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All Theory is Grounded A Book Review

By The Editor[©]

The book under review here is the second, revised edition of *The Myth of Religious Neutrality: An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories* (Notre Dame Press, 2005), by Roy A. Clouser. Clouser is professor emeritus of philosophy and religion at The College of New Jersey in Trenton. This is a book for philosophers and for scholars and teachers in the fields of mathematics, physics, psychology, sociology, political science, and religion. It is a remarkable essay of great weight, whose value can hardly be overestimated.

The ruling assumption in science and philosophy for centuries has been that carefully constructed and tested theories can be neutral with respect to religion and dogmatic beliefs. This assumption is most strongly held in the natural sciences and mathematics. The social sciences have, by and large, tried to achieve the same thing by using methods that will supposedly yield factual truth unaffected by the values of the scientist and neutral with respect to the values held by the human practices and institutions being studied.

Clouser's achievement is to show, in detail, why this ruling assumption about the religious and value neutrality of theory is mistaken. It is, quite simply, a myth. Clouser begins with a thorough examination of the meaning of religion, concluding that religious belief is belief in that which is unconditional, non-dependent reality—in other words, belief in that which is divine. For Christians this means belief in the Creator God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus Christ. But those who believe in other gods or in no god cannot escape religious belief, and this shows up in the work of all theorizing, whether it is done by so-called religious people or so-called non-religious people.

Part II of *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* takes up the question of what constitutes a theory. Theories are carefully developed, abstract hypotheses designed to explain something. Particular sciences try to explain things like biotic or physical or social functions, properties, and laws. All-encompassing theories—philosophy—try to explain the relations among all aspects of reality. Clouser shows in his extended argument with

many illustrations that all theorizing, whether in a particular science or in philosophy, is controlled by the basic beliefs the theorist holds about the nature of reality, including the theorist's belief about what is unconditional and non-dependent.

The third part of *Myth* is a "Casebook" in which Clouser makes his case about the non-neutrality of all theorizing in the fields of mathematics, physics, and psychology. This leads to a concluding chapter in Part III titled "The Need for a New Beginning," by which the author means the need for an approach to theorizing that accepts rather than denies the non-neutrality of theory and that tries to explain why it happens to be the case that all theorizing is controlled by religious beliefs. In essence, the extended argument is that all aspects of reality hang together in dependence on the Creator God and that is why human theorizing about the whole of created reality or about any particular dimension of it arises from human dependence on the Creator. In other words, theory, which arises from humans who are dependent on their Creator cannot possibly have a religiously neutral starting point. Consequently, those who try to make theoretical thought itself an independent, neutral starting point tend to absolutize one or more aspects of reality as if those aspects are non-dependent, like God. But such an approach to theorizing cannot be successful, and the lack of success shows up in various "reductionisms." By reductionism Clouser means an attempt to explain reality in terms of one part of reality that has been abstracted and posited by the thinker as unconditional and non-dependent. Successful theorizing, by contrast, requires a correct starting point, which is recognition of the dependence of the entire creation (including theory itself) on the true unconditional, non-dependent origin of reality, namely the Creator God. Clouser takes his stand then in the tradition of the Cappadocian church fathers and Calvin for whom all of human existence, including theory, was recognized to be religiously dependent on the Creator.

Clouser concludes Part III this way: "The philosophical critique of reduction showed why attempting to attribute unconditional existence to any kind of properties and laws abstracted from our experience of the world results in the meaning of that kind evaporating before our minds. The religious critique has shown why, on the other hand, no such calamity befalls the idea of a transcendent Creator. In our encounter with God through His word and His ongoing relations to us in our daily lives, God's actions and relations also have properties we can abstract. But as none of them are regarded as having unconditional existence, the ideas of them do not fall victim to our thought experiment as do pagan deifications of aspects of the cosmos. Only God's transcendent being has unconditional reality, and it is not a hypothesis in need of, but incapable of, theoretical justification."

This leads to the final section of the book, Part IV, in which the author demonstrates the kind of theorizing for which he is arguing, namely non-reductionist theorizing. Throughout the book, but especially here, the author demonstrates the fruitfulness of the Christian philosophical work of Herman Dooyeweerd, a Dutch philosopher of law who followed in the tradition of Abraham Kuyper and taught at the Free University of Amsterdam from the 1920s until his retirement almost 50 years later. In particular, Clouser shows how non-reductionist Christian theorizing expresses itself in sociological and political theory. While Clouser's entire book hangs together in one

piece, those particularly interested in law, government, and politics will want to give special attention to the book's 13th chapter, "A Non-Reductionist Theory of the State."

Clouser begins his concluding "Afterword" with this summary: "In the introduction I claimed that a religious belief plays a role in human life analogous to the role played in the earth's geography by its great tectonic plates. The intervening chapters have now presented reasons for believing this to be true for the theories by which we interpret ourselves and our world. We have seen that, at bottom, theories are driven and regulated by whatever idea of divinity has gripped the hearts of their advocates. In that sense a theory is every bit as much an expression of religion as worship is, even though it is a very different type of expression."

No review of this 395-page book can adequately capture its sophisticated breadth and depth. This review is merely an introduction. Those who are engaged in any kind of scientific or philosophical theorizing should study this volume carefully. It is one of the most liberating books of philosophy one will find and is available in paperback for \$25 from Notre Dame Press (www.undpress.nd.edu), 574-631-6346.

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