



# BOOK REVIEW

## *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*

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Like so many of the great thinkers of history, Gordon Haddon Clark has been misunderstood, maltreated, and criticized. He has been defamed as a fideist, rationalist, pantheist, and an absolute idealist. On the other hand, there are those who have recognized him as a “theological giant” (Harold Lindsell), “a man profoundly influenced by a sense of the holiness of God” (John Sanderson), “one of the profoundest evangelical Protestant philosophers of our time” (Carl Henry), “one of the greatest Christian thinkers of our century” (Ronald Nash), and “perhaps the greatest Christian philosopher and theologian America has produced” (John Robbins).

The present reviewer is in this second camp. Gordon Clark was a prodigious thinker. He was a great Christian philosopher and theologian. In his lifetime Dr. Clark authored some forty books in the areas of philosophy and theology. His *Thales to Dewey* (1957, 1989) is one of the few histories of philosophy written by a Christian in the twentieth century. It is perhaps the best one-volume work ever composed in English on the subject. And no Christian since Augustine has attempted what Gordon Clark accomplished in his *Historiography, Secular, and Religious* (1971): an appraisal of both secular and religious approaches to the study of “history-writing.” Dr. Clark has also penned a series of books on the subject of systematic theology. In this vein Gordon Clark is a rarity, in that he was equally at home in and a master of both theology and philosophy.

In 1965 Dr. Clark delivered three lectures at Wheaton College on the subject of Christian philosophy. They were first published in 1968 in *The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark*,<sup>1</sup> in the form of a *Festschrift*. They have now reappeared in *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*.

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald H. Nash, editor, *The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark: A Festschrift* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1968).

Chapter I is on “Secular Philosophy.” In it Dr. Clark reviews various non-Christian theories on four particular subjects. In a series of *reductio ad absurdum* arguments the author reveals the flaws in the secularist worldviews. By the end of the first lecture Dr. Clark concludes that “secularism fails in epistemology, science, ethics, and religion” (56).

The order here is important. Epistemology (the theory of knowledge) is first. It must be first, says Dr. Clark, because before we discuss science, ethics, or religion, we must ask the question: How are we to know? “A theory that tries to explain how knowledge is possible is called an epistemological theory. This is where we must begin” (27).

Chapter II studies “The Axiom of Revelation.” Every philosophical system needs an indemonstrable starting point, a *pou sto* or “place to stand.” According to Gordon Clark, the axiom or first principle of the Christian worldview is that “the Bible is the Word of God” (88). Biblical revelation is the starting point of Christianity. There is no other source of truth and knowledge. The Bible has a monopoly on truth. This is why in the “Foreword” of this book John Robbins refers to Dr. Clark’s philosophy as “Scripturalism,” and it is virtually unique with him.

Scripture claims to be the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God, therefore, says the author, it is perfectly logical to begin with this axiom. It is not mere question begging to do so. But if one calls it question begging, writes Dr. Clark, then “as an *ad hominem* or *tu quoque* reply it may be pointed out that such begging the question is not an idiosyncrasy of Christianity,” because all systems begin with axioms; and from those axioms they deduce theorems. This being so, “the Christian system is no more indefensible on this point than any other system” (62). The Christian believes what the Bible says: that it is the Word of God. And he believes it because the Holy Spirit produces this belief in his mind.

In Chapter II the author also discusses the role of logic in the Christian worldview. As noted, Dr. Clark has been accused of being a rationalist. Some of his critics aver that he places logic above the Word of God. But this is a caricature. According to Gordon Clark, it is “the intelligibility of the Scriptures [which] presupposes logic” (64). It is the “exhibition of the logic embedded in Scripture [which] explains why Scripture rather than the law of contradiction is selected as the axiom” (71).

Unlike far too many of today's philosophers, Dr. Clark does not believe that logic was created. Rather, logic is the way God thinks. In John 1:1 we read that Jesus is the *Logos*: the Reason, Wisdom, or Logic of God.<sup>2</sup> And Scripture, being a part of the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16), is logical. The orthodox teaching of plenary and verbal inspiration, and the perspicuity of the Scriptures, necessitates logic. Finally, the Scriptures teach us that man is the image bearer of God. Thus, he must be a rational creature. Unlike the animals, man is able to think logically.

One of the basic tenets of Dr. Clark's philosophy is that knowledge is restricted to the Bible. Knowledge is possessing not just ideas or thoughts but true ideas or thoughts. Knowledge involves possessing the truth itself. Knowledge is justified belief, and only the Word of God gives us a justification of knowledge. Through the study of science, history, etc., we may have opinions about certain matters, but science and history never give us truth. Most of what we today call knowledge, comments Dr. Clark, is nothing more than opinion.

Critics of this tenet of Gordon Clark's philosophy have replied that this means that we have a very limited amount of knowledge. Dr. Clark's response is that the thousands of propositional statements found in the Scriptures can hardly be said to give us "limited knowledge." Moreover, without divine revelation, there would be no knowledge at all. Writes the author: "it is incorrect therefore to complain that the axiom of revelation deprives us of knowledge otherwise obtainable. There is no knowledge otherwise obtainable" (91).

Chapter III is entitled "Several Implications." Having established the postulate that the Bible, being the Word of God, must be our axiomatic starting point, Dr. Clark now attempts "to erect on this basis some positive views of various subjects:...history, politics, ethics, and theology or religion" (93).<sup>3</sup> Methodically, the author shows that where secularism fails, biblical revelation succeeds. The Christian philosophy of Scripturalism "distinguishes truth from error. It preserves intelligibility. It banishes mysticism, emotionalism, and despair. And by it we receive the Reason of God, that is, God Himself" (122).

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<sup>2</sup> The Greek word *logos* is the word from which we get the English word "logic."

<sup>3</sup> For more on this see Gordon H. Clark, *A Christian View of Men and Things* (The Trinity Foundation, 1952, 1998).

In the July 1993 edition of *The Trinity Review*, John Robbins wrote:

*[Gordon Clark's] philosophy is the most Christian philosophy yet published, yet few seminary students hear his name mentioned in their classes, much less are they required to read his books. If I might draw a comparison, it is as though theological students in the mid-sixteenth century never heard their teachers mention Martin Luther or John Calvin. There has been a great educational and ecclesiastical blackout. Both churches and educators have gone out of their way to avoid Clark. They have cheated a generation of students and churchgoers. As theological students at the end of the twentieth century you ought not consider yourself well educated until you are familiar with the philosophy of Gordon Haddon Clark.*

With this statement the present reviewer is in full agreement. And what better place is there to begin this educational process than with Dr. Clark's *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*. Do yourself a favor and read this book. Then read the balance of Clark's writings, most all of which are published by The Trinity Foundation. As Carl Henry writes in the "Introduction" to this book "those who have not read his [Dr. Clark's] works have a rewarding opportunity awaiting them."