

**The Myth of Religious Neutrality :  
An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories**

Roy A. Clouser

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US\$18.95 (paper)

In the history of twentieth-century christian thought, says Clouser, the great unread and unconsidered contributor is Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977). The sheer volume of Dooyeweerd's output, let alone the extensive and systematic magnum opus **A New Critique of the Theoretical Thought**, which was a 1955 American translation of a four-volume 1930's Dutch work entitled **De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee**, does indicate that for all his marginality he was yet a prolific and, in his own area of speciality, an eminent and insightful philosopher, political philosopher, and historian of philosophy, if not legal scholar. One example can suffice here to show the breadth of his **oeuvre**; Rudy B Andeweg's article "The Dutch Prime Minister : Not Just Chairman; Not Yet Chief?" [**West European Politics** 14:2, April 1991] cites Dooyeweerd's 1917 Doctoral Dissertation as the standard work for the historical explanation of the evolution of the role of Prime Minister in the Dutch Polity. This however was written at the beginning of Dooyeweerd's academic career, before he embarked upon an extensive philosophical campaign which, in his words, would "subject the dogma of the autonomy of theoretical thought to a critical enquiry".

Clouser's work functions therefore in at least four distinct ways : he aims to introduce his North American readership to this Dutch calvinist philosopher; he writes **The Myth of Religious Neutrality** to show how Dooyeweerd's theory can be read as an attempt to address the questions that have occupied philosophers of science since phenomenology and logical positivism started wrestling for supremacy; he begins to make his own critical contribution to the tradition of christian philosophical reflection from out of which he writes; he desires to make philosophical systematics immediate and relevant to students and argues to show how a christian-philosophical approach is well-placed to do just that.

For all these reasons Clouser's book is **designed** to make some philosophers furious; namely, those who yet believe that philosophical discussion should be the sole preserve of a select elite of professional-trained "syllogism crunchers" who seek to keep themselves appraised of recent-reasoned fashion in the logician's art.

**Myth**, however, is not a post-modernist philosophical treatise. Perhaps its style and presentation would have been enhanced by a bit more of the post-

modernist flair for surprising examples. Perhaps also Clouser might have at least begun to address the fact that so much of what passes for philosophy these days, in our neo-Nihilistic, post-Nietzschean twilight, **simply assumes that religious neutrality is a myth** [ie that reasoned discourse about the basis of theoretical reflection cannot be anything but mythic]. But that does not mean that our contemporary philosophical discourse - more often than not about the meaning of discourse - is any closer to the position put forward by Clouser.

**Myth** is concerned with pitting Clouser's own christian-philosophical systematics against prevailing realist and christian-realist approaches to truth. Clouser's **BIG** questions are : What is religion? What is the relation of theory to underlying religious impulses in our cognitive-cultural endeavour? How does religious choice shape our theories and the analytical frames of reference we use in our scientific research?

After having dispensed with fundamentalist versions of science which base themselves on a logico-deductive hermeneutic of Holy Scripture, Clouser does two things. First, he develops an interpretative "Casebook" in which the differences various theories make upon scientific endeavour are related to the underlying religious views which control any thinker's world-view. He considers theory in mathematics [and the debate about the role of such by Mill, Russell and Dewey], physics [Mach, Einstein and Heisenberg] and psychology [Watson, Thorndike, Skinner, Adler and Fromm]. Second, having demonstrated the role which religion plays in theorizing and theories, Clouser sets sail against the **reductionistic** tide whereby all of reality is seemingly reduced for the purposes of theoretical thought completing its own work. He then proposes his "Radically Biblical Theories" as part of his projected new beginning in theoretical reflection and scientific research. This, the fourth and final section, gives a pertinent overview of Dooyeweerd's philosophy and theories focusing first upon "The Theory of the Modal Law Spheres" and then upon Dooyeweerd's "Structures of Individuality of Temporal Human Society".

Let us then all too briefly appraise Clouser's work on each of the four goals set out above.

1. *Does the book give an adequate introduction to Dooyeweerd's thought?* The answer must be that within its 330 pages **Myth** gives a competent outline of Dooyeweerd's systematics in some of its phases. The term "myth", as Clouser uses it to name his discussion in this book, has echoes of its **analytic** usage in circles dominated the logical-positivist tradition. Within the systematics and critical appraisal of that tradition, philosophic arguments have for decades now used the term to mean something that is extra-empirical and thus meaningless.

Clouser's immanent critique of logical positivism is that its adherence to "religious neutrality" is mythic, and though he is too polite to say so logical positivism thereby self-destructs in a puff of its own logic.

The term "myth" however also conjures up "historical" imagery; it has Weberian, critical-Marxist and Nietzschean overtones, which calls forth a historiographical account of how this dogma of religious neutrality could have come to have such a strong hold upon the scientific enterprise of western society. But Clouser's use of the term in this book keeps to the analytic, rather than the historical, side of the modern equation in science.

In this sense Clouser keeps close to Dooyeweerd in those sections of the latter's work he considers pertinent to a discussion of the religiosity of analytical reflection. For this reason the more historical expositions within Dooyeweerd's argument as found in his **New Critique** - Vol.1 Part II - and those parts of Vol.2 which deal with the structure, coherence and meaning of the historical aspect [pp.181-328], are not integrated into Clouser's discussion.

2. There is enough in **Myth** to indicate that Dooyeweerd's treatment of the philosophy of science and the history of science **is** worthy of serious examination. But could not **Myth** be construed as a creative attempt to reverse Kant and expound upon "reason within the limits of religion alone"? Some readers may wish to make such a critical observation, but Clouser explicitly denies an aim to make "religious pre-suppositions" the autonomous foundation of theoretical reflection. At this point Clouser stays close to Dooyeweerd in his view of the self-insufficiency of the human person basing his view upon the Pauline-Augustinian-Calvinian view of **homo religiosus**, albeit with a creative note to Gregory of Nyssa (p.188)\*. Humankind is to be understood as responsible creature **Coram Deo**, totally dependent upon the Creator in all things, including the provision of a creational structure in which theoretical thought does its work.

3. *Clouser's own critical contribution does not emerge in full in **Myth**.* This is because he is much more concerned with the exposition of a thesis concerning the hidden role of religious belief in theories. The critical literature on Dooyeweerd, the debate about Dooyeweerd's doctrine of time, the South African philosophical connection in relation to apartheid and the relation of philosophy to theology are not discussed at length.

Clouser does make a potentially useful suggestions concerning Dooyeweerd's terminology; for example, instead using "pistic" as the term to qualify the modal aspect whose qualifying moment is "faith", Clouser proffers "fiduciary" which does avoid possible Anglo-Saxon mis-readings, as well as highlighting the point

that **qua** modal aspect the fiduciary aspect is **not** limited to things religious, just as any other modal aspect is an aspect from which the entire temporal horizon is to be viewed. There are also other creative attempts at re-definition of some of Dooyeweerd's terminology. The above will suffice for this review.

4. *As a useful textbook for under-graduate and graduate students at state universities where secularist philosophies predominate, **Myth** will certainly achieve a hearing where previous attempts to make Dooyeweerd known have failed.* Spier's **Introduction to Christian Philosophy** and Kalsbeek's **Contours of a Christian Philosophy** were much more discussions that made sense within the circles of those interested in Dooyeweerd's work and hence written with a christian college graduate in mind. Clouser, as a philosopher plying his trade within the state college system, has written a book in which he seeks to make his own **calvinistic** philosophical position palpable to his students and any others that are listening. That he has done so with the University of Notre Dame Press is further evidence of a strong and competent desire to have these matters discussed as widely as possible.

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\* slight modification 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2008