

# ***SOCIAL THEORY AND THE MYTH OF RELIGIOUS NEUTRALITY***

Introductory Theses for a Christian Sociology

Paper Presented to

Author Meets Critics Session :

Roy A Clouser

*The Myth of Religious Neutrality*

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What relevance has a discussion of The Myth of Religious Neutrality to the “scientific study of religion”? On first appearances Clouser’s discussion could be read to mean an attempt to encourage the “religious study of science”, much in the way that Nicholas Woltersdorff has written, turning Kant on his head, about “Reason within the Limits of Religion Alone”. In this case the book should instead be reviewed at the Society for the Religious Study of Science rather than here.

But the thesis of the book is not simply that the scientific study of religion is a religious exercise controlled in one way or another by some hidden religious standpoint. Rather the thesis is that the necessarily and ineluctably religious activity of philosophy, defining the scientific perspective, let alone the logical exercise of making clear what is meant by the term “religion” has direct and immediate empirical consequences for the every-day practice of science. The Myth of Religious Neutrality is, as its subtitle suggests : An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories. Roy Clouser’s masterly study argues in a potent, logical and empirical fashion that theories, science and scholarship are religious in character and should be consciously religious in their make-up. The religious character of theories and theorising no longer needs to be hidden.

Let us firstly ask : what are these consequences? In bringing Clouser’s book into this forum we re-open a debate which has been going on in SSSR circles from its inaugural meeting in 1961. The exchange between William L Kolb and Talcott Parsons<sup>1</sup> has already

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<sup>1</sup>. William L Kolb "Images of Man and the Sociology of Religion" Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 1961:1 5-22 and Talcott Parsons "Comment" 22-29.

been commented upon by Benton Johnson at yesterday's consideration of the religiosity of the theory of Talcott Parsons.

Like Kolb, Clouser is clearly advocating an explicit Christian profession and practice within social science. In introducing his argument Kolb had made a statement very close to some of Clouser's statements.

*I consider myself, on the basis of one of the several strands of the Judeo-Christian traditions, a committed Christian. The particular strand of thought and commitment through which I relate myself to what I take to be reality, empirical and non-empirical, would call Judaic-Christianity as opposed to Greco-Christianity. This strand, which is non-dualistic and takes the world seriously, has as one of its elements stress upon the possibility and importance of knowing the world empirically. Knowing in this tradition is primarily an existential and historical phenomenon, and only secondarily a rational phenomenon involving systematic general categories, abstraction, and prediction. It also explicitly involves the secular independence of scientific investigation and the explicit role of public, repeatable investigation based on observation as the only way in which empirical knowledge can be rendered reliable. Theology, the human attempt to reflect upon commitment, occupies no privileged position in this tradition, and neither it, nor the Church, has any authority to dictate or establish the content of empirical knowledge<sup>2</sup>.*

Kolb's view, briefly put, was that sociology, to the degree that it had included a Judaic-Christian anthropological view in its conceptual foundations, had opened up a genuinely new and liberating perspective in research, social theory and sociological understanding. The influence of a Christian anthropology upon the sociological discipline is constructive in this sense. Sociology, and particularly the sociology of religion, could come into its own if it recaptured the distinctiveness of the "Judaic-Christian" perspective. His constructive view is that when sociology becomes aware of its Christian presuppositions then its scientific path to further discovery and constructive (presumably, ethical) contribution will be opened.<sup>3</sup>

The truly stimulating point in Talcott Parsons' rejoinder is his comment which refuses to rule out, in any a priori fashion, the possibility of a sociological enterprise based upon Judaic-Christian (rather than Graeco-Christian) foundations.

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<sup>2</sup>. William L Kolb op cit p.5

Parsons "Comment" implies the cumulative evolution of sociological and anthropological presuppositions. Christian, Humanist and also Greek perspectives have to be kept in mind. Now there is a debate about what this evolutionary metaphysical movement implies for the conceptual foundations of sociology. Is it simply a "methodological a priori"<sup>4</sup> constructed by Parsons to make his analytical foundations understandable? Or is it indicative of his own mystical (liberal evolutionistic) religious position? I tend, taking my lead from Clouser, to see it in **both** ways, as Parsons' attempt to make his own religious position understandable and his adoption of a position which gave coherence to his articulation of social theory.

