

Three Types of Religious Philosophy

Gordon H. Clark

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Sadly, many people, including many Christians, are not interested in the study of philosophy. I say “sadly” because the study of philosophy is important. It has to do with “the love of wisdom” (the word “philosophy” means “the love of wisdom”). The fact is that all persons are philosophers whether they know it or admit it or not. That is to say, all persons have a worldview, a way or means by which they view all of life. This is inescapable. The only question is whether a man’s philosophy is correct or not.

The apostle Paul speaks of the importance and significance of philosophy in Colossians 2:8. First, the apostle strongly warns his readers against falling prey to unbiblical philosophies, i.e., those which are “according to the traditions of men.” Implicit in this admonition is the recognition that one must study philosophy in order not to be led astray by such false worldviews. Second, Paul enjoins the church to study a philosophy “according to Christ.” The study of philosophy, then, is not an option for the Christian. It is a biblical mandate for every true believer to love and learn the wisdom of Christ.

Even within the church of Christ, however, there is much confusion as to what kind of philosophy is a biblical philosophy. Basically, there are three types of non-Christian philosophies (which even some Christians have adopted): rationalism, empiricism, and irrationalism. In his *Three Types of Religious Philosophy*,^[1] which is an excellent introduction to religious philosophy, Gordon Clark adroitly demonstrates why the non-Christian worldviews are erroneous, and presents a genuine biblical philosophy which he calls “dogmatism.”

In Chapter I Clark introduces the subject matter. He defines the worldviews under discussion, leaving a more detailed analysis for subsequent chapters. **Rationalism** “is the theory that all knowledge, and therefore, all religious knowledge, can be deduced from logic alone, i.e., logic apart from both revelation and sensory experience” (10). **Empiricism**, on the other hand, in its strictest and most consistent form, “bases all knowledge on sensation alone” (24). Finally, **Irrationalism** is the philosophy which (at least implicitly) denies that knowledge is objective; knowledge, if it can be achieved at all, is subjective. The irrationalist repudiates logic, opting for “logical paradox.”

Then, writes the author, there is dogmatism. From a Christian perspective, “the term dogmatism designates that method of procedure which tries to systematize beliefs concerning God, science, immortality, etc., on the basis of information divinely revealed in the sacred writings” of the Word of God (8). The dogmatist denies that there is truth to be obtained outside of Scripture (this side of the final state). The Bible has a monopoly on truth. Hence, “dogmatism does not conflict with truth from other sources because there are no other sources” (9).

The dogmatist and the rationalist have one important thing in common: “their respect for and detailed use of logic” (15). The significant difference being that whereas in pure rationalism knowledge comes “from” reason alone, in dogmatism knowledge comes “through” reason as one deduces truth from the propositional statements of Scripture. In the words of Clark, the dogmatist “takes his premises from Scripture and deduces conclusions....Dogmatism applies logic to premises given in revelation” (16,17). The dogmatist’s position is admirably set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1:6): “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.”

By the end of Chapter I, one thing has become very apparent: “Philosophies must be evaluated on the ground of what they begin with. The starting point determines all that follows” (25). The crux of the matter

is that of epistemology (the theory of knowledge). The question to be asked is this: "how can we know anything?" The answer to this question controls all subject matter.

Chapter II is on Rationalism. Well known rationalists include Plato, Hegel, Anselm, Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. The pure rationalist, it will be remembered, is one who believes that all knowledge can be deduced from logic alone; whereas Christian rationalists (biblical dogmatists), like Augustine, Calvin, and Clark, aver that all knowledge is to be logically deduced from Scripture. Even the existence of the God of Scripture can be deduced from logic, say Anselm and Descartes, in their Ontological Argument for the existence of God. This argument, reduced to the form of a syllogism, states that "God, by definition, is the being who possesses all perfections; existence is a perfection; therefore God exists" (35).

As Dr. Clark teaches in this book (and elsewhere^[2]), however, there are problems endemic to pure rationalism.

First, as rationalists admit, fallen man can and does err in his reasoning. Formal errors in logic are just one example.

Second, there is the issue of a starting point. Where does one start in pure rationalism? The six "well known" rationalists listed above, for example, had different starting points.

Third, how can reasoning apart from revelation determine what kind of God controls the world? Is the world controlled by an omnipotent, good God, who has revealed to us that two plus two equals four, or an omnipotent demon, who has all along deceived us into believing that two plus two equals four when it really equals five? As Clark points out, the question, then, is not whether or not God exists (as with Anselm and Descartes). All things exist, because "the predicate existence can be attached to everything real or imaginary without exception: dreams exist, mirages exist, the square root of minus one exists" (44). But these statements tell us nothing about dreams, mirages, or the square root of minus one. Similarly, the Ontological Argument for God's existence tells us nothing about God. The question that needs to be asked about God is not whether or not he exists, but what is he? This is why the Shorter Catechism (Q 4), when it begins its study of God, does not ask if God exists, but asks "What is God?" and then goes on to define the God of Scripture.

