

1993

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

Ken Badley

George Fox University, kbadley1@gmail.com

Harry Fernhout

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/soe_faculty

 Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Badley, Ken and Fernhout, Harry, "Review of Clouser's "The Myth of Religious Neutrality"" (1993). *Faculty Publications - College of Education*. 148.

https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/soe_faculty/148

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - College of Education by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

Clouser, Roy A. *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*. Notre Dame, IN: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1991, xii + 330 pp., \$18.95.

Ken R. Badley and Harry Fernhout
The Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto

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 expansion 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. Without 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.

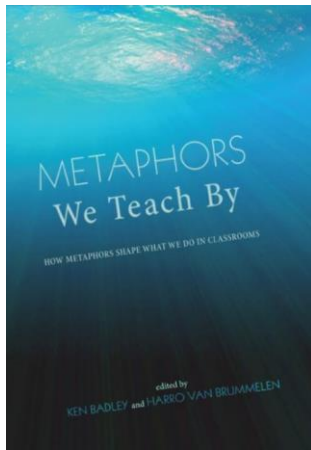
Clouser identifies his intended audience in his introduction: those without previous knowledge of philosophy who seek an introduction to the religious character of theory and theory making. Without saying as much, or burdening his readers with an overdose of the unfamiliar, he introduces the thought 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.

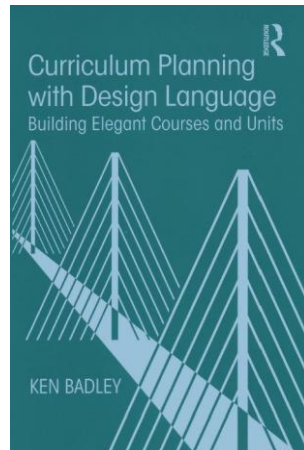
Still, the book is strong. Those who teach will recognize Clouser's classroom experience throughout the book. His illustrations creep up and surprise the reader, usually pleasantly, and they always work to clarify rather than muddle the difficult concepts he is trying to explain. His case study in psychological 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.

Kenneth R. Badley is senior member in the Philosophy of Education, and Harry Fernhout is president of The Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, Ontario.

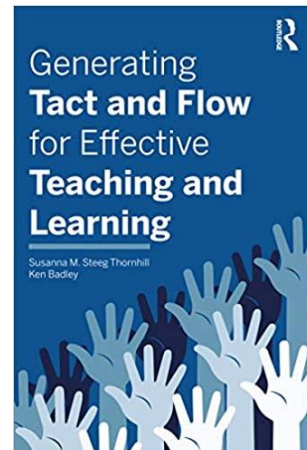
Other titles on education and culture by Ken Badley ... available wherever books are sold



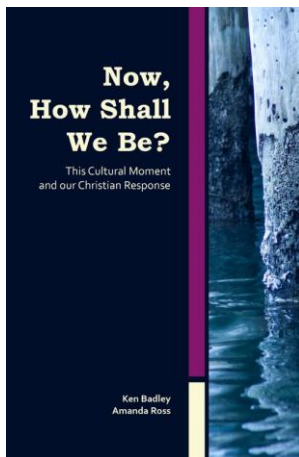
2011



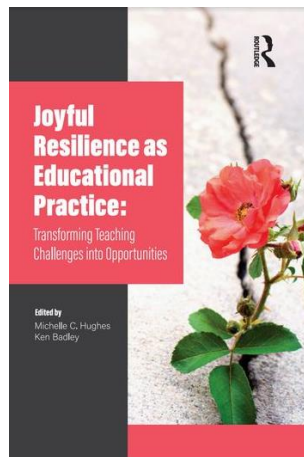
2018



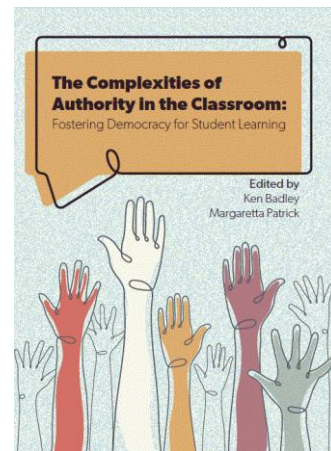
2020



2020

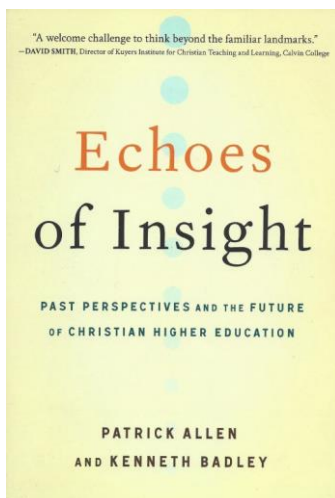


2021

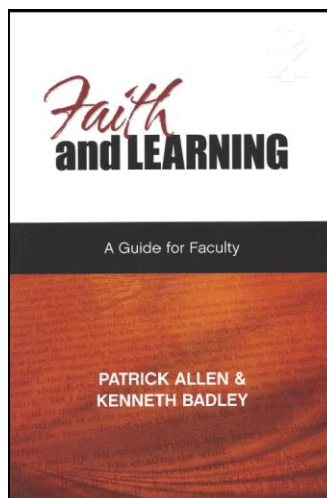


2022

Education titles with Kenneth Badley listed as author

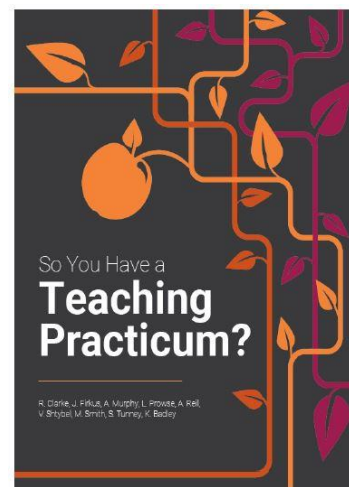


2014



2017

Available only on Amazon



2019