

Articles and Sermons :: "How does Man know God?" by Gordon H. Clark

"How does Man know God?" by Gordon H. Clark - posted by intrcssr83 (), on: 2009/5/19 3:29

How Does Man Know God?

Gordon H. Clark

from *The Trinity Review*, July-August 1989

The subject of this afternoon's lecture is "How We Know" or perhaps, "How We Know God."

The basic question in the philosophy of religion is, How can we know God? Charles Hodge and Louis Berkhof devoted some sections of their volumes to this question. And, for that matter, it goes back to the very dawn of Christian theology. The Jewish philosopher, Philo, who had a number of things to say about the Logos, was struggling with its difficulties in the very years that Jesus was walking around in Palestine.

In very recent days the question has been rephrased. Instead of asking whether we can know God and how we can know God, the philosophy of language analysis has asked, How can we talk about God? Language is supposed to be an evolutionary development out of the practical needs of survival and is, therefore, inadequate and inapplicable for theological matters. In fact the main body, not all, but the main body of language philosophers, especially in their earlier works assert that language about God is meaningless. Not only do the secular empiricists make this claim, Wittgenstein, A.J. Ayer, and the logical positivists, but also the liberal theologians of the neo-orthodox school -- in more polite terminology, no doubt -- but yet they accept essentially the same viewpoint.

While the question of how we can know God is the fundamental question in the philosophy of religion, there lies behind it in general philosophy the ultimate question, How can we know anything at all? If we cannot talk intelligently about God, can we talk intelligently about morality, about our own ideals, about art, politics -- can we even talk about science? How can we know anything? The answer to this question, technically called the theory of epistemology, controls all subject matter claiming to be intelligible or cognitive.

Empiricism

The present lecture will canvas three such theories and will emphasize their implications for religion, Christianity, and God. The first of these three is empiricism.

The theory of knowledge that presumably accords best with common sense is the theory that we learn by experience. We learn that bees sting and rattlesnakes kill through our perceptions of pain. We learn that roses are red and violets are blue by the sensations of sight. All our knowledge comes through sensations. This type of epistemology is not merely the theory most in accord with common opinion, it is the view of distinguished philosophers also, among whom are such famous thinkers as Aristotle, Aquinas, and John Locke. These three men, among others, tried to explain how we perceive a chair, how a law of physics can be discovered, and finally how, by complicated arguments, we could prove the existence of God.

However plausible this theory may be, it raises some exceedingly difficult questions. For the moment let us set aside the complexities in trying to rise from fleeting sensations to the knowledge of the incorporeal and eternal God. Instead, let us first attend to the most simple parts of empiricism.

Let us start with the red of a rose and the blue of a violet. First, a description of sensation will show that it does not give knowledge so readily as common sense imagines. Not everybody sees roses as red and violets as blue. There are some people who we say are color blind, and there are degrees of color blindness. It is difficult to tell what is color blindness and what are color illusions. The real color is very hard to settle upon. The condition of the organ, the eye, a disease, temporary sickness, a headache or extreme sensitivity change our color sensations.

Let me give you one little example. If you would take a course in art, oil painting, you might take a square of canvas and

put some color paint on the top half of it and another color on the bottom. It could be red and blue or any two colors you wish just so long as they're different. And then after they have dried, take a brush full of gray paint and just bring it down vertically over the two parts of the square and you will see that that one stroke of brush has put two different colors on the canvas, the color of the gray at the top is not the color of the gray at the bottom half of the canvas. So the color that you see depends on the background against which you see it. And since there is always a background, you never see anything as it is all by itself.

I could also mention some optical illusions: the Texas rancher who was sure he was seeing a mirage and drove his pickup truck into a lake. Some of my friendly opponents try to meet my argument against empiricism by claiming that I merely parrot the ancient skeptics. I'm afraid of two things: The ancient skeptics didn't know anything about Texas, and, in the second place, if I am parroting the ancient skeptics, that is not a sufficient answer to their arguments.

Take one thing that certainly the ancients didn't know. Get a nice piece of bristle-board cardboard and paint one-half of it with black India ink. Leave the other half white and then put little swiggles of black on the white half. Then get something that will rotate at about 500 revolutions a minute, and what color will you see? Will you see black? Will you see gray? Well, if you haven't done this experiment I'm pretty sure you just don't know. I'll tell you: You'll see purple; you'll see red; you'll see green; you'll see some sort of brown. You will see all these colors just from a mixture of black and white, and this gives you considerable difficulty in trying to say that you see the color of anything at all or to paraphrase a little bit from Augustine, there is nothing given (das Gegebenes, if you know the German technical term), nothing given in sensation without intellectual interpretation.

