

Roy A. Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality: An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Beliefs in Theories* (Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 2005, rev. ed.)

Kenneth W. Hermann  
Kent State University

Christian scholars would all agree that their Christian faith ought to shape how they understand their disciplines – in some form. In fact, phrases such as the ‘integration of faith and learning,’ ‘Christian worldview,’ and ‘Christian perspective’ are ubiquitous in Christian colleges. They are laded out in liberal doses in ads to assure parents that their children will receive a solid ‘Christian perspective’ in their education and in fundraising letters to persuade alumni that their contributions are essential to spreading a ‘Christian worldview’ in our secular culture. But, when pressed for more substantive understanding of the distinctive contributions that the Christian faith makes to evaluating and developing theories in the disciplines, there are often only vague references to ‘Christian’ attitudes, behaviors, ethical concerns, and positions to avoid. It would not be too wide of the mark to observe that the widespread use of these phrases has often emptied them of any specific meaning in many classrooms and studies. Roy Clouser is deeply troubled by this state of affairs among his Christian colleagues in the academy.

Working in the tradition of the famous Dutch Christian philosopher, Herman Dooyeweerd, Clouser has devoted his entire academic career to demonstrating that there are such things as distinctly *Christian* theories in the special sciences. All those who have been put off by what they believed were Dooyeweerd’s esoteric language and ideas will find *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* to be a superb, if dense and demanding,

introduction to his thought. In this revised and enlarged edition of *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*, first published in 1991, Clouser urges his fellow-believers to abandon their vain efforts to harmonize pagan philosophical and scientific theories with belief in God and embrace the ‘radically biblical’ claim that “there is no knowledge or truth that is neutral with respect to belief in God.” (94) This claim, he argues, must include theories about every conceivable aspect of reality, from philosophical overviews of reality and theories of knowledge to aesthetics and zoology. He lays out a bold, stimulating, and provocative framework that gives depth to this claim: 1) all humans, not just Christians, depend on either the true and living God or an idol for their understanding of reality; 2) all theoretical activity in the special sciences is inescapably shaped by an overview understanding of reality and the God or idol on which it depends; 3) Christians can avoid the shallows of fideism, Fundamentalism, and Scholasticism and develop surprisingly fruitful philosophical and scientific theories that are profoundly shaped by their commitment to the true and living God and the Scriptures.

As professor of philosophy and religion at the College of New Jersey, Clouser was daily faced with undergrads and colleagues who were skeptical of his claims that religion played a critical role in theorizing. Most of them accepted the common view that ‘religion’ meant the traditional ‘religions,’ like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism to which they were indifferent or hostile. Clouser had, therefore, to delve more deeply and critically into the question of what it meant to be ‘religious’ or to have a ‘religious’ belief. After examining all of the common efforts to find a common denominator – e.g. belief in a Supreme Being or some supernatural power, that which provides an object of worship or ultimate concern, code of conduct, Clouser found them all deficient and

superficial. He offers a more expansive claim that all persons hold some belief in that which has the *status* of being “unconditionally, non-dependently real,” though they disagree on what beliefs occupy that status, whether the God of Scripture, the Nothingness of Buddhism, the Material of Materialism, or any other ‘creature.’ It is impossible, he concludes, for anyone not to believe that there is some ‘thing’ on which everything else depends for its existence, whatever name they chose to call it. He calls all such beliefs ‘divinity beliefs.’ The choices for the status of divinity are either the true and living God or an idol, as the Scriptures declare. Clouser finds that the apostle Paul’s claim that the Creator and the creature are the only two fundamental realities in creation packs far more explosive philosophical implications for theorizing than Christians have appreciated or understood.

The next step in Clouser’s argument is to contend that divinity beliefs act as the inescapable and basic presuppositions for all philosophical and scientific theories. Those engaged in highly abstract theorizing, Clouser notes, must necessarily abstract or lift some aspect, property, or law out its coherence with all other aspects, properties, and laws that they find in ordinary experience for their intense analysis. Such abstraction requires that the theorizer has some understanding of what enables the coherence of reality or that on which all reality depends as a precondition for their abstraction. Though often held unconsciously, these overviews of reality are themselves necessarily shaped and controlled by divinity beliefs.

Clouser defends this controversial claim with an extensive analysis of how prominent non-Christian theories in mathematics, physics, and psychology presuppose a wide range of abstract ‘creatures’ – things, events, laws, properties, or aspects – as the

non-dependent reality on which all else in reality depends. All such theories are driven to 'reduce' their theories to some basic 'stuff' on which everything else depends, whether logic for Bertrand Russell's philosophy of mathematics, 'social orientation' for Alfred Adler's psychology, or countless other 'creatures' that populate the theories of the academy. Clouser offers a penetrating religious and philosophical analysis for why reductionism in its many Christian guises is a flawed strategy for devising theories that are consistent with the world of our experience, the nature of God, and Christian belief. Spotting such reductionistic tendencies turns out to be a major way that scholars can identify hidden idolatrous and pagan divinity beliefs in theories.

The final step in Clouser's argument is to outline a "non-reductive theory of reality' that presupposes God alone as the ultimate reality on which all else in creation depends. Although the Bible does not give us all of the 'furniture' for our theories, as the Fundamentalist desires, Clouser claims that the Bible does speak throughout about the orderliness or lawfulness of all 'creatures,' whatever kind they are. Understanding the nature of that 'lawfulness' for all those 'creatures' is therefore critical for developing distinctive Christian theories. Clouser outlines four guiding principles for all possible theories that take belief in God as their fundamental divinity belief: 1) "*everything other than God is His creation and nothing in creation, about creation, or true of creation is self-existent*"; 2) "*no aspect of creation is to be regarded as either the only genuine aspect or as making the existence of any other possible or actual*"; 3) "*every aspect is an aspect of all creatures since all creation exists and functions under all the laws of every aspect simultaneously*"; 4) "*aspects cannot be isolated from one another since their very intelligibility depends on their connectedness.*" (241-256 inter alia) The brevity of these

statements belie the depth and breadth of implications they contain for Christians involved in developing theories in their fields. He concludes the book with examples of how his 'framework of laws theory' of reality bears distinctive *Christian* fruit in social and political theory.

The first edition of *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* sparked considerable interest, discussion, and debate across a wide range of disciplines both inside and outside the Christian community. Its ideas and phrases even trickled down into the lexicon of evangelicals concerned about a broad range of academic and cultural concerns. This edition, in which Clouser offers extensive responses and rebuttals to his critics as he travels far and wide across philosophy of religion, biblical studies, philosophy of science, ontology, and epistemology, is sure to extend and deepen our understanding of what it means to develop theories that honor our belief that Yahweh alone is that on Whom all reality depends. All Christian academics who are still puzzled by what it might mean to develop a 'Christian perspective' in their discipline would do well to read and ponder Clouser's *magnun opus* with their colleagues.