

# Epistemological Foundations For Science and Theology

by Paul Hiebert

Christian theologies, like other systems of human thought, emerge in different historical and cultural contexts. To be sure, Christians seek to root their theologies in the revelation by God of Himself in history, particularly as this is recorded in the Bible. But this does not preclude the fact that they are deeply influenced by the cultures in which they live.

It should not surprise us, therefore, that theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were influenced by modern science which had captured western thought with its obvious successes. Many, in fact, came to see theology as a kind of science. For example, Alexander (1888:1:1) defined systematic theology as "the science of God." Wiley, Pipe, Wakefield, Hovey, Shedd and Hodge did the same (Wiley 1960:1:14-15, Shedd 1889, Hodge 1928:15-17). Chafer (1947:v) noted that "Systematic Theology, the greatest of the sciences, has fallen upon evil days." Strong defined theology as "the science of God and of the relationships between God and the universe." He added,

If the universe were God, theology would be the only science. Since the universe is but a manifestation of God and is distinct from God, there are sciences of nature and of the mind. Theology is 'the science of the sciences,' not in the sense of including all these sciences, but in the sense of using their results and of showing their underlying ground (1972:1)

More recently, Griffiths (1980:169-173) has sought to show that theology is indeed a science.

Often this definition of theology as a kind of science meant no more than that theology was an orderly and systematic pursuit of knowledge. Theologians have long emulated philosophers in this. But in many instances there was an attempt to build theology on the apparently solid epistemological foundations that seem to make science so certain and trustworthy. In any case, however, we as Christians use the term "science," its definition and nature is largely controlled by the modern natural scientists.

In the past decades a radical change has been taking place in the epistemological foundations of science, a change in the way science itself is perceived. This change has profound implications for those seeking to integrate science and theology, and, indeed, for theology itself, for the epistemological crisis in the sciences raises questions about the epistemological foundations of theology and about the relationship of science and theology.

The crisis has not yet been resolved in the sciences. Because of this, and because I am not a trained philosopher, this article is more a set of questions than of answers. It is easier for us to stay within the fields of our specialization, but this limits us to narrow questions and to piecemeal answers. We dare not avoid the big questions for fear of being wrong. The consequences of the current epistemolog-

ical crisis are far reaching, and will affect us as Christians whether we examine them or not.

A word about my assumptions: I am committed to the full authority of the Scriptures, and to an evangelical anabaptist understanding of Christian theology. I am also an anthropologist and missionary seeking to understand our modern, pluralistic world, and to make Christ known within it.

## The Crisis

In its early stages, science was based largely on an uncritical form of realism. While most philosophers and theologians argued from positions of idealism, scientists, with a few exceptions, "assumed that scientific theories were accurate descriptions of the world as it is in itself" (Barbour 1974:34). Scientific knowledge was seen as a photograph of reality, a complete and accurate picture of what is really real. In its positivistic forms it rejected metaphysics and transempirical realities. Consequently there was little room for theology or integration. This stance seemed justified in view of the great strides made by science in its examination of nature.

The certainty of scientific knowledge, and the optimism that marked its early years were undermined from within. There were three major attacks on the epistemological foundations of naive realism, all reflecting the growing study by scientists of the scientific process itself.

First, in the physical sciences, Einstein in relativity, Bohr in quantum mechanics and others showed that the personal factor of the scientist inevitably enters into scientific knowledge. There is no such thing as totally objective knowledge. Second, social scientists began to study the psychological, social and cultural factors involved in the scientific endeavor, and demonstrated that there are no unbiased theories. Science is built on the cultural assumptions of the west, and is deeply influenced by social and psychological processes. Third, historians and philosophers of science such as Polanyi (1958), Kuhn (1970) and Laudin (1977) found that science is not cumulative and exhaustive. It is a sequence of competing paradigms or models of reality. But if theories taken as fact today are replaced by others tomorrow, what is the nature of scientific knowledge? Clearly we can no longer equate scientific knowledge about reality with reality itself. The old assumption that scientific theories have a one-to-one correspondence with reality has been shattered. We cannot have science without metaphysics. We must understand it within its historical, sociocultural and psychological settings. Whatever it is, science is not a photograph of reality.