But what does the Kolb-Parsons exchange of 30 years ago have to say to us as we consider Clouser's work? Myth "speaks" to both formulations with an alternative view, but we need to note that the search for an "alternative" is not foreign to the inner workings of the sociological discipline, especially in the so-called sub-discipline of the sociology of religion. Parsons' reply to Kolb might have been his reply to Clouser.

*The position I would like to take is that if Kolb is right both about the existence of this [neopositivistic] orthodoxy and in his characterisation of it, it does constitute an obstacle [to the scientific advancement of sociology]. At the same time I should like to question whether such an orthodoxy exists, and at the same time whether his alternative, a "Judaic-Christian commitment" constitutes, from the point of view of the contemporary situation of social science, the important alternative, though it may constitute one such alternative.<sup>5</sup>*

This discussion between Kolb and Parsons took place right at the beginning of the organisational existence of the SSSR. It is well to keep this in mind when considering Clouser's Myth. His argument is not so very foreign to the deliberations which have taken place in this forum over the years. And though he, and I, might wish to ask whether such a tradition of debate has remained somewhat under-developed in the social science disciplines, it should not be forgotten that such a "discourse", such as it is, does exist. In this sense

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<sup>3</sup>. Kolb's approach is somewhat consonant with themes found in the social perspective of Edward Smith Parsons, an advocate of the social gospel, and father of Talcott Parsons.

<sup>4</sup>. see Arnold Brecht Political Theory, and Talcott Parsons' own comment about the god of science : Evolution The Structure of Social Action 1937:41.

<sup>5</sup>. Talcott Parsons "Comment" JSSR Vol.1 No.1 1961, 22-23.

consideration of Clouser's Myth can be a means of reopening this debate and ascertaining how Clouser's argument contributes alongside the positions enunciated by Kolb and Parsons. Moreover, Clouser's argument does include a call to Christian scientists, including those engaged sociologically, to reconsider their contribution to science as their vocation.

Clouser's contribution in Myth addresses the same question addressed by Kolb and Parsons. How does religious commitment affect scientific inquiry?

When Clouser says that theories are necessarily of a religious character, he is not, at least on my reading of him, asserting that religion is some kind of **reality sui generis**. Clouser's philosophical method which emphasises the dependent and non-autonomous character of all aspects of creaturely existence, including the activity of theorising and constructing theoretical concepts, would seek to subject the concept of **reality sui generis** to a rigorous theoretical critique. As such he is not seeking an autonomous theoretical foundation upon which to build theories in religion. Such an interpretation, which I can understand will be imputed to his argument, mis-represents the truly constructive character of his Christian philosophical argument.

Nor are we to consider Clouser's concept of religion as somehow separate from the inner nature of theories and theorising and somehow derived as so much baggage from a sub-, pre- or non- scientific age. It bears repeating : the religiosity that Clouser is referring to is inherent in the conceptual structure of theories and theorising.

The statement "theories are religious" is not meant in the sense of "theories are also religious" but in the sense that theoretical thought is thought which is totally enclosed within the limits, structure, purpose, meaning and vocation of human creatureliness, Coram Deo.

Clouser's argument is framed in terms of a Christian view of reality which places great store upon a Christian student living close to the Word and Spirit of Holy Scripture. Clouser is impressed by the self-insufficiency of the human vocation in all of life and that is why he stresses that science in its own way should confessionally express this creaturely dependency by a fiduciary bond of trust in the One who has made science and theories possible. But the book is not devotional; nor is it theological or a treatise in biblical studies.

