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Review of Clouser's "The Myth of Religious Neutrality"

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On first seeing Roy Clouser’s book, sticklers for correct usage may think that they have caught him misusing “myth” in the title of *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*. Does he not want to connote “illusion” in the sense of a society clinging to a deception? Does “myth” not signify some deeper, society-sustaining narrative? In fact, the possibility of this ambiguity works to Clouser’s full advantage. His book deals with a well-nurtured illusion: neutrality. As they read, usage sticklers will have to admit that to the degree Clouser is correct in what he argues—that theories have religious roots and that neutrality is non-existent—he is also correct to use “myth.” Correct because the myth of neutrality underlies Western, liberal society and nurtures that society. In its turn, it makes some things appear possible (e.g., religion-less schools) and others not, and it renders some things necessary and others not (e.g., independent religious schools). Clouser lays the myth of religious neutrality bare and displays the tangle of connections between at-bottom, untestable convictions on one level and the world of thought, theory, and science on another.

He begins his book by defining religion as that conviction all persons have that something exists at-bottom that does not depend on anything else. After differentiating pagan, pantheistic, and Biblical religions, he argues that scientific theories sprout from religious conviction, illustrating his argument with case studies in mathematics, physics, and psychology. He then outlines his own theory of reality, showing its significance in a theory of society and a theory of the state.

Clouser’s argument comes at a needed time. We see around us that the liberal ideal that one’s most important convictions can remain private and out of the public square has shown up wanting. The civil wars of
post-Communist Europe, increasing religious violence in India, and a
new tribalism in North America all show empirically the liberal ideal
fraying at the edges. Other academics, such as John Ralston Saul and
Richard Rorty, have also told us recently that a mindset has its limits.
Clouser is thereby not alone in raising objections to rationalism.

Yet, Christians involved in independent schools know well that the
breakdown of that ethos has so far elicited few admissions in the public
square to the ideological character of the liberal ideal. Clouser
approaches this ostensibly neutral, rational conception of society, not
empirically, but by analyzing the character of theories and theory
making. He argues that all systems of thought, explicitly religious or
not, involving worship or not, ultimately view something as final: a
divinity, a process, a human characteristic, some aspect of reality.
Viewed this way, liberal rationalism with its twin claims of toleration
and neutrality begins to look as religious as Taoism.

The Myth of Religious Neutrality rarely mentions educational
questions. Yet the whole thesis has direct application to several
questions related to education, and especially to religious education and
independent schools. The denial of funding to independent religious
schools, for example, almost always rests on the presumption that the
public square must remain neutral with respect to matters of faith. We
are able to co-exist in the West only because we leave matters of faith
in the private sphere. The genius of public schooling is its non-religious
character. Clouser says “no” to this account. Public schooling, because
it believes rationality to be the at-bottom, defining human characteristic,
and thus the only appropriate basis for education, is no less religious
than confessional schooling. If one likes, one type of religious school
already receives public funds.

Anyone troubled by the inequities in the funding of independent
schools or by public-school claims of neutrality will find Clouser
reassuring, perhaps thinking, “If only we could get this book into the
hands of public policy makers!” If Clouser is right in what he argues,
that theories cannot possibly be neutral but always find their root in
some religious sub-stratum, then getting his argument into the public
square does make sense. For too long the liberal mindset, having
hijacked the word “neutrality,” has maintained its own worldview as the
dominant worldview in public education. Clouser’s book could radically
alter that situation. In view of this potential use for The Myth of
Religious Neutrality, one wonders why Clouser did not expand his
intended audience to include those who make public policy but claim
neutrality as regards their own at-bottom convictions. Such an expan-
sion of purpose would require the book’s being written differently, but
would please many of Clouser’s readers.

However, The Myth of Religious Neutrality cuts two ways. The
same educators who point fingers at the ostensibly neutral but world-
viewishly loaded public-school curriculum will find Clouser problematic
regarding their own borrowing from secular educational theorists. With-
out addressing questions of the world-view roots of educational
methods directly, Clouser is unequivocal about the neutrality of those
methods many Christians allege. All theories spring from religious
roots. Those Christian educators who want funding of independent
education or credits for religion courses but insist on “spoiling the
Egyptians” thus face a dilemma. On Clouser’s terms, consistency would
require that funding or recognition spell the end of uncritical, eclectic
borrowing. Theories growing from secular ground are saturated and
contaminated by the groundwater which originally nurtured them, and
borrowers would have to admit that. Thus, Christian educators would
face developing their own uniquely biblical theories of curriculum,
instruction, and evaluation. And they need so—at least in some
sense—before drawing on the body of educational theory and practice
we all already habitually utilize in our day-to-day educational practice
and reflection. Clouser’s argument may still have space for borrowing,
but all such borrowing would entail conscientious evaluation of the
religious roots of whatever educational ideas we are considering. Our
borrowing would involve seeing through the lenses of a biblical
worldview, so that we would implement only that which withstood
scriptural inspection—for many, a sobering prospect. Thus, The Myth
of Religious Neutrality, a book which first looks like ammunition,
implicitly squeezes Christian educators and contains a serious rebuke
concerning one of their cherished practices.

Clouser identifies his intended audience in his introduction: those
without previous knowledge of philosophy who seek an introduction to
the religious character of theory and theory making. Without saying as
much, or burdening his readers with an overdose of the unfamiliar, he
introduces the thought of Herman Dooyeweerd, the Dutch philosopher,
whom we might rightly consider a critic of rationalism. Others have
undertaken to introduce Dooyeweerd’s thought to the uninitiated; none
has done so as lucidly as Clouser. He has written an excellent
introductory text for the upper-level undergraduate, or any reflective,
general reader.
If Clouser errs, he does so because of a particular characteristic of philosophical argument. Despite his warnings that the reader must follow the chapters in order, one still might find the unrelenting logic daunting. Miss one step and the argument will go down the track without the reader. On its own merits, this characteristic of philosophical writing constitutes no flaw; but in this case, Clouser's argument resembles the very kind of rationalistic edifice one assumes he wants to criticize. Despite denying wanting to convert anyone to faith through *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*, Clouser almost appears at times to want to argue his readers into the kingdom.

Still, the book is strong. Those who teach will recognize Clouser's classroom experience throughout the book. His illustrations creep up and surprise the reader, usually pleasantly, and they always work to clarify rather than muddify the difficult concepts he is trying to explain. His case study in psychological theory, for example, is a paradigm of clarity. In it, he surveys several psychologists, tracing their worldview roots and showing how at-bottom religious convictions informed and shaped their theory making. Educators, and anyone interested in psychology, will find direct benefit from that chapter. He achieves similar clarity when he sketches out his own conceptions of society and of the state a few chapters later. As he promised to do in his introduction, he has removed the most technical aspects of the argument to the notes. In doing so, he keeps Dooyeweerd somewhat out of sight, a stratagem that may disappoint some, but one which renders the book accessible for most others.

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