## Where To?

Forced to leave the comfortable certainty of naive realism, scientists are now looking for a new epistemological foundation. What are their options?

To answer this question, we need a taxonomy of epistemological systems, a meta-epistemological grid by which we can compare and contrast various epistemological options. There are dangers, of

course, in creating such a grid. Any taxonomy imposes biases on the field, and overlooks the fine nuances of the various positions. Moreover, it assumes that epistemological paradigms are not incommensurable (contrary to Kuhn 1970), and that some measure of mutual understanding and comparison between them is possible (cf. Hofstadter 1980).

There are, however, greater dangers in looking at various epistemological positions in isolation, or of assuming that they are incommensurable. If comparison between epistemological alternatives is impossible, rationality is undermined, and with it science and philosophy.

The taxonomy suggested here (Table 1) is overly simple, but it may help us understand the current crisis in epistemology and some of the possible solutions. In the last column the various epistemological answers are illustrated by a parable. Several umpires stood talking after a baseball game one day when a player asked them, "Why do you call a particular pitch a 'strike'?" Each of them gave a different response based on his epistemological position.

*Idealism.* Forced to abandon naive realism, scientists are looking for a new epistemological foundation. Some, particularly in psychology and anthropology, are advocating some form of idealism. Few, however, go so far as Vedantic Hindus who deny the existence of an external world. Science, after all, began as an investigation of the world around us. Critical idealists argue that there may be external realities, but what really matters is the world we create within us. The order we perceive in the world is an order we impose on it by our categories and theories.

Most scientists, however, argue that to deny that the order we perceive does exist in nature itself, and to abandon empirical observation as a method alters the scientific endeavor beyond recognition.

*Determinism and Instrumentalism.* Most scientists are too busy studying the world around them to give much thought to epistemology. And most use deterministic models to explain their observations. Curiously, they assume that their own theories are based on rational choice. Only recently has science become self-reflective enough to call this inconsistency into question.

In response to the current crisis in epistemology, a number of philosophers of science believe that we have no alternative but to accept some form of determinism. Kuhn and Feyerabend, for example, sought to found science on solid empirical and rational grounds, but came to the conclusion that scientific decisions are based on politics and propaganda in which prestige, power, age and polemics determine a choice between competing theories. They argue "not merely that certain decisions between theories in science *have been irrational*, but that choices between competing scientific theories, in the nature of the case, *must be irrational* (Laudin 1977:3. italics in original). Carried to its logical conclusion, determinism renders human knowledge, including science, irrational and meaningless (cf Lewis 1970:129-146).

Other philosophers of science, including Laudin, argue for an instrumentalist epistemology. They see science as a "useful" way of looking at the world because it helps us solve problems. They affirm a real world, and make a distinction between systems of