It is his listening to the Biblical message which leads Clouser to affirm that the integrity of the scientific task of building theories - deepening our understanding of the structures of creaturely existence - lies in its religious character. If this is denied, or suppressed, then science will simply proceed without the requisite self-consciousness about the underlying religious commitments that are implicitly guiding scientific investigation in its exploration of the cosmos. The religious character of theories will be hidden.

In this sense, says Clouser, theories do not become religious through the influence of some underlying spiritual substance or by mystical contact with some religious essence. Theories do not become religious; they are religious through and through - not only in their foundations - via the influence of religious beliefs - but in their conceptualisation, operationalisation and critical examination. It is by an open recognition of the religious beliefs that operate at the basis of a theory that a critical and self-critical science is promoted. Moreover, this as Herman Dooyeweerd has cogently argued, is **the truly critical method**. Critical theory is self-critical theory at the same time. It is in becoming conscious of the religious character of our theories and our creatureliness that we find the lever for self-critical reflection in our scientific endeavours.

For Clouser theories are one very important way of deepening our understanding of creatureliness Coram Deo. And part of the calling of theories is to deepen our awareness of our inherently religious character to live subject to the laws for creation. Like everything else theories are creaturely. In their own way, according to their own structure, they have a calling to fulfil. Clouser calls us to deepen our understanding of the Divinely decreed task for theories.

This is not an argument which says that theories are (somehow) inherently theological. Clouser's "theory of theory" is no "theology of theory". In point of fact Clouser's attempted delimitation of the Christian ground rules for theorising implies that theology is an attempted accommodation of Christian and pagan thought. "Theologies of theory", in Clouser's view, imply an attempted Divinisation of some or other aspect of the theoretical task and hence of the creation-order.

Nor is Clouser suggesting a return to a state where university scholarship is subjected to the imperial demands of one or another department. Departments of religious or theological

studies, which began to heed Clouser's call for an examination of the place of religious belief in theories, would have a most important part to play in promoting a truly critical attitude to science - especially in their teaching programmes, research and administration; likewise any philosophy department, which ditched the idea that theoretical reflection is religiously neutral. The constructive curricula reform of the university is an integral part of any Christian scientific calling and this assumption is at the back of Clouser's discussion.

But Clouser's analysis is more immediate in an analytic sense. It is aimed at the scientifically involved student who seeks clarification about the conceptual and methodological problems of the specialist disciplines. The Christian student who resists the notion that a Christian response to science might be found in a "theology of physics" (Paul Davies) or a "theology of society" (V A Demant) still has to return to the empirical and scientific task. The Christian calling in physics or social research is not advanced by simply adopting a philosophical analysis which goes no further than arguing about the hidden role of religious beliefs in theories. And it is in Clouser's promotion of a this-worldly theoretic vocationalism that the book finds its strength. The truly empirical approach in science is that theorising which is open about its religiosity.

Clouser does not stop short with an attempted philosophical answer to complex scientific problems. His work (perhaps because it is written from within the secularist university system in the USA and not from out of a "Christian college") actually "grips the rails" in so far as he promotes a Christian scientific calling in the large secular and secularised universities. The Christian scientific contribution here is not circumscribed "for the utilisation of Christians" so much as "for the development of a conscious and self-critical analysis of the vocational structure of science."

Though Myth is formulated on the basis of a Christian profession and view of reality - which Clouser seeks to lay at the foundation of theoretical activity *per se* - *his point is not that sociology, qua religious activity is now, or should be made into, a scholarly activity dominated by Christians and Christian viewpoints. The religious vocation which the various disciplines have in the Divine Plan includes the development of a self-conscious and self-critical understanding of the religious character of science. Kolb, perhaps, tends to the point of view which assumes that a discipline*

*will be made Christian when the practitioners hold to Christian doctrine.* This is a development of the evangelical view that assumes that Christian practitioners will make a science Christian.