And finally, in pure rationalism, it is difficult to avoid *solipsism*, which is the incorporation or merging of the world into the "ego" or "self," wherein the world becomes nothing more than the projection of one's own consciousness. Without a divine universal mind in which all persons and objects participate, it is not possible for the individual thinker to escape his own mind.

In Chapter III, Dr. Clark examines empiricism,^[3] which maintains that all knowledge originates in the senses. Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and David Hume are three of the main thinkers in this system of epistemology. Empiricism elevates the scientific method of investigation in order to attain knowledge. It is based on observation: the idea being that if some phenomenon can be observed it must be certain. Repetitive observation, of course, increases certainty.

The logic used in empiricism is called "inductive." One scientifically collects information and draws inferences and conclusions. This knowledge is *aposteriori*, i.e., it comes after and through experience. One must be able to smell, taste, feel, hear, or see something in order to know it. Once something is experienced, then the mind, which is a *tabula rasa* ("blank tablet") prior to experience, can somehow combine, transpose, categorize, and formulate the sensory information into knowledge.

There are numerous problems with empiricism.

First, all inductive arguments are logical fallacies. It is not possible to collect enough information on any subject to have certainty. Just because this system depends on the collection of details for its conclusions, it can never be sure that some new bit of information will not completely change its previous conclusions. Thus, empiricism can never deal with certainty, only probability. For

example, one may examine 999 crows and find them all to be black. But what happens when crow number 1000 turns out to be an albino? The past knowledge about crows would have to be revised. That which the scientists considered certain would be rendered uncertain.

Second, the senses can and frequently do deceive us. Anyone who has ever shoved a “straight” stick into a body of water and noticed that it appears to “bend” can attest to this.

Third, writes Clark, “no object is ever experienced in isolation; but its surroundings change its appearances; therefore we can never know what the object itself is like” (75).

Fourth, one can never have the same experience twice. The ancient philosopher Heraclitus pointed this out centuries ago when he stated that no one ever stands in the same river twice. Finite things continue to change, even as the water in the river continues to flow. In such a system, verification is not possible. In fact, the basic axiom of empiricism, namely that truth can only be attained by means of verification or falsification by scientific investigation, itself cannot be verified. Thus, empiricism is founded on a fallacious starting point.

Fifth, empiricism, at best, is only able to tell us what is; it can never tell us what ought to be. That is, “ought-ness” can never be derived from “is-ness.” Sensation might inform us that doors have two sides, but it cannot teach us that all doors must have two sides. No experience can disprove the idea that some doors might have one side. The universal proposition defining “door” can never be substantiated by sensory perception. Empiricism is restricted to “particular” things.

Sixth, empiricism cannot tell us how the senses alone give us conceptions. If the “knower” is not already equipped with conceptual elements or ideas (i.e., innate knowledge), how can he ever conceptualize the object sensed? Whereas rationalism, with its universal ideas, gives us an explanation for categories and similarities, empiricism does not. And without these rational discourses would not be possible (17-20).

Seventh, solipsism is inescapable in an empiricist epistemology. My sensations are just that: my sensations. No one else can experience them. But this being the case, how can I know that there is anything more than my experiences?

Finally, how do the senses give us ideas such as “parallel,” “equal,” or “justification?” They do not! These ideas can never be found in any experience. In reality, for instance, no two things that we experience are perfectly equal. So, says the author, as David Hume asserted over two centuries ago, if one takes his epistemological stand upon sensation, he can never know anything (64-70).

In Chapter III we come to Clark’s evaluation of irrationalism.^[4] Irrationalism, fostered by such men as Soren Kierkegaard, Immanuel Kant, and neo-orthodox theologians, is a form of skepticism. It is anti-rational and anti-intellectual. Actual truth, say the skeptics, can never be attained; rational attempts to explain the world, especially the noumenal realm (Kant), leave us in despair. Reality cannot be communicated academically, it must be grasped “personally and passionately” (Kierkegaard); truth must be sought in inward experiences, i.e., subjectively.

Even though one may never know if there is a god who gives purpose and significance to life, say the irrationalists, he must nevertheless take a “leap of faith” (Kierkegaard). He must live life as if there is a god, a higher being, a meaningful universe, etc., because not to do so would be worse (Kant).