TABLE 1  
A Taxonomy of Epistemological Positions

Position	Nature of Knowledge	Relationship between Systems of Knowledge	The Umpire's Response
ABSOLUTE IDEALISM	Reality exists in the mind. The external world is illusory. Eg. Vedantic and Advaita Hinduism.	Each system is an island to itself. Systems are incommensurable. Unity is possible only as everyone joins in the same system.	"My calling it makes it a strike. The game is in my mind."
CRITICAL IDEALISM	Reality exists in the mind. The external world is unknowable. Order is imposed on sense experience by the mind.	Each system is an island to itself. Systems are incommensurable. A common ground is found in human rationality which is assumed to be the same for all humans.	"My calling it makes it a strike. My mind imposes order on the world."
NAIVE IDEALISM/ NAIVE REALISM	The external world is real. The mind can know it exactly, exhaustively and without bias. Science is a photograph of reality. Because knowledge and reality are related 1:1 this is naive idealism or naive realism.	Because knowledge is exact and potentially exhaustive, there can be only one unified theory. Various theories must be reduced to one. This leads to reductionism such as physical reductionism, psychological reductionism or sociocultural reductionism.	"I call it the way it is. If it is a strike I call it a strike. If it is a ball I call it a ball."
CRITICAL REALISM	The external world is real. Our knowledge of it is partial but can be true. Science is a map or model. It is made up of successive paradigms which bring us to closer approximations of reality and absolute truth.	Each field in science presents a different blueprint of reality. These are complimentary to one another. Integration is achieved, not by reducing them all to one model, but to see them all in their relationships to one another. Each gives us partial insights into reality.	"I call it the way I see it, but there is a real pitch and an objective standard against which I must judge it. I can be shown to be right or wrong."
INSTRUMENTALISM (Pragmatism)	The external world is real. We cannot know if our knowledge if it is true, but if it "does the job" we can use it. Science is a Rorschach response that makes no ontological claims to truth.	Because we make no truth claims for our theories or models, there can be no ontological contradictions between them. We can use apparently contradictory models in different situations so long as they work.	"I call it the way I see it, but there is no way to know if I am right or wrong."
INSTRUMENTALISM	The external world is real. We and our knowledge are determined by material causes, hence knowledge can lay no claim to truth (or to meaning).	There is no problem with integration for all systems of knowledge are determined by external, nonrational factors such as infant experiences, emotional drives and thought conditioning.	"I call it the way I am programmed to."

knowledge and external realities. But they deny that science gives us a "true" picture of those realities. The criterion for evaluating science is pragmatism—does it work, not is it true. We must, therefore, live with scientific (and cultural) relativism. Sukenick writes,

All versions of "reality" are of the nature of fiction. There's your story and my story, there's the journalist's story and the historian's story, there's the philosopher's story and the scientist's story . . . Our common world is only a description . . . reality is imagined (Sukenick 1976:113).

But, as Marvin Harris notes, relativism destroys science as science (1980:45). And Peter Berger points out that relativism denies any concept of truth, and in the end relativizes relativity itself, rendering it meaningless (1970:40-42).

A rejection of instrumentalism does not preclude scientists from creating and using models that they know to be useful fictions. All scientists recognize that at times it is useful to develop models for which no claims of truthfulness are made. Those in the applied sciences, in particular, often use models simply because they work. The question is not whether all mental models depict reality, but whether any do.

*Critical Realism.* A number of scientists now argue for a critical realist approach to science. Harold Schilling writes,

The interpretation I shall offer will be developed from the point of view of critical realism, as I believe it to be espoused by most scientists . . . According to this view science actually investigates nature itself, not just its own ideas. It achieves much reliable knowledge about it. This knowledge is communicated through systems of theoretical models . . . Science's descriptions of [nature] are . . . to be taken as "true," though not literalistically so in detail (1973:99).

Ian Barbour adds,

. . . the critical realist takes theories to be representations of the world. He holds that valid theories are true as well as useful (1974:37).

Like instrumentalism, critical realism makes a distinction between reality and our knowledge of it, but like naive realism, it claims that knowledge can be true. In it theories are not photographs of reality. They are maps or blueprints. Just as it takes many blueprints to understand a building, so it takes many theories to comprehend reality.

Truth in a map is different from truth in a photograph. Some is literal and some is symbolic. For example, a road map shows this road leading to the airport—a fact we can empirically verify. But the fact that the road on the map is colored red does not mean that the road itself is red. Nor is the city yellow.

Naive realism has no room for metaphysics. Mental images are uninterpreted photographs of reality. Determinism and instrumentalism accept metaphysics, but divorce mental images from external realities. Critical realism, as Laudin points out (1977), restores metaphysics to a central place in science, and postulates a complex dialectical relationship between external realities and mental images.

Finally, to be useful, a map must be selective. A road map must leave out information about underground pipes, overhead wires, buildings, trees, sidewalks, lawns and the like. To put everything in one map clutters it and renders it useless. The choice of what to include and what to exclude depends on the purpose for which the map is to be used, for maps are not only maps of reality, but also maps for choosing a course of action (Geertz 1972:168-169).