But the implication of Clouser's analysis is that sociology **qua religious activity** cannot exclude *a priori* a Christian sociology without i) closing off discussion about its own (alternative) equally religious foundations; and ii) closing off discussion concerning the ever active religious foundations of scientific activity. Clouser's aim is to have theoretical reflection become conscious of its inherently religious character **within the theorising activity itself.**

We may well ask : how is a critical direction given to our theorising? Clouser implies that it comes about when we learn to discern how scientific results are shaped by religious concerns, factors, elements. But this is **not** simply by adding a doctrine to the dogma list which says : All theory is religious! or All social research is religiously based. It is begun by seeking to devise a method of theoretical self-criticism about the religious basis and character of theoretical reflection in which the thinker/researcher/theorist cultivates a conscious understanding of how religious beliefs are being worked out in the structure and details of any scientific exercise. Here Clouser most obviously draws inspiration from the transcendental critique of theoretical thought developed by Herman Dooyeweerd.

Clouser, following Dooyeweerd and reminiscent of both Kolb and Parsons, reckons with the successive formative influence of variant religious ground motives upon the development of western thought. He does not follow Parsons' evolutionary hermeneutic in which Parsons formulated, in definitive form, his "convergence" hypothesis of recent European social theory.<sup>6</sup> Parsons, extending the concept of Durkheim, not only accepted the view that society is a *reality sui generis* but developed an historiography of sociological theory which assumes that **the theory of society is in its own analytical way an analytical reality sui generis.** Theoretical reason is a single organic whole and so are the conceptual schemes that evolve over time<sup>7</sup>.

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6. Talcott Parsons The Structure of Social Action New York 1937. see also my discussion of convergence in Bruce C Wearne The Theory and Scholarship of Talcott Parsons to 1951 Cambridge UK 1989 espec. chapter 6 "Convergence and its Construction".

7. In this regard it is noteworthy that Parsons indebtedness to Darwinian modes of thought can be detected in a doctrine of the survival of the "fittest concepts". In this the seminal influence of both L J Henderson and Alfred North Whitehead upon Parsons' intellectual development should not be underestimated.

Clouser does not adopt the transformational hermeneutic of Kolb. Kolb's approach borders on the suggestion that in the Christian view of man sociology has found its true autonomous rational basis.

At this point I would like to suggest to Clouser that the further development of his argument in sociology is dependent upon an somewhat under-developed theme in his book. I am not saying he should have addressed it. But it does require some further explication. The matter concerns our understanding of, and method by which we approach, that academic discipline often called the "history of ideas". Since such a reality is also not a self-subsistent reality, nor can its analysis be religiously neutral, I wonder how Clouser views the historical study of science. What principles consistent with his general view in Myth does he adduce for this part of the academic enterprise? In particular I think that his work raises the question : How is the history of sociological theory to be written? This is a vexing issue and it is not always readily apparent that Clouser (or for that matter Dooyeweerd) has actually dealt with it **in principle** in the enquiry undertaken into the religious character of theoretical reflection.

The assumption underlying Clouser's work is that the insights which Christian theorising glean are not the private property of some or other confessional community. They are truly "free". But then God is not skied as in Basil Willey's account of Bacon<sup>8</sup>. Insights are truly free when they are appropriated Coram Deo. On the other hand the liberty to make insights freely available is no guarantee that they can stand the test of rigorous examination. This is no libertarian fundamentalism as he is at pains to point out. In many ways the book is an attempt to give a coherent philosophically meaningful rationale for engaging in science. It is not done confessionally; it is argued conceptually. It is Clouser's attempt to help his colleagues to become conscious of the religious basis of their own theorising. *It is not just Clouser's attempt to allow others to understand the religious foundations upon which his (ie Clouser's) theorising is based; although it is hard to imagine how the former could be set forth without the latter.*

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<sup>8</sup>. Basil Willey in his standard work The Seventeenth-Century Background 1986 (1934) refers to that nominalist and empiricist approach to science which has to "skied" religion. "Religious truth, then, must be `skied', elevated far out of reach, not in order that it may be more devoutly approached, but in order to keep it out of mischief. But having secured his main object, namely, to clear the universe for science, Bacon can afford to be quite orthodox..."(1986:34).