And just to protect myself from these people who think I'm as old as the Greek skeptics — I am getting a little ancient, but I'm not quite 2,000 years old, I guess I'm about 95 or something like that — but I was traveling along the road from St. Louis to Indianapolis on one occasion. This was before the interstate was there, and as I looked ahead, I saw a small truck standing by a barn. This was approximately 1,500 or 2,000 feet ahead of me. And it wasn't a passenger car, it was a truck because the front and the back were both vertical. There was the truck standing by the barn. Now as we drove along — and going at 75 m.p.h. you cover a few feet pretty quickly — this truck suddenly became a mailbox on a post. Now was it a truck or was it a mailbox? Well, that depends on how far away from it you are. And time forbids the multiplication of such examples. Suffice it to say that they soon become overwhelming. You have trouble with sensation. You can never rise to perception, and, oh my, the empirical theory is pretty terrible.

In the second place, this empirical theory, after making such a poor beginning with sensation, requires a theory of images to account for the retention of knowledge after the sensation has stopped. When you talk about the sensation, when it is gone, and you have an image that is retained, there are other difficulties. If perception is an inference from sensation, and images follow the perception, how can one determine when the inference is valid? At one time, I inferred that I saw a truck. Another time, a few minutes later, I inferred that I saw a mailbox. But how do you tell whether either inference is valid? And then in the second place, some people, especially scientists, not artists, but especially scientists, don't have any images. And that's a difficulty I don't see how the empirical philosophy can ever overcome. They seem never to have thought of the existence of such people. Thomas Aquinas and David Hume, best known for their theories of images, just seem to believe that all people have images. But that isn't so. There are some people, and I know one fairly well, who have no images at all.

Now, third, even for people who have visual or auditory images, the formation of concepts by abstraction, as Aristotle and Locke require, is impossible for reasons I won't go into. And if Bishop Berkeley did nothing else, at least he clearly showed that empiricism cannot allow or justify abstract concepts.

My fourth objection to empiricism, and if you've been counting them up, it may be the fortieth, empiricism cannot produce norms of any kind. It cannot produce moral and religious norms because at the very best, empiricism can only tell you what is. I don't think it tells you even that little, but that is all that empiricists can legitimately claim to do. They cannot tell you what ought to be because you cannot get an ought out of an is. And this applies not only to moral and religious norms, but to the very basic logical norms without which speech and understanding would be impossible.

The logical norms are universal truths. John Dewey says that logic has changed and will change in all its parts including the law of contradiction. But if evolutionary theory implies the rejection of logic, then evolutionary theory has not been established by logic and every statement is both true and false, and therefore nonsense.

Well, that leads us to the second type of epistemology, which we shall call irrationalism. I think I've gotten there pretty fairly. It is surprising enough that some secular philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche, John Dewey, and Freudian psychologists reject the law of contradiction, but it is more surprising that some professing Christians, professing Christians, hold similar opinions.

The anti-logic movement within the visible Christian church seems to have originated not with ancient Tertullian, one of whose phrases has been misquoted and misinterpreted, but has originated with the nineteenth-century theologian, Søren Kierkegaard, the father of neo-orthodoxy, or, as it is sometimes called, dialectical theology.

Søren Kierkegaard insisted that in order to be a Christian, it is necessary to believe contradictions. His chief example is the doctrine of the Incarnation. In the Incarnation the eternal God entered history and became a temporal human being. Now we understand and it is obvious that the eternal can never be temporal. What is temporal has had a beginning before which it did not exist. What is eternal had no beginning. Obviously, therefore, a being that had no beginning cannot have had a beginning. What has always existed cannot now come into existence. But to be Christians we must believe that this logical impossibility has occurred. We recognize and understand the absurdity but we must believe what is absurd because Christianity is itself irrational and absurd.

At this point it is natural to wonder how our salvation and everlasting blessedness can be guaranteed by absurdity. Can contradictions do what historical information cannot do? Søren Kierkegaard insisted that our salvation does not depend on any historical information. How then can it depend on absurdities? To this question Kierkegaard has an answer. Since we must believe the absurd, says Søren Kierkegaard, and not rely on intelligible historical information, it really makes no difference what we believe. The what is unimportant. All that counts is the how.

This point he stresses in his famous illustration of the orthodox Lutheran and the pagan Hindu. Many of you know it but I'll repeat it. The orthodox Lutheran had a correct understanding of God. He was straight in his theology but he prayed in a wrong spirit and hence he was not praying to God. But the Hindu who had never read John Calvin or Martin Luther either, had a totally incorrect idea of God. However, since he prayed with an infinite passion, he was praying to God, and the Lutheran wasn't.

This illustration might have been a good one had Kierkegaard intended to commend sincerity and condemn hypocrisy. Christ would have condemned a hypocritical Lutheran as much as he condemned the hypocritical sons of Abraham whom he met during his lifetime. But hypocrisy is not the point of this Hindu illustration. Kierkegaard intended to convince us that it makes no difference what a man believes. Only the how, the passion, is of value. It is far from clear, however, that Christ, in condemning any sort of hypocrisy, would commend Hindu idolatry. Kierkegaard's illustration means that a Hindu idol is a full replacement for Jehovah. And what might have impressed Søren Kierkegaard more strongly, it also follows that logical and rational philosophy, which he hated, is as good as his own irrationalism. If it makes no difference what you believe, you might as well be a rationalist.

Although Kierkegaard's main disciples, Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, and Rudolph Bultmann, too, in a certain way, although his main disciples retain their faith in paradox and absurdity, they seem to make some effort to disguise the futility of believing contradictions. The infinite passion of Kierkegaard becomes, in their theory, Encounter, the encounter that Barth and Brunner proclaim. Men become Christians by having an encounter with God. Of course, this encounter neither contains nor is produced by any historical information. The Resurrection was not a dated event that occurred three days after the Crucifixion. It is an existential experience in men today. For that matter, the written Gospels contain little or no accurate history. They are all fables like Aesop's. Aesop's fables are unhistorical, literally false, but existentially true. They are good descriptions of widespread human traits, and for the neo-orthodox, so are the Gospels. But the encounter can do what history cannot. There is no need to surmount two thousand years of history and find events that happened long ago. Easter happens now, and the encounter cancels the time span and makes us contemporaneous with Christ.

If it sounds absurd to say that we can abolish two thousand years just like that and return to the first century, or to bring Easter into the twentieth century, if it sounds absurd to say that we today can be contemporaneous with Christ, so be it. Christianity consists in contradicting ourselves. Nothing intelligible can be said of God.

Brunner very explicitly states, and this is a verbatim quotation, "God and the medium of conceptuality are mutually exclusive." To give another quote verbatim, "All words have only an instrumental value. Neither the spoken words nor their conceptual content are the Word itself, but only its framework." You will find this in the English translation on page 110 of *Wahrheit als Begegnung*. Truth is unimportant, for Brunner says, and this is another verbatim quotation, in the English e

dition, page 117, and in the German edition, page 88, "God can speak His word to man even through false doctrine." It doesn't make any difference what you believe. You must believe it passionately.

This is the natural outcome of replacing logic with paradox. When the law of contradiction is deliberately repudiated, the distinction between truth and error vanishes. The words God and Satan mean the same thing. A minister may preach that Christ atoned for sin and in the same sermon also maintain that Christ did not atone for sin. Not only does this make all preaching futile, we can't even invite a person to lunch, for when I say, Have lunch with me, I also say, Don't have lunch with me. Lunch and no lunch are the same thing unless they are logically different.

Dogmatism

Now to the third type of epistemology, which I will give the unpleasant name of dogmatism. To avoid the utter ignorance of skepticism, and to escape the insanity of irrationalism, one must seek a secure refuge in a third possibility. It could be called rationalism if the word were not confused with Hegelianism on the right or Deism on the left. It could equally well be called dogmatism unless the popular opprobrium thereby incurred is too much for it to bear. A more recent term is presuppositionalism. Take your choice. The name is relatively unimportant, unlike Hebrew names used to be. The name is relatively unimportant if the details are understood.

The argument is that every philosophy must have a first principle, a first principle laid down dogmatically. Empiricism itself requires a first non-empirical principle. This is particularly obvious in that most extreme form of empiricism called logical positivism. To say that statements are nonsense unless verifiable by sensation, is itself a statement that cannot be verified by sensation. Observation can never prove the reliability of observation. Since, therefore, every philosophy must have its first indemonstrable axiom, the secularists cannot deny the right of Christianity to choose its own axiom.

Accordingly, let the Christian axiom be the truth of the Scriptures. This is the Reformation principle of sola Scriptura. Evangelicalism historically meant two things: It meant justification by faith alone, of course, but it also meant the scripture alone—sola Scriptura and sola fide. Faith alone, scripture alone. These were the material and the formal principles of the Protestant Reformation, and anyone who denies either of those two has no historical business calling himself an Evangelical.

The principle is sola Scriptura. This is a repudiation of the notion that theology has several sources such as the Bible, tradition, philosophy, science, religion, or psychology. There is but one source, the Scriptures. This is where truth is to be found. Under the word truth there is included, in opposition to irrationalism, logic and the law of contradiction. Whatever contradicts itself is not truth. Truth must be consistent, and it is clear that Scripture does not both affirm and deny an atonement. God is truth. Christ is the wisdom and Logos of God. And the words he has spoken to us are spirit and are life.

The axiom of Scripture not only implies a particular view of the nature of God, it also implies a definite theory of man. Subsidiary to the Biblical concept of God, the decision between the irrationalism of the neo-orthodox on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the intelligibility, the logic, the law of contradiction of Calvin and Hodge depends on one's view of the nature of man. Christianity maintains that there is a common human nature. Oswald Spengler denied it by saying, "There are men, there is no man." The French existentialists deny it by saying that existence precedes essence. The Freudians, dare I say it, are more Christian. At least Freud makes a judgment concerning all men universally. Life and mind for Freud are emergent evolutionary products of physicochemical structures. The dominant force in man is not his intelligence, shared as he fondly supposes with God, but a horde of subconscious drives and sexual urges. Admittedly, we consider this a false judgment, but at least it recognizes a common human nature. And if we take it as a description of man in his fallen estate, it contains some truth, however distorted that truth may be.

But in opposition to Freud, to Sartre, to Wittgenstein and to others, the Christian view is that man was created in the image of God. Man, not the animals. And what that image is to be determined not by empirical observation, but by an exegesis of Biblical passages.

There was a conference that was held in Augusta, Georgia just last week. It was supposedly held by Christian scientists, and one of the papers was called "A Search for Personhood." I searched the Merriam-Webster Dictionary but couldn't find the word. Anyhow, the paper had no reference to the Bible; it was entirely empirical. There was nothing Christian in it. We insist that if we want to find out what man is, we study the Scripture.

The Image of God

The first passage for exegesis is the first passage in the Bible. God created man after His image and likeness. This image cannot be man's body for two reasons: First, God is spirit and has no body; second, animals have bodies but they were not created in God's image. Therefore, the body cannot be the image of God. The divine image then must be man's spirit, for the two elements which compose man are body and spirit. Genesis says that God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and out of these two elements man became a living soul. If the dust or clay is not God's image, the breath or spirit must be. There is no other possibility. Scripture goes further. To talk about the image of God in man is slightly inaccurate. The image is not something man has. It is not something in him. Man himself is the image or the image is itself man, for 1 Corinthians 11:7 states that man is himself the image and glory of God. No doubt animals too have or are spirits. The Bible says so in several places. Hence, the divine image must be those characteristics of the human spirit that are not shared by the lower creation. These are the characteristics of rationality. Animals cannot do arithmetic and geometry. The Baltimore Orioles, I mean the birds, not the baseball team, the Baltimore Oriole builds a magnificent nest, but one oriole does not differ from another in its architectural style. There's no inventiveness. They do not figure out other forms. And then too, animals cannot understand the commandments of morality. Is this not what Psalm 32:9 means when it says, Be not as the horse or the mule which have no understanding? The animals are incapable of sinning because they are non-rational. Hence, the very fact of human sinfulness shows that man is rational as opposed to the animals.

Then finally, on an even more elementary plane than morality, animals have no knowledge of history. They cannot possibly know that Christ died and rose again. Since, therefore, reason distinguishes the spirit of man from the spirit of animals, rationality is the image of God. This identification of the divine image, argued to this point mainly from the creation account in Genesis, seems also to be required by what Paul says in Ephesians and Colossians. These epistles speak of regeneration as a renewing of the original image. And the points at which the renewal takes place are knowledge and righteousness. Paul, therefore, presupposes that the image of God is rationality.