Irrationalism manifests itself in theological circles in the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. For Barth and Brunner, truth is purely subjective. There is a “repudiation of logic” (106). Logic is anathematized; “faith” must curb “logic.” Further, God’s logic is said to be different than “mere human logic.” Neo-orthodoxy elevates the paradoxical and virtually demands a crucifixion of the intellect. In this “theology of paradox,” as Brunner claims, “God can speak his Word to man even in false propositions” (111). God can even teach us through contradictory statements.

Nowhere, of course, does the Bible call upon us to take a leap of faith. Nowhere does the Scripture tell us that faith must curb logic. Nowhere does the Word of God elevate the paradoxical. And nowhere does God tell us that truth is subjective. Rather, Scripture tells us that God is truth itself (Psalm 31:5; John 14:6; 1 John 5:6). Truth is objective and logical, and it is found in and restricted to the sixty-six books of the Bible. Says Jesus, who is the Logic of God incarnate (John 1:1; the English word "logic" comes from the Greek logos): "Your Word is truth" (John 17:17).

The problem here is that when one divorces logic from epistemology, he is left with skepticism. And skepticism is self-contradictory, for it asserts with certainty that nothing can be known for certain. For example, if the law of contradiction (A is not non-A) is invalid, then all statements are invalid. The words of God and Satan mean the same thing. Rational discourse is impossible. Neither God nor the world can be known, leaving us in a state of uncertainty. To quote Clark: "Logic is fixed, universal, necessary, and irreplaceable. Irrationality contradicts the biblical teaching from beginning to end....God is a rational being, the architecture of whose mind is logic."^[5]

Finally, in Chapter V we come to "Dogmatism." Herein we have a Christian epistemology, a Christian philosophy, a Christian worldview set before us. First, Dr. Clark would have us know that "the God of dogmatism is a sovereign Deity who determines all his creatures and all their actions" (116). But this is not the starting point.

Every epistemological system must have its starting point, which is axiomatic, i.e., it cannot be proved; it is indemonstrable (if it were provable or demonstrable, then it would not be a starting point). In the author's own words: "There must be first principles. A system cannot start unless it starts. The start is first....Any system ends its regress in its first principle" (120,135). And the first principle or starting point or axiom in Christian dogmatism is the Word of God, biblical revelation. The Bible has a monopoly on truth.

We cannot even know who God is without biblical revelation. Scripture defines God for us.

The Bible claims to be the Word of God (confirm John 10:35; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20,21), and it should be believed because there is no higher source than God's own self-disclosure. As the author of Hebrews writes: "because [God] could swear by no one greater, he swore by himself" (6:13). God cannot be deduced from any superior principle. As stated in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1:4): "The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God."

And as we have seen above, in the words of the Confession (1:6): "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture." And as Paul teaches in 2 Timothy 3:16,17: the infallible, inerrant Word of God (and nothing else) thoroughly equips [us] for every good work. In the Scripture we have the solutions to all of our problems, the answer to all of our questions, regarding all aspects of life. We need not, we must not, seek truth from any other source. There is no other source of truth.

In conclusion, this review turns to the "Foreword" of Three Types of Religious Philosophy. In it John Robbins, as an example of how we should evaluate "truth claims," assesses the avowal made by the Roman Catholic Church (and some allegedly Protestant thinkers) regarding the shroud of Turin. Deftly, Robbins shows that neither the empiricist nor the rationalist nor the irrationalist is able to answer the assertion that the shroud is actually that of the resurrected Christ. The dogmatist, however, depending solely on the Word of God as his source of truth, is able to point out the absurdity of Rome's claim. Indeed, the religious philosophies of empiricism, rationalism, and irrationalism are all nothing more than a "tissue of logical fallacies" (xiii). They can never give us truth. The Bible and the Bible alone is the Word of God; it has a monopoly on truth. •

[1] Gordon H. Clark, *Three Types of Religious Philosophy* (The Trinity Foundation, 1973, 1989). The chapter numbering and pagination used in this review are from Clark's book.

[2] See Gordon H. Clark, *Religion, Reason, and Revelation* (The Trinity Foundation, 1986), 50-68.

[3] See also Gordon H. Clark, "How Does Man Know God?" *The Trinity Review* (July/August, 1989), and Clark's *Religion, Reason, and Revelation*, 54-58.

[4] See also Clark's "How Does Man Know God?" *The Trinity Review* (July/August, 1989), and *Religion, Reason, and Revelation*, 69-87.

[5] Gordon H. Clark, "God and Logic," *The Trinity Review* (November/December, 1980), 4.