The implication of Clouser's study is that a programme of theory-building in the entire encyclopaedia is waiting to be taken up. But if, for example, we are to engage in Christian social theory building, we have to do so with an architectonic overview of the entire scientific encyclopaedia. In a very real sense Clouser is implying that the task of developing a Christian social theory cannot be truly achieved without insight being deepened about the inherent character of all modal aspects and a scientific advance on all (modal) fronts. But this advance is not without an ongoing philosophical vigilance - a self-conscious and critical investigation of the conditions that alone make theoretical thought possible.

Another stimulating aspect of Clouser's thesis concerns the implied framework for an ongoing hermeneutic which would draw out the underlying religious commitments which have guided the theoretical architects of our late twentieth-century scientific *Weltanschauung*. Enough is given to begin a critical analysis of the theoretical contributions of Mill, Russell, Dewey, Mach, Einstein, Heisenberg, Watson, Thorndike, Skinner, Adler, Fromm. For Clouser, "thinking these non-Christian's thoughts after them" is not merely some prolegomenal parry for pulling a "Christian philosophical rabbit out of the hat of critical secondary literature". Such secondary literature has its own creaturely character which must be respected. Trying to uncover the hidden religious beliefs is no hermeneutical gymnastics to have these thinkers say things they did not intend. It is to identify and uncover conscious and un-conscious (if not sub-conscious) taken-for-granted beliefs about the structure of the theoretical enterprise. Clouser's deep respect for thinkers he obviously disagrees with calls for further studies of these thinkers (and others with them) as religious thinkers - not for the purpose of rendering them "more religious" but to highlight the inner religious coherence of their contribution. In this sense Clouser is calling for a renewed historiography of science. As I have intimated above I think that the questions of the historiography of the social sciences (ie in terms of Dooyeweerd's theory of modal aspects those sciences which are covered by the post-historical aspects) present some of the most stimulating questions for our further critical reflection.

By developing a technique of critical-consciousness-raising about the true character of theories, as well as contending with theories which proclaim their own neutrality, Clouser is actually seeking to promote a conscious, empirical and philosophical attitude in science. This is no call to abandon science. It is a call to be re-committed to the scientific vocation on a

Christian basis. And by asserting that such a Christian critique of theoretical thought can help in uncovering the religious character of theories Clouser has made a helpful contribution toward theoretical clarification.

But even laying the curricular question of the “de-centred” and post-modern university to one-side, the temptation with an argument such as this for the erstwhile Christian scientist will be to leave empirical scientific research and take up a philosophical career. The scientific student involved theoretically in a particular discipline might find fruitful clarification in re-interpreting purportedly neutral scholarship in a new way but in Clouser’s terms this is only a part of the vocational task.

What I would like to ask at this point is this : how will the thesis be further developed in the organisation of the encyclopaedia of the sciences? How would “religious studies” and “the scientific study of religion” function in Clouser’s encyclopaedia? Such a conference as this one makes a unique and distinctive contribution to sociological, historical, political research across this nation. Can such conferences exist for long without the power of the myth of religious neutrality?

### **Some preliminary problems concerning the myth of religious neutrality in social research.**

I wish now to turn to my own scientific specialty and outline some preliminary problems on the myth of religious neutrality in social research.

1. In applying the book’s basic thesis to the arena of sociology and the social sciences we come to the following : Social research is a religious activity carried out by the social researcher as a person living *Coram Deo*. Social theories and social research programmes, as integral parts of the scientific vocation are religiously, and not purely scientifically, based.

Social research as a religious activity is itself social. It cannot escape its social character, nor need it, nor should it try to mask it. We should not play down or minimise this aspect but try to reckon with the full meaning of the human condition. In my view traditions of social research which reject God and His Word will always find inner contradictions between the social aspect of the research act and the social aspect of human society which social research investigates. The insight into the true nature of the relation between our science and our neighbour is blurred if not lost to sight.

2. Clouser has given a cogent hypotheses for further testing in a “casebook” in the history and historiography of sociological theory and research, namely : the attempted

philosophical, theoretical and empirical divinisation of some or other aspect(s) of social research. [eg in the Comteian tradition the method of science, if not the methodologists themselves, has become divinised.] The question which arises therefore is : how does Clouser propose to safeguard his method of theoretical criticism from any future divinisation? I am reminded what S U Zuidema has observed concerning the potential for the WDW becoming a "point of departure"<sup>9</sup>. Could his view become incorporated into some pagan view as the "Christian" (in his terms : scholastic corrective? Could it become accepted as part of a "puritanising" of science?

Since social research is also social the researcher takes account of the public legal context in which it is developed. So how does social research maintain its own integrity from the impositions of state, church, business, political party etc? To answer such a question we need to articulate a theoretical view of the interwoven social reality in which social research takes place and in which social research qua vocation maintains itself by giving form to its own character.

3. Social research takes place in the domain of social relationships. Basically there are three types of such relationships.

i. Institutions unite people in a more or less permanent way as members of the same social whole (family, marriage, the state, the church).

ii. Organisations take possession of a person's activity for greater or lesser periods of time for specific purposes (school, corporation, union, political party, employment) - one clocks on and off. Whereas in the first category membership is ascribed, without the will of the member concerned, in the latter membership is achieved and voluntarily embraced in regular routines.

iii. Relationships which are developed from within institutions and within organisations, between organisations, between institutions and between organisations and institutions.

Hence we can "enter into" social research from "within" or from the fringes of these various forms of social relationships.

How does social research manifest itself as a neighbourly activity, in terms of the command to love our neighbour? The answer to this question concerns the way we understand the relationship between social research and the institutional/organisational setting in which it is initiated.

Just as a member of a family has to work out the meaning of a marital-family role in relation to the other roles and responsibilities assumed in the wider society, so the social researcher has to come to terms with her own variegated mosaic of social responsibility. None of these responsibilities are neutral with respect to each of the others. Yet there may indeed be a socially formed neutrality between and among institutions and organisations and free social relationships may manifest neutrality in peculiar ways on occasion. But the existence of such socially-constructed neutralities should not be interpreted *religious* neutrality.

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<sup>9</sup>. S U Zuidema "Philosophy as Point of Departure" in Communication and Confrontation - A Philosophical Appraisal and Critique of Modern Society and Contemporary Thought Assen Van Gorcum 1972 pp124-129.

4. Social research as a recognisable social form has emerged from within differentiated and literate societies. In such societies people, groups and communities interact with each other in friendly co-operation, mutual competition and antagonism. There is a complex historical inter-weaving of inter-relationships between state and church, families, organisations, professionals and clients. Consider the relationships that develop between a doctor and her patients, a shopkeeper and his customers, and the inter-relationships between friends and acquaintances. Consider the “opened-up” character of the **friendships** which grow out of a common work situation - either in terms of annual parties, sporting tournaments or merely lunch-time recreation.

That we in our “opened-up” differentiated society can take up social research in one of these three directions (ie the history of St Cuthbert’s East Wychip, shop floor practices of the Nissan Company, train travellers from Mooroolbark on the 7.45am) is indicative of the historical difference between our type of society and our types of relationships and (relatively speaking) **undifferentiated or less differentiated societies.**

Historically speaking differentiated societies provide the institutional and organisational context from which to ethnographically investigate the social structure of un- and less-differentiated societies. This is why it is of utmost importance to understand the relationship between the myth of religious neutrality and socially structured neutralities which emerge in social relationships.

5. In less-differentiated societies (tribal society, feudalism) the distinction between institutional membership and inter-personal relationships has not been formally unfolded in organised and concrete form. An undifferentiated society will show hints of, reveal possibilities for a distinct state, church and corporate structure. A lot of things, if not all things will be “in the family”. This includes a very important empirical possibility for **social psychological research** of those who are still “in the family” in an emotional sense within “opened-up” differentiated societies. Could the existence of widespread long-term unemployment be a kind of “closing down” [rather than “opening up”] in important psychological and cultural senses? Could this have something to do with **over-development** in Western society?

6. In this distinction we perhaps come closer to a sociological understanding of so-called “left” and “right” **political** options in our society. An inadequate understanding of the social processes of disclosure - differentiation, integration and undifferentiation - will lead in a totalitarian direction as far as social **relationships** are concerned. Public life will be viewed as a **corporation** or as a **tribe**. Church-life will be reduced to a ethical **business**, and/or a ritualised **recreation**. Left-wing political options typically base policy upon organisational solidarity as normative for all of society, whereas right-wing politics considers corporate (contractual) unity as the lynch-pin of economic reform and structural stability. Both tendencies inhibit the opening-up of inter-individual relationships according to their own character.

7. Where does the social researcher stand? The social researcher can take her position in an institution and locate herself within the institutions own definitional boundaries (a state, a church, a family). Such research is often done on behalf of that institutional community and seeks to study the people of that community (nation, congregation/denomination, parents and children).

The social researcher can take her position within the organisation, either overtly or covertly, and can study the inter-organisational and inter-personal relationships to a greater or lesser degree. These involve “community studies”; suburbs for example as communities are the interweaving of relations of institutions and organisations. Social research as the search for discernment.

Taking her position “within” a researcher may be a member of that institution or organisation, but whichever way it goes the researcher will need to be defined in terms of the commonly accepted rules for membership of the community concerned.

8. Taking her position from the “outside” a researcher can be a co-participant in the relationship or try to study it from the “outside”, in the sense of seeking to attain a position of societal neutrality. We might have a pretty good idea of what studying from the “inside” means; but what could studying as an “outsider” mean? Studying from “outside” is only possible in a differentiated social setting and implies that the researcher has adopted an isolated individual relationship, or series of relationships, as the place from which to mount her research.

9. Social research from the “outside” has been put forward in our sociological tradition as an ideal to which the scientifically-trained researcher will aspire. “Outsider” study has only emerged in history on the basis of a view of the differentiation of social structures that they are a function of the emerging and rational individual personality. This methodological individualism is a taken-for-granted of a priori most social research in the sociological tradition as we have known it. With such an aprioristic view the insight that such research is undertaken by a member of one community (institution or organisation) placing her/himself in inter-personal relationship adjacent to another community for the purpose of studying that community is distorted or lost. In other words “outsider” social research is this : someone with social responsibility in one social relationship will bring insight to bear upon another social relationship. This is a further explication of the social meaning of social research.

10. Social research itself is a vocation. We need conceptual clarity upon the ways in which the activity itself is shaped and directed from **within** the social context. What is the character of **freedom** within social research? Again this important question is a normative one and a full answer will not be possible without the development of a self-critical awareness of its own embeddedness in a religious world-view from out of which the research goals, style and philosophy gain their coherence and direction. In other words Clouser raises the critical question about the character of freedom in social research.

11. The architectonics of research (especially social research).

12. University culture and scientific and philosophical communication. How can avowedly non-religiously neutral research be promoted within the university which espouses its own religious neutrality? How does a philosophical/scientific movement avoid misunderstanding on this point? Is it not a matter of presenting the results of one’s empirical research in the closest possible contact with the scientific community? In which case how do you see the development of this thesis, as put forward in Myth developing in a North American and specially USA context?

## Concluding Critical Point :

By the time we come to developing a critical perspective upon social theory we find that there are indeed questions of immense complexity involved when we start to try and ascertain how the dogma of religious neutrality manifests itself in the various traditions of social thought.

Is this battle to be fought solely in terms of the underlying philosophical sociology? And what about the battle between the various theoretical perspectives? Even the battle itself is not perceived in a religiously neutral fashion.

How does the dogma of religious neutrality manifest itself in social research and its variant methodologies?

These are questions which I think the discussion of "A Biblical Theory of Society" needs to address to further clarify its orientation. It is to these issues that the preceding discussion about social research has been directed. It is also necessary, given the current pre-disposition of social theory to engage in "critical discourse", to give some reflection to the question of how a Christian approach to theoretical **discourse** should proceed. From the character of Clouser's book it seems that it should be developed by critically aware Christian thinkers, scholars who are in the **closest possible relation**, on the closest possible terms, with the ongoing traditions of social theory and social thought. But how is this to be done? Can it be concretized without retreating into the Christian scholar's ghetto?

There are a variety of idols that are purveyed within the academic market-place. They all claim to somehow provide the integrating perspective from out of which a total view can be achieved. Clouser's work helps us to discern the character of the variant claims and counter claims. In social theory and research it has often been a debate over which perspective has best validated its claim to being "religiously neutral". The question arises : How can a Christian viewpoint be developed without it seeming to over-ride, or seeming to wish to over-ride, the various religious perspectives at war in the intellectual market place. How does a Christian approach to social theory safeguard itself against implicit imperialism?

The social sciences are very much caught up in the thought-traditions of the American and French Revolutions and the humanistic thought that had come to its initial and ongoing expression in the so-called Enlightenment. Positivism is a concerted attempt to overcome the

vagaries of intellectual schizophrenia and reduce the uncertainties of cognitive dissonance. In this tradition the idea of a Christian sociology is indeed problematic.

The religious character of the last 300 years of European thought needs to be carefully assessed; it needs to be critically analysed in terms of the pre-dominating religious motifs of historical development. Ancient Greek thought, along with Christian and Christianised-greek thought, have contributed to our intellectual tradition. Even if it is the **modern era** in which humanism (post-modern humanism?) appears to predominate, our historical perspective should place humanism alongside of other religious perspectives.

What then could a Christian sociology mean? Could it be : i. a sacralised positivism? or ii. the social gospel? or iii. Christianised humanism? or iv. social research and analysis of human society based in a biblical view of life and the world?

Clouser implies the fourth option. But then sociology has always had a difficulty distinguishing between sociology as science and as an ideologised world-view. It is here that Clouser has continued the exhaustive critical investigation, begun by Dooyeweerd, into the structure of theoretical thought itself. And in this sense safeguarding against ideology, and propagandistic pamphleteering, is an ongoing task; it is a cause for ongoing principilar vigilance. The victory over such theoretical degeneration cannot be guaranteed by one's theoretical perspective. In this sense Clouser commends the Christian philosophical tradition in which he operates by showing that it is not some obscurantist and sectarian tendency which would reduce the value of all of scholarship to the immediate applicability to its own findings. Yet the religious character of theoretical reflection **Coram Deo** remains, and for the Christian that means that theory either develops as a task in which its creaturely meaning unfolds with greater gratitude to the One who made it possible or else it follows after divinised promises which get theory, and us, nowhere in the long run.

Such an investigation into the principilar difference between scholarship and propaganda can begin to throw a penetrating light upon the arbitrary and meaningless division of labour within the university, with its senseless and demoralising interdisciplinary competition for resources and the fragmented and pretentious search by each discipline for encyclopaedic control.

By discussing “facts” versus “norms” Clouser begins to theoretically move away from the objectivism/subjectivism dilemma and develops a theoretical account of objectivity and subjectivity in relation to human responsibility and the necessary dimension of critical judgement which is required in scientific and theoretical work.

Clouser re-introduces the question of the scholarly vocation - in these post-modern times a reappraisal of what it means to be a scholar is surely overdue. Clouser also contributes to the reformation and rehabilitation of the student task as we now experience it in oft-times alienating academies. If as an academic one has ceased from exercising the responsibility of the student one should not be a teaching member of the university. Here his work throws another penetrating light upon the character of learning under a secularist ideology in which the university is either politicised by its dis-satisfied students who are seeing a perspective in which to account for the value of the facts OR it is politicised by governments through the usurpation of a (pseudo-neutral) bureaucratic device called administration which takes over and transforms the university into its own corporate image - a supermarket of packaged learning.

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