This is not the place for a lengthy study of all the Bible says on the subject, but the mention of a few verses will hint at the pervasiveness of the support for this position. These suggestive passages have to do with the nature of God as well as with the nature of man. One may begin with Deuteronomy 32:4 which refers to God as a God of truth. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth who will guide us into all truth. Christ is not only the way, the truth and the life, He is the Logos, the mind and wisdom of God. He told his disciples, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

Not to reproduce all the material in John's Gospel on words, Scripture, and truth, let us recall that the apostle Peter also in his second epistle said that, "All things pertaining to life and godliness, God gives us by means of knowledge." God is rational. His truth is rational, and we must be rational to receive it. The horse and the Baltimore Oriole cannot.

But beyond individual verses such as these, the Bible in its entirety enforces this lesson. All Scripture is profitable for doctrine and for instruction in righteousness. If all Scripture is thus profitable, then the following verses are profitable for instruction. This one: Reuel, their father, gave Moses Zipporah, his daughter. Another verse: When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he was furious. And for a final verse: When they had passed through Amphipolis and Appolonia, they came to Thessalonica.

These verses have been deliberately chosen because they seem to have no bearing on the image of God or on any other profound theological doctrine. But Paul said all the verses in the Bible were profitable for doctrine and the doctrine these verses enforce is the doctrine of the divine image. These verses were written for us to understand. This is the history that is not for the birds. It is for our edification and to be edified requires understanding. Recall that Paul prohibited unintelligible tongues in the Corinthian church. He prohibited them because they did not edify. And they did not edify because they could not be understood. How can we say Amen to another's prayer if we don't understand it? The whole Bible, every part of it, is revelation because it is rational and because we are rational. Deny the law of contradiction, abandon logic, insist that we must believe the absurd, and nothing in the Bible remains. Nothing whatever.

Because this whole subject has so many facets, and because the details are so complex, the conclusion can canvas only one objection. The objection is this. If every system of philosophy derives from its own unique set of axioms, it becomes impossible for those who accept one set of axioms to hold a meaningful discussion with those who hold another set. The two parties to the dispute have nothing in common, and hence, neither has any basis for convincing the other.

This is an ancient, not a recent, objection. It does not require genius to think it up. But though so common, indeed because it is so common, it needs a clear answer. An historical reference will serve as a starting point. Anselm wanted to appe

al to the Jews and Moslems on their own ground without using revelation. "Reason" (in quotation marks) was supposed to be the common ground. But "reason" (in quotation marks) was not clearly defined nor was a common proposition actually identified. But common sense supposes that whenever we try to persuade people of anything, we appeal to what they already believe. But common sense is wrong. This works only on secondary matters and not on all of them. On basic matters no one ever appeals to a common ground between two systems of philosophy.

Take this example. Can an empiricist, on the basis of sensation, convince me of empiricism when I do not accept sensation? Well, how then may we present the Gospel to an unbeliever? We present the Gospel as fully as possible. We explain to him as many of the historical details as we have time for and as many of the logical connections as our prospect will listen to. But sermons, arguments, and explanations will not convert him. The Christian worker cannot convince him of the truth of the Gospel. He is not supposed to. After we present the Gospel, we then pray that the Holy Ghost will convince him, that God will change his mind, grant him repentance, that God will give him the divine gift of faith, cause him to believe the axioms of Scripture and raise him from the death of sin to a new life in Christ.

The Trinity Foundation hereby grants permission to all readers to download, print, and distribute on paper or electronically any of its Reviews, provided that each reprint bear our copyright notice, current addresses, and telephone numbers, and provided that all such reproductions are distributed to the public without charge. The Reviews may not be sold or issued in book form, CD-ROM form, or microfiche.

© 1999-2006 Trinity Foundation
Post Office 68 — Unicoi, Tennessee 37692
Phone: 423.743.0199 - Fax: 423.743.2005

http://www.lgmarshall.org/Apologetics/clark_knowgod.html

If you need to take a tylenol or two, do it now. :p

However, given what Clark said about the inconsistency of experience-based systems of gathering and processing knowledge compared to presupposing Divine Revelation as an axiom (or starting point) of thought and logic, is it reasonable for a Christian who vocally professes to believe in the authority and inspiration of scripture to nonetheless attempt to use empiricism as a means of problem solving when it comes to spiritual things?

If in the midst of a conflict, when one party says "Seeing is believing; I consider experience necessary to substantiate the claims of Scripture" while the other says (to paraphrase Luther) "Unless convinced by Scripture, I will not recant", whose standard is essentially right?