he began to embark on his own research in plant physiology which resulted in the publication of several research papers and monographs (for an overview, see [11]). Senebier introduced chemical methods in plant physiology and he discovered that 'fixed air' (as carbon dioxide was called in phlogiston theory, which Senebier endorsed at the time of his discovery) was taken up by plants as they produce 'dephlogisticated air', i.e. oxygen, which was a vital step towards the uncovering of the process of photosynthesis [12].

In this essay, I will focus on Senebier's views on the relation between reason and revelation, which can be traced through his unpublished manuscripts, and to a lesser extent through his published work. Let me provide an overview of Senebier's religious manuscripts. Between 1773 and 1803, Senebier worked on a large, never to be published work on teleology, the *Essai de téléologie*. There are six different versions of this work which are conserved at the Bibliothèque de Genève (henceforth BGE), Ms. suppl. 471-483 and Ms. fr. 635-640. He also left seven sermons that were delivered at Chancy (1770-1773, BGE Ms. suppl. 122), a short set of notes on religious topics (undated, BGE, Ms. suppl. 854), a collection of essays that start with an essay on the beneficial role of Christianity upon scientific and artistic progress (undated, BGE, Ms. fr. 633), and an essay on the reliability of the New Testament (1791, BGE, Ms. fr. 518), of which an earlier version is to be found in BGE, Ms. fr. 632. Senebier's religious and theological work has only been studied by two scholars [1, p. 156-247; 13-15]. In this essay, I shall focus on BGE, Ms. fr. 633 and Ms. fr. 518.

Senebier was well versed in the 'reasonable Calvinism' of his day, which sought to establish the 'reasonableness' of Calvinism by showing that both general and special revelation are not contrary to reason but are in fact supported by it [16]. In this contribution, I seek to determine whether there is continuity or discontinuity between Senebier's theological and religious ideas concerning the relation between reason and revelation and those of a number of significant theologians and religious thinkers who are associated with 'reasonable Calvinism', including Jean-Alphonse Turretini (1671-1737), Jacob Vernet (1698-1789) and Charles Bonnet. In the next section, I shall explore the ideas of Turretini, Vernet and Bonnet. I will show that these men, despite differences which I won't further explore here, shared a similar theological orientation.

2. The 'reasonable calvinism' of Turretini, Vernet and Bonnet

In his *Histoire littéraire de Genève*, Senebier noted that by supplanting the clear ideas in the Holy Scripture with “convoluted, obscure and fabulous opinions” some theologians have produced more disbelievers than for instance Voltaire, who settled in Les délices outside the city walls of Geneva in 1754 [16]. Voltaire seems to have coloured d’Alembert’s portrayal of the Genevan ministers, whom he characterized as Socinian and quasi-deist in his lemma on Geneva in the *Encyclopédie* [17, 18]. The attacks of the deists and atheists are more successfully refuted, Senebier continued, by the “best apologists of faith”, including the Genevan theologian and Church historian Jean-Alphonse Turretini (1671-1737), his pupil Jacob Vernet (1698-1789), under whom Senebier studied theology [2, p. 438], and Bonnet, who have proven “the unchangeable solidity and perfect truth of the foundation on which religion is based” [10, vol. 3, p. 5-6]. In what follows, I will provide an overview of the ‘reasonable Calvinism’ of Turretini, Vernet and Bonnet. I am fully aware that there are important differences between their views. However, for the purpose of the present essay I shall focus on what they had in common.

In response to a rise of deism and atheism, as illustrated by the case of the soldier and vineyard owner André-Robert Vaudenet who was banned from Geneva in 1707 because he refused to accept the divinity of Christ and the veracity of the Bible, Turretini, who was part of the committee of theologians who investigated Vaudenet’s religious views, argued that Christianity is not contrary to reason [19-21]. According to Klauber, for Turretini God’s existence and his attributes can be elicited through the use of reason and rational inquiry [22]. In this context, he promoted a system of natural theology, based on scientific findings, and teleological and cosmological arguments, that according to him provided knowledge about God independent from Scripture, though in harmony with it [19, 20]. Natural theology played a pivotal role in his theological work, as a result of which he greatly expanded the use of general revelation [23]. For him natural theology was required to establish the veracity of special revelation [24]. Turretini rejected Calvin’s argument that the Holy Spirit confirms the divine nature of Scripture in the heart of the believer, and in order to convince deists and disbelievers of the divinity of the Bible he based his argument on the external marks of Scripture such as fulfilled prophecy and Biblical miracles, which both, according to him, withstand rational scrutiny so that every reasonable individual should accept the divine origin of Scripture [20; 22, p. 111-127]. Senebier approved of Turretini’s project and he remarked that his fellow townsman showed “the force of the proofs that establish the truth of Christianity,” and that he gave “a sharp idea of natural religion and its principle truths” [10, vol. 3, p. 9].

Although he targeted deists as his readership, Vernet continued the path trodden by his predecessor, whose unpublished work he translated and prepared for publication. In the course of this process, he gradually developed a voice of his own. Like Turretini, he argued that Christian faith is not contrary to reason, and he attempted to prove as much as possible about Christian faith through

general revelation [25-28]. He proposed historical proofs of Scripture based on the character of Christ and his Apostles, Biblical miracles, the way how Christianity became established, and fulfilled prophesy, for which he proposed a number of criteria on the basis of which its truth could be rationally assessed [25, p. 58-59; 26; 27]. According to Vernet, in order to uncover the fundamentals of Christianity first reason – the ‘first torch’ which God has given us – and a careful inspection of the order in nature are to be consulted. General revelation will unveil God’s existence and his attributes. Afterwards, special revelation will expand and perfect our knowledge [27, 29]; and more generally [30]. Vernet’s work is characterized by a number of tensions. For instance, whereas at an earlier stage he urged that special revelation is necessary for salvation, later in his career seems to have implied that it was merely useful. It seems that ultimately Vernet could not accept that virtuous individuals who have never had the chance to acquaint themselves with Scripture would not be saved, which is the case when special revelation is indeed necessary for salvation [25, p. 63-64; 27; 30; 31]. He also argued that the idea that the divine nature can be distinguished into three persons is nowhere to be found in Scripture, and he considered Christ divine yet not identical to God [25, p. 63-65, 96-97, 454; 27, p. 387; 31, p. 75-76]. It has recently been suggested that the Arminian leanings in Vernet’s work can explain why Vernet’s Christology was deemed Socinian by some of his contemporaries [16, p. 228]. According to Vernet, the goal of Christianity, as he understood it, is to assist in the achievement of man’s chief end, namely the attainment of happiness [25, p. 94; 27].

In his *Recherches philosophiques sur les preuves du christianisme* (1770), which grew out of parts 16-21 and in the second volume of his *Palingénésie philosophique* (1769) [32], Bonnet set out to determine the veracity of Christianity through a “logical examination” [33]. He maintained that reason supports the existence of a divine legislator. Here he relied on the principle of sufficient reason, which states that everything must have a sufficient reason for its existence, from which he concluded that God is the cause of all created things and a necessary being, who cannot not exist nor can be subject to change [34]. As is well documented, in his theological and biological work Bonnet appropriated the principle of sufficient reason as found in the work of G.W. Leibniz, whose *Essais de théodicée* (1710) he read in 1748 [35, 36]. The manifest order observable in the world, the harmonious relations between things, and the elegance of laws of nature furthermore compel our reason to recognize God’s attributes, namely omnipotence, omniscience, and absolute goodness, he continued [33, p. 85-92, 100]. In broad lines, Bonnet’s argumentative strategy resembles Turretini’s and Vernet’s argument for the existence of God and the divine attributes [22]. According to Bonnet, it is not against reason to accept that God, given his omnipotence, can temporarily abolish the laws of nature or foreordain modifications to them for certain purposes, which lead him to conclude that miracles are not contrary to reason [33, p. 104, 181-182]. Through experience and reason the “future destination” of humankind cannot be known, Bonnet stated [33, p. 42, 160, 463]. In order to know God’s plan with man, we should turn to special

revelation, i.e. to the Scriptures, which speak in a “language of facts” [33, p. 161]. Special revelation is absolutely necessary in the attainment of human happiness, and not merely useful [33, p. 116]). However, experience and reason furnishes rules with which both the internal marks of the Scriptures, i.e. arguments drawn from the nature of the doctrine put forward in the Bible, and the external ones, i.e. arguments relying on miracles, prophesy and the character of Christ and his disciples, are to be assessed [33, p. 152, 507-508]. With respect to the internal marks of the Scriptures, Bonnet emphasized, like Vernet, that God’s plan of salvation offers the unique possibility of maximizing and perpetuating man’s chief goal, namely the achievement of happiness [33, p. 93-94]. In his discussion of miracles, Bonnet pointed out that since we cannot doubt the sincerity of those who reported miracles in the Bible, given their moral qualities, nor their competence, which manifests itself through the ‘palpability’ of the facts they report on, we should conclude that they have not deceived us nor that they have been deceived [33, p. 184]. Bonnet concluded his investigations by claiming that the credibility of the Christian doctrine is so probable that, if he rejected it, “I would believe to have turned the surest rules of logic upside down and renounced the most common maxims of reason” [33, p. 511]. In order not to incite the deists and the disbelievers, throughout his *Recherches philosophiques*, he underscored, like Turretini [21, p. 104; 22, p. 111, 127], that he did not seek to demonstrate the veracity of Christianity, as many apologists have done, but only to show that the Christian doctrine has a high degree of probability or moral certainty [33, p. xvi, 42-44, 83-84, 149, 151, 510]. Since he wanted to be read by readers from all Christian denominations, Bonnet refrained from publicly going into doctrinal matters [33, p. xiv]. For Bonnet Christianity was not a set of rigid doctrines, but a practical philosophy whose finality was man’s happiness [36, p. xv; 37].

Having provided an overview of Turretini’s, Vernet’s and Bonnet’s ‘reasonable Calvinism’, in the next section, I shall turn to Senebier’s views of the relation between reason and revelation as they can be found in his published work and unpublished manuscripts.

3. Senebier’s views on the relation between reason and Revelation

Senebier’s published work does not inform us much about his views on the relation between reason and revelation. In a passage in his *Histoire littéraire de Genève*, to which little attention has been drawn (see however [1, p. 86]), Senebier stated that special revelation, which is a “factual science” that records what God has communicated to man and has as its goal human happiness, and Natural theology (théologie naturelle) are in harmony with one another, and that natural theology is the science that “in my eyes, honours man most, and the progress it has made best demonstrates the extent of man’s mind and what he owes to revelation” [10, vol. 1, p. 175-176]. He made the latter statement without providing any further details. Earlier, in a short section on natural theology in his *L’art d’observer* (1775), Senebier argued that careful observation of the Universe reveals that there is a necessary being that is its cause, and that this cause is

intelligent, almighty and infinite goodness [38]. In other words, for Senebier Natural theology can establish God's existence and his perfections. This is pretty much all we have in print about Senebier's views on the relation between reason and revelation. We need to turn to Senebier's unpublished manuscripts in order to get more insight into his views on the relation between reason and revelation.

In an unpublished piece on the veracity of Christianity, Senebier pointed out that the Christian religion has three parts: a historical part, a dogmatic part and a moral part (for discussion, see [15]). This manuscript is to be found in BGE, ms. fr. 633 and runs from pages 23-27. The preceding part on the favourable influence of Christianity upon the sciences and the arts runs from pages 1-22, BGE ms. fr. 633 contains three other parts: a part on the Jewish religion (p. 28-30), a part on the persistence of Christianity (p. 31-32), and a part on the propagation of the Gospel (p. 33-35). The entire manuscript is undated. In the manuscript, Senebier argued that the historical part of Christianity, i.e. the events reported in the New Testament, can be shown to be as reliable as other well established historical truths. Although historical truths cannot be established by mathematical demonstration, they have a high degree of reliability [BGE, Ms. fr. 633, p. 23]. The events reported in the Bible are very probable because they are not internally contradictory nor contradictory to common received notions and because the witnesses who reported on these events were virtuous and free from prejudices [BGE, Ms. fr. 633, p. 24]. As to the fundamentals of Christianity, which according to Senebier include the existence of God and his perfections, the immortality of the soul, and retribution after death, he claimed that they are "naturally deduced from the contemplation of the universe, its laws and order", which have been undertaken by for instance Leibniz, Newton and Bonnet. These fundamentals conform to the demands of philosophical reason. In another unpublished piece on the favourable influence of Christianity upon the sciences and the arts, Senebier remarked that certain philosophers such as Bonnet have established the same things through reason what revelation has taught us. For instance, they have established the necessary existence of God and his perfections, the immateriality of the soul, life after death, and judgment day. It is as if, Senebier underscored, one reads in their writings "the Gospel in another form" [BGE, Ms. fr. 633, p. 4-5]. Reason and revelation are therefore in perfect harmony with each other. The moral part of the Christian religion corresponds to what certain contemporaries, who have used reason as a guide, have written about natural law and morality, which shows that Christianity's moral part is in harmony with reason [BGE, Ms. fr. 633, p. 25]. Although Senebier's argumentation quite sketchy, at least the gist of his argumentation is quite clear.

In a manuscript on the moral character of Jesus Christ and the Apostles and on the divinity of the Gospel (full title: *Observations philosophiques et critiques sur le caractère moral[,] les connaissances et diverses circonstances de la vie de Jésus Christ et des Apôtres ou Présomptions philosophiques en faveur d'Évangile tirées de l'Évangile même*; BGE, Ms. fr. 518), on which Senebier started working in 1791, he urged that although revelation is an independent form of knowledge because it is a manifestation of God's will to reveal certain truths whose ultimate

goal is the happiness of mankind [BGE, Ms. fr. 518, p. 184], reason and revelation are in harmony with each other since both of them are divine gifts. (This manuscript is a revised and expanded version of BGE, Ms. fr. 622 which is undated.) For this very reason, we can rely safely on reason to establish the certainty and divinity of revelation [BGE, Ms. fr. 518, p. 5]. The certainty and divinity of the New Testament cannot be established by mathematical demonstrations. It can only be established with the assistance of reason that the truths revealed in the Bible have a very high degree of probability, as Vernet and Bonnet have shown, Senebier pointed out [BGE, Ms. fr. 518, p. 5-6]. In the introduction of this manuscript, Senebier stated that revelation is "a new version of reason that is considerably augmented". "Revelation is to reason", he added, "as the telescope is to sight". A telescope "does not change anything to the objects [being observed] or to the manner of seeing, but it allows one to discover beings that could not be seen before without it" [BGE, Ms. fr. 518, p. 2-3]. Revelation and reason cannot be separated and both are required, for revelation perfects reason and reason leads the way to revelation [BGE, Ms. fr. 518, p. 4]. Turretini introduced a similar metaphor, using a microscope instead of a telescope, in his *Traité de la vérité de la religion chrétienne* [39]. In the manuscript, Senebier tried to establish the sanctity of Christ's character, the divinity of his mission, and the supernatural origin of the knowledge he communicated [BGE, Ms. fr. 633, p. 10]. Although the manuscript is numbered in consecutive parts and chapters, the argumentation is prolix and not very well structured. For the benefit of the reader, I will pinpoint the main steps in Senebier's argumentation. Note that the order of the arguments which I will provide does not correspond to the order according to which Senebier structured his manuscript. First, Senebier established that the Apostles are virtuous men who cannot have had the intention to deceive us [BGE, Ms. fr. 518, p. 238-251]. By consequence, we should accept that they are reliable witnesses. Now that this has been established, it follows that the miracles on which the Apostles reported actually happened and that Christ truly existed. Second, given the Apostles' descriptions of Christ's outstanding moral behaviour reported in the New Testament, it follows that we can believe him when he said that he was sent by God, and that the knowledge which he communicated cannot have a human origin, and that instead it is to be ascribed to a divine source [BGE, Ms. fr. 518, p. 177-180]. From this it follows that the doctrine Christ communicated concerning his death, resurrection and ascension and concerning the Last Judgement, and the moral code he introduced are veridical and reveal God's plan with man [BGE, Ms. fr. 518, p. 117-198]. According to Senebier, what we can learn from a philosophical investigation, i.e. an investigation guided by reason, of the New Testament is that Christ was sent by God to spread divine knowledge for the benefit of humankind.

4. Conclusions

As we have seen and as has been previously suggested [15], Senebier shared a number of important views with his fellow 'reasonable Calvinists'. With

them he shared the following convictions: that natural and special revelation are in harmony with one another, that the veracity of the Bible can only be established to a high degree of probability through the aid of philosophical reason, and that Christianity is not about doctrine but about a moral code that has as its chief goal the happiness of mankind. In addition, he agreed with Turretini and Vernet that special revelation augments and perfects the knowledge we have obtained through reason. Although, as I have emphasised from the start, there are differences between Senebier's views and those of his Genevan 'reasonable Calvinists' [15, p. 24], it is clear that he shared a similar theological orientation with them. From this I would like conclude that there was indeed a continuity between the religious views of Turretini, Vernet, Bonnet and Senebier.

The 'reasonable Calvinism' of Turretini, Vernet, Bonnet and Senebier points to an important transformation within Calvinistic theological thinking. In an age in which deism and atheism spread more widely, these 'reasonable Calvinists' decided to pin their faith on the very weapon used by their deist and atheist nemeses, namely reason. In doing so, they rationalised their own Calvinistic beliefs and they hoped that by endorsing the view that reason is the arbiter of beliefs and convictions they could convince deists and atheists more easily. In order to defend God's existence, they argued that the existence of God's and his attributes could be, in the words of Senebier, "naturally deduced from the contemplation of the Universe, its laws and order". In order to establish the veracity of the Bible, they relied on rationalist methods of evaluating human testimony. 'Reasonable Calvinists' created a novel, modernised version of Calvinism by means of the one tool *en vogue* at the time: human reason. The case of 'reasonable Calvinism' shows clearly how religious thought needed to adapt itself to a changing environment.

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