

Book Summary Report: *Toward A Recovery of Christian Belief* by Carl F. H. Henry (Report Date: February 2019)

This book, by Carl F. H. Henry, is based on the 1989 “Rutherford Lectures” in Scotland. The first lecture addresses the decline of Christianity as a “world-and-life view.” The second chapter relates to theological method. Chapter three focuses on the essential axioms that undergird Christianity. The fourth, and last, chapter differs from the last Rutherford Lecture, which was centered on higher criticism. In this book, chapter four focuses on the overall tenor of the previous three chapters and their significance for present-day evangelicalism.

Henry’s premise is that deductive theology is the only valid means for establishing what inductive theology fails to do, establish the existence of the Bible’s God. Augustine’s *credo ut intellegam* gains primacy over Aquinas’s “I understand in order to believe” and the so-called Tertullian formula, *credo quia absurdum* (“I believe what is absurd”).

The first chapter addresses the overall decline of the Christian worldview in the west, or as Henry states, the “West’s costly stifling of God after Jesus Christ came into the world . . . and put Graeco-Roman paganism on the defensive.”¹ Western culture has been slowly returning to the paganism from which is departed (a “neo-paganism”). For many centuries truth was grounded in the Bible; yet most, especially those younger, have little idea the debt that western thought owes to its biblical heritage.

Henry reminds us that the Christian worldview has brought to the west a purposive universe, one that is the creation of the God of the Bible. This included the belief in the sanctity of life, human dignity, and a true equality. History had a linear and teleological perspective. Nature was held to be orderly and man, the steward over it. Life transcends mere natural existence and good would triumph over evil. In the end would be the resurrection of men and final judgement.

¹Carl F. H. Henry, *Toward A Recovery of Christian Belief* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 16.

The dilution of Christianity that we've more recently witnessed is indeed nothing new. Foundational to that was the politicization of Christianity, especially during the middle ages. The increasing political power of an institutional church muted biblical truth. It was the reformers who protested against these abuses, such as the addition of legend and myth to the faith. This institutional church also added a sacramental, works-oriented salvation (the perversion of justification) and the epistemic error of natural theology.

Modern philosophy is said to have originated with the Jesuit Descartes who exchanged a speculative theism based on nature for the truth of biblical revelation. These early thinkers unwittingly preserved, however, some of the biblical positions that stood apart from ancient Greek dualism: the creation of matter, the rejection of a moral dualism where the Platonic view of an inherently evil human body having been replaced by the Pauline doctrine of the *σάρξ*.

However, the naturalistic (rather than revelatory) base had been laid and modern philosophy came to affirm the ultimate reality of naturalism and epistemological relativism. Man was little more than a highly evolved animal. These secular dogmas became the stock of the liberal arts educational system. All was not lost in that 19th century naturalism retained a vestige of biblical truth in affirming that nature was rational, truth 'durable,' and humanity unique. But the decline continued into the 20th century: "By the mid-twentieth century, secular humanism, which repudiated all revealed truths and divine commandments, had become the molding metaphysics of western liberal arts learning."² Reality was now reduced to impersonal processes, life terminated in death, truth and good now culturally conditioned. As Henry notes, "humanity's coming of age requires rejecting all transcendently fixed and final authority."³ This naturalistic worldview secularized an agenda of social justice tinged with a rabid environmentalism.⁴

²Henry, *Toward A Recovery of Christian Belief*, 23.

³Ibid.

⁴On page 24, Henry cites Elton Trueblood to the effect that these social concerns were borrowed from Christianity rather than being rooted in naturalism.

Henry addresses the increased use of drugs as “an out of body recreational sacrament.”⁵ . The usage numbers that he cites, no doubt, pale in comparison to today (not to mention the universal surge to legalize “recreational” drugs like marijuana). The damage is being done: “Much as some practitioners portray indulgence in hallucinatory drugs as a kind of religious experience, it in fact warps the human psyche and distorts the image of God in which human beings are created.”⁶ Further, these chemical experiences breed a diminished morality based on objective truth. I appreciate Henry’s words: “Chemically induced ecstasy is a return to magic; vibrations replaced syllogisms and pharmacology replaces theology as its context.”⁷ Subjectivism and deconstructionalism reigns supreme, having disconnected itself from an objective view of God and logic.⁸

Modernism has spawned a post-theistic atheism that has rejected the panorama of deities, such as the gods of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Leibniz, and Kant. However, these moderns are especially hostile to objective Christian theism. “Marxists applaud this deconstruction of Western philosophy in order to promote their own Socialist theory that links contemporary naturalism with pre-Christian and pre-Socratic materialism and degrades theism as myth.”⁹

Christian theology has not escaped this onslaught of anti-intellectualism. Karl Barth and Rudolph Bultmann were at the forefront of this movement. The words of Jeremiah 2:13 echo in the background: “My people have . . . forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.”

Chapter two, *Presuppositions and Theological Method*, addresses the distinctions between evidentialism, which is based on empiricism (induction), and presuppositionalism, based on deduction (championed by Augustine and Anselm). Evidentialistic induction as a

⁵Henry, *Toward A Recovery of Christian Belief*, 26.

⁶Henry, *Toward A Recovery of Christian Belief*, 28.

⁷Ibid.

⁸This subjectivism finds its counterpart in the rise of Christianity’s non-creedal Pentecostalism.

⁹Henry, *Toward a Recovery of Christian Belief*, 31.

means for doing theology was popularized by Thomas Aquinas and reigned until challenged by the Protestant Reformers.

Induction begins with man and nature as effects which demonstrate the existence of a First Cause. Some evidentialists, notably R. C. Sproul and John Gerstner, have accused their presuppositional brethren as being fideists who come to a conclusion via blind faith apart from reason. This notion is false. Faith and logic are not contradictory.¹⁰ The Reformers held that a belief in God is properly basic. That does not make them (or anyone) fideists.¹¹

Thomism (and subsequent Trentian orthodoxy) maintain that God's existence may be established by empirical evidence and unaided reason. Presuppositionalists give primacy to revelation (the Bible) and reason (logic). Henry points out that evangelical empiricists, in their opposition to presuppositionalism, rely on Thomas's "five-fold proof" while ignoring the fact that Thomas himself resorted to a presuppositional approach to doctrines such as the Trinity.

Science, by nature empirical, also cannot escape the ramifications of presupposition. Henry points out that science commonly takes for granted that which it cannot prove, such as the comprehensive unity, predictability, and perspicuity of nature. Science cannot avoid presuppositions.

Christianity, on the other hand, does not blush at adopting aprioric presuppositions. The church must not fall prey to operating on the world's prevalent *a posteriori* worldview. As Henry notes, "An intellectual is wholly within the bounds of philosophical and theological legitimacy if he believes God exists and affirms His existence even in the absence of empirical proof."¹² To put it in philosophical terms, belief in God is properly basic. Moreover, this is not unusual. Philosophy has always affirmed the existence—even the necessity—of unprovable axioms. Logical positivists, for example, contend that truth can only be verified by sense data, a premise

¹⁰Neo-orthodoxy and theologians of Kierkegaard's ilk are more properly labeled as fideists.

¹¹"Fideism simply affirms its positions authoritatively: it adduces no rational supports and weighs no alternatives; neither does it evaluation the logical consistency of its claims." (86)

¹²Henry, *Toward A Recovery of Christian Belief*, 45.

that itself is unverifiable. The issue is one of logical consistency within the system as a whole, something that secular worldviews do not accomplish.¹³

Henry observes that Christianity rests upon two axioms, one ontological and the other epistemological. The former is the existence of God, the latter, divine revelation. Upon these axioms all the core doctrines of the faith rest. Faith is not arbitrary belief, but one that stands upon the living, Triune God who has sufficiently revealed himself in the canonical Scriptures. He is the source of all truth. Truth is what he thinks. Natural revelation cannot determine the core doctrines of the faith, doctrines such as his Triunity and the nature of the gospel. Moreover, evidentialism is not logically demonstrable. As Henry notes, “Like Thomism, evidentialism introduces divine revelation into the discussion too late to be useful.”¹⁴

Henry moves on to the axioms of biblical theism in chapter three. He notes that every philosophy, science, or theology begins with presuppositions. This was true with Euclid’s classic *The Elements* which gives five unproved principles regarding geometry. From these he deduced his theorems. Theological and philosophical systems likewise have their governing axioms, presuppositions that cannot be inferred from other principles. “No axiom is arrived at by reasoning; as the starting point, an axiom is therefore in the nature of the case beyond proof.”¹⁵ Henry further points out that logic rests on unprovable principles, namely the law of noncontradiction.

As it relates to naturalism, the axiom is that physical processes encompass all of reality. With empiricism it’s sensation as the basis for knowledge.¹⁶ Yet empiricism cannot prove its axiom via empirical forms (and we cannot experience the physical world “directly: as our experience “consists of sensations and neurological impulses”). Henry emphasizes that each

¹³A “logically inconsistent system cannot be valid or truth.” (53).

¹⁴Henry, *Toward A Recovery of Christian Belief*, 57.

¹⁵Henry, *Toward A Recovery of Christian Belief*, 64.

¹⁶“Kant’s governing axiom is that knowledge is a joint product of innate forms and sense content. Logical Positivism sets out from the axiom that only sentences verifiable by sense experience can be true or meaningful.” (65)

worldview has its touchstone proposition upon which the rest of its noetic structure rests. All axioms are, therefore, *a priori*.

The author cites David Hume as one who argued that empiricism cannot establish God's existence, the existence of causes, the existence of the physical world, or the existence of one's "self." One cannot navigate from empirical argument to the existence of the Bible's God without making certain unprovable assumptions. Similarly, Henry quotes Bertrand Russell who remarked that "if we cannot be sure of the independent existence of other 'people's' bodies, and therefore still less of other people's minds . . . it may be that the whole outer world is nothing but a dream, and that we alone exist."¹⁷ Again, as it relates to science, the scientist's methods may be empirical, but he still operates on the basis of unprovable axioms. Going back to overall logical consistency, Henry favorably quotes D. Elton Trueblood and Edward John Carnell in affirming that Christian theism best accounts for the totality of man's experience: moral, aesthetic, historical, religious, and scientific. He also cites Plantinga who notes that belief in God is innate, an integral part of human nature. Moreover, truth claims always involve metaphysical assumptions at some level.

On what basis do we evaluate rival claims to truth? No internally inconsistent set of propositions can be true. Furthermore, no system, no matter how consistent, can be validated empirically. The author maintains that "There can be but one comprehensive system of truth. If the true system is comprehensive, every false system must contain contradictions."¹⁸ Henry cites Jerry Gill's three guidelines for escaping false systems of belief: "comprehensive coherence, internal consistency, and ethical fruitfulness."¹⁹ The author also notes that Gill eschews the necessity of absolute consistency, which is problematic, to say the least.

¹⁷Henry, *Toward A Recovery of Christian Belief*, 73.

¹⁸Henry, *Toward A Recovery of Christian Belief*, 88.

¹⁹Henry, *Toward A Recovery of Christian Belief*, 89.

What of the accusation that the presuppositional Christian worldview rests upon circular argumentation? All arguments, Henry declares, involve circularity as all arguments depend on unprovable axioms.

The absence of meaning is one thing that invalidates secular worldviews. Darwinism considers the laws of logic as an evolutionary by-product. However, this contention is self-refuting. Naturalism views the universe as a closed system while at the same time inserting its own values into it. Humanism fosters an ethical imperative to protect human rights, yet insists that individuals have no ultimate status. Behaviorism and Existentialism also fail in that the former rests upon immutable chemical processes while the latter fails to objectify transcendent significance of particulars. All systems that depart from the Bible are fragmented and do not encompass all of reality.

As Henry closes out the book he reminds his readers that Christianity has succumbed to a sub-par apologetic, popularly evidentialist in nature, and unable to stand the scrutiny of robust minds. In avoiding “presuppositions” they shamelessly engage in them. Experience cannot validate belief; the God of the Bible is “not perceptible to the senses, and a strict empirical method has no competency to decide the reality of the supernatural.”²⁰ The subjective cannot decisively address that which transcends experience.

According to Henry, the issue at hand is the choice that exists between fideists, evidentialists, and presuppositionalists. Some evidentialists falsely embrace the Reformers as trailblazers on their behalf, treading Thomistic waters. This is false. Citing John Calvin, all people are created in the *Imago Dei* and already believe in God, a belief that is suppressed by sin. All would “naturally believe” in him if sin were not. However, this does not mean that the body of doctrinal truth which is Christianity can be discerned apart from revelation.

The author further points out that there exists an improper understanding of the relationship of revelation and reason. He outlines the differences between the Tertullian,

²⁰Henry, *Toward A Recovery of Christian Belief*, 100.

Augustine's, and Thomistic systems. The Tertullian view is basically fideistic and thus excludes reason. Embracing paradox, logic is not relevant. Reason and revelation are antithetical. This antithesis is rejected by both the Augustine's and Thomistic positions. However, these two systems differ over the starting point of Christian epistemology: is it revelation/faith or empiricism?

Rational presuppositionalism conjoins faith and reason, insisting that all of humanity can understand the Bible's propositions. The source of truth, however, is revelation, not reason. The latter is a gift to men which allows them to discern truth (Eg. the law of noncontradiction).

Henry addresses the plea of some that logical structures are inherently "western" and that ways of thinking differ—in the east, for example. The dissimilarities that exist rest upon different views of reality. Hindus and some Buddhists, for example, contend that ultimate reality is a divine All; humans simply a manifestation of the divine. Christianity, in contrast, holds that God is the transcendent Other and Creator of all—a space-time universe that is ontologically distinct from him. The author points out that the so-called "Asian way of thinking" differs among Asians. The laws of logic are true and consistent, everywhere and at every time; before the Fall and after (and into eternity). They are a reflection of God's mind and consonant with his nature. All truth belongs with God and Christianity alone comprehensively embraces all of reality. Henry's statement on page 113 is more relevant than ever: "For unbelieving multitudes in our times, the recent modern defection from God known in His self-revelation has turned the whole of life in to a shambles. Ours is the first society in modern history to have ventured to erect a civilization on godless foundations; it may well be the last."