Critical realism is increasingly being accepted as a new epistemological base by the scientists. With the exception of a few social scientists, none are idealists. And with the exception of applied scientists, few are instrumentalists. Most are still convinced that they are in search of truth, and that their theories are more than useful fictions.

### Epistemological Foundations For Theology

The epistemological crisis in the sciences raises important questions for theology, particularly where it has tried to be a science. What are its epistemological foundations, and what is its relation-

ship to science? These questions must be distinguished from questions regarding the content of theology which must be dealt with on another level of discourse. We will limit ourselves here to the question of the relationship between theology as a system of thought and the Bible as a historical document.

*Theology as Naive Realism.* Most Christians, like most scientists, do not examine their epistemological foundations. They assume that they understand clearly and without bias what Scripture has to say. Just as naive realist scientists assume there is a one-to-one correlation between theories and a real world outside, they assume that their theology has a one-to-one correlation with the Bible. They reject the notion that their interpretations of Scripture are colored by their history and culture, their personal experiences, or even the language they speak. They are, in other words, naive realists. Or naive idealists. It is, in fact, hard to distinguish between the two, for both claim a one-to-one correspondence between knowledge and reality. Only when they are forced to leave a naive realist/idealist position is the difference apparent. Naive realists, in the end, move to some other forms of realism. Naive idealists, on the other hand, become critical or absolute idealists.

Because naive realist/idealist Christians hold to an exact correspondence between their theology and Scripture, they claim for the former the absolutes and certainty that they affirm for the latter. This raises problems when disagreements arise. Each claims for his or her own theology full and certain truth. But then those who disagree must be wrong. The result is a rejection of one another that leads to divisions. Unity is possible only on the basis of complete theological agreement. But this is achieved only if people share the same historical and cultural contexts, or if they are willing to be followers of a single theological authority. There is little room for ordinary Christians to read and interpret the Scriptures for themselves. In the past naive realism/idealism provided us with the security of both a real world and certain knowledge, but it is no longer a tenable epistemological position.

Science has convincingly shown us that there is a human element in all knowledge (Coulson 1955:84-120). Anthropologists have found that all languages have within them implicit cultural and theological biases in which are expressed the categories they form, and the world view they assume. They have also shown us that all human knowledge is molded in part by the cultural and historical context within which it is found (Hymes 1964). Sociologists have shown that knowledge belongs to a community, and is influenced by the dynamics of that community (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Psychologists have demonstrated that even so simple a task as reading and interpreting a page of written materials involves a complex hermeneutical process that varies according to the level of mental development (Piaget 1960), the knowledge and the attitudes of the reader. There is, in fact, no knowledge in which the subjective dimension does not enter in some way or other.

The growing awareness of these findings has forced scientists to realize that science itself must be understood within its cultural and historical settings. If this is true of science, what about theology? Can we claim that no subjective factors enter our reading of Scriptures? Certainly the Holy Spirit works in us helping us to understand them, and to interpret them for our particular needs. But does He totally override our human thought processes?

But if all knowledge has a subjective dimension to it, where is truth? What is a foundation we can trust? Where are absolutes? The answers we give to these questions will depend largely on the epistemological stance we take in theology.

*Theology as Idealism.* Forced to choose between human knowledge and the external world as the independent variable, as the source from which the other is derived, many theologians opt for some form of idealism. In this, human thought is seen as foundational and empirical realities as contingent. The advantage of this, of course, is that we can have objective knowledge which is certain in every detail.

Idealists argue that this certainty rests on Biblical revelation and on reason. The former, however, is a written document and a part of the external world which we can know only through hearing and reading. But this again raises questions about the subjectivity of Biblical knowledge. In the end, therefore, idealists must appeal to human reason as the final arbiter of truth.

An idealist approach to theology does provide a viable way of looking at reality. There are too many idealists in philosophy and theology to write it off lightly. But it leaves several questions unanswered.

First, it assumes one uniform system of reason for all humans. This assumption, however, is being increasingly challenged in the social sciences. Certainly, at the most fundamental level, all humans work in the same way. They all learn languages, and seem to generate these on the basis of common processes. They are able to communicate and to understand one another even though they belong to different cultures.

But there are different types of formal logic. Mathematicians have shown that we can construct any number of non-Euclidian geometries, each of which is internally consistent. More recently they have shown that fuzzy sets, "fuzzy algebra" and "fuzzy logic" provide us with a system of reason in which the western notions of either-or-ness and the law of the excluded middle do not hold (Zadeh 1965). If there are mental universals, and there certainly are, they are at a deeper level of thought than we formerly thought to be true. Anthropologists have also shown that there are differences in the systems of logic used in different societies (Luria 1976).

Second, an idealist theology has difficulty in accounting for communication. We cannot know another person's mind directly. All communication is mediated through external events. But if the meaning of these events is what we make them to be, communication breaks down. In extreme idealism, as in Vedantic Hinduism, we are left as islands of certainty within ourselves, with no real knowledge of one another apart from a mystical experience of oneness.

Third, an idealist theology leaves uncertain the question of discerning the work of the Holy Spirit. As Christians we hold that the Holy Spirit is at work in the hearts and minds of his people, helping them to understand the truth. But how can we test whether our understanding has come from God, or from our spirit or some other spirit? We cannot appeal to Scripture, for each person can claim to have had a divine revelation regarding its interpretation. We all face danger of molding Scripture to fit our thoughts.

Fourth, an idealist theology faces problems with disagreements. Because the final appeal is internal, there is no external reference point that can serve as an arbiter between different theological positions. The result is a combative stance that leads to divisiveness. The only real resolution lies in the conversion of one side to the position of the other. In the end, we are in danger of worshipping human reason. We are the final arbiters of truth, and those who disagree with us are wrong.

Fifth, an idealist theology undervalues the importance of history as the framework within which divine revelation takes place. It tends to be ahistorical and acultural. It has problems with taking seriously the changing historical and cultural contexts of the Scriptures and of our times. In the extreme it leads to a Vedantic view in which the external world is *maya* or illusion, and history has no meaning. But as Mircea Eliade, Stanley Jones and others have argued, the Judeo-Christian tradition is different from tribal and eastern religions precisely because it has a strong doctrine of creation of a real world apart from but contingent on God, and a strong sense of history as the arena within which God is carrying out His work. And it is the realist epistemologies that take the external world seriously.

Sixth, it is well nigh impossible to integrate an idealist theology and a realist science. The two see knowledge in a different light. Consequently, in the end we are forced to choose between one or the other as our ultimate frame of reference.

Finally, as we will see in the next article, there is a missiological question. How does an idealist Christian theology relate to non-Christian religions, particularly to the great idealist religions of Hinduism and Buddhism, and how does it affect evangelism?

*Theology as Determinism or Instrumentalism.* A deterministic approach to theology, like a deterministic approach to science, renders it meaningless. A few theologians may argue for a total divine determinism, but like scientists using deterministic models, they tend to exclude their own theologies from the picture.

Others, particularly social scientists such as Durkheim, argue that theology is instrumental. It is a useful way of looking at things,

whether true or false. It serves important functions in the society such as giving it a sense of identity, and encoding its values. As evangelicals we must reject an instrumentalist theology, because it rejects the concept of truth. In the end it leads to theological and religious relativism.

*Theology as Critical Realism.* How would evangelical theology look in a critical realist mode? In the first place it would differentiate between theology and Biblical revelation, and ascribe final and full authority to the latter as the inspired record of God acting in human history. The Bible would then be the source and rule for Christian faith and life, and the final criterion against which we measure theological truth. We would see in it the definitive record of the person and work of Jesus Christ who is our Lord.

Theology in a critical realist mode is our human understanding and interpretation of the Scriptures. Technically, we should speak of theologies, for each theology is an understanding of divine revelation within a particular historical and cultural context. Thus we would speak of the theology of Calvin, or of Luther, or of evangelicalism.

A critical realist approach to theology affirms the priesthood of all believers, and recognizes that they must and will take the universal message of the Bible and apply it to their own lives and settings. It holds that the Holy Spirit is at work in all believers, leading them, when they are humbly open to His guidance, through the Scriptures and the Christian community into a growing understanding not only of theological truth in general, but also of the meaning of that truth for their lives.

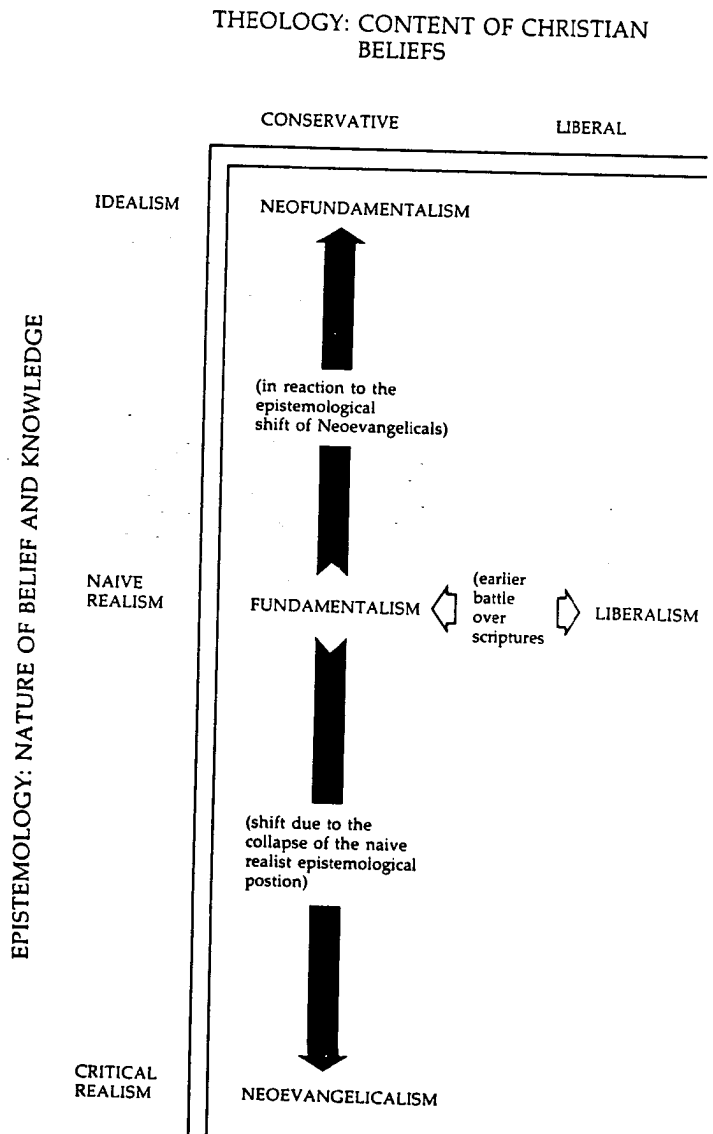


FIGURE 1  
TYPES OF CONFLICT ON THE EVANGELICAL SCENE

... means, however, that all theologies are partial and culturally biased, that truth in the Scriptures is greater than our understanding of it. There is room, therefore, for growth in our theologies, but this means we must constantly test our theologies against the Scriptures and be willing to change them when we gain new understandings. Historical realities do not change, but our understandings of them do.

Does this not lead us into a morass of theological pluralism? Yes and no. It recognizes that different people ask different questions when they go to the Scriptures, and that their cultural and historical frameworks will color their interpretations. But, as Norman Kraus points out, Paul makes it clear that the interpretation of the Gospel is ultimately not the task of individuals, or even of leaders. It is the task of the church as a hermeneutical or "discerning community."

Thus the Scripture can find its proper meaning as witness only within a *community of interpretation*. Principles of interpretation are important, but secondary. There needs to be an authentic correspondence between gospel announced and a "new order" embodied in community for Scripture to play its proper role as a part of the original witness. The authentic community is the hermeneutical community. It determines the actual enculturated meaning of Scripture (Kraus 1979:71).

Similarly, the cultural biases of local churches must be checked by the international community of churches drawn from many cultures.

There are three checks against theological error. First, all theology must be rooted in the Scriptures. Second, the Holy Spirit is at work in the hearts of God's people revealing the meaning of the Scriptures to individuals and churches in their particular settings. Third, believers and congregations must help one another discern the leadings of the Holy Spirit. They must test one another's theology, and themselves be open to critique. Just as others see our sins more clearly than we, so they see our theological errors more clearly than we see our own. The interpretation of Scriptures within a hermeneutical community must, therefore, be carried out in a spirit of humility to speak and willingness to learn.

Does this approach not lead to us to instrumentalism and a consequent theological relativism? No. Historical and experiential facts remain the same in all times and cultures. And while our interpretation of history introduces a subjective dimension, the facts of history force on us a large measure of objectivity. Critical realist theology like critical realist science affirms that while we see in part, we do see. We can speak of theological truth in an absolute sense. We see clearly the great outlines of theology—creation, fall, and redemption. In the study of Scriptures we see enough to lead us into faith and a growing discipleship. Too often it is not a lack of truth that holds us back, but our unwillingness to obey the truth we do have.

### Epistemology and the Current Evangelical Scene

An understanding of the various epistemological positions can help us untangle some of the current debates in evangelical circles, debates that often seem to lead to confusion rather than to clarity. Clearly, we must distinguish between debates over the epistemological foundations of theology and those over the content of theology (see figure 1). Because we take our epistemological assumptions for granted, we do not debate them openly. Consequently our disagreements on this level surface in debates over the contents of theology and confuse the issues.

As I see it, many young evangelicals aware of the shifts now taking place in western epistemology have moved from the old position of naive realism to that of critical realism while remaining evangelical in their *theological content*. Confusing this move as a shift towards liberalism, other theologians have reacted by asserting the certainty of theology as a comprehensive, complete system of thought (not to be confused with trustworthiness of the Scriptures [historical revelation]). But in doing so they have been forced into an idealist epistemology that absolutizes ideas over historical realities (see figure 1).

To be sure, the old debate over the content of theology between conservatives and liberals continues, and we must examine it with utmost seriousness. It is here that we seek the content of truth. But

this debate must not be confused with the debate over epistemology—over the nature of our understanding of the truth. There are naive realist liberals who are just as dogmatic in declaring that they have a full knowledge of the truth as the are naive realist evangelicals. There are also idealist liberals and idealist evangelicals, and critical realist liberals and critical realist evangelicals. Some Christians have moved from a conservative-naive realist position to a more liberal-critical realist position. But they must not be equated with those who have moved to a conservative-critical realist position.

One area in which the failure to distinguish between the epistemological nature and the content of theology has created a great deal of confusion is that of Biblical authority. For those who see human knowledge as a photograph of reality—having a one-to-one correspondence with it—all knowledge is in a sense factual and literal, and any difference between knowledge and reality is an error. For those who see knowledge as a map, some information may not have a literal correspondence with the visible reality, but *may communicate another level of truth*. It is, therefore, not an "error." For example, freeways on a road map may be colored red, and surface streets black. This does not mean the two are, in fact, red and black. It does mean that the roads are different in character and belong to different systems. Moreover, a map is not faulty if nonessential information is lacking. It is fully trustworthy and accurate if it serves fully the purposes for which it is intended.

A second area in which the confusion of epistemology with content has wreaked havoc has to do with focus. Idealism (naive or critical) focuses on the ultimate unchanging structures of truth. Idealist theologians, therefore, emphasize systematic theologies (theologies of the balcony). Consequently they tend to be ahistorical and acultural. Realism looks at events in the real historical world within which we live and focuses on the nature of truth in specific situations. Realist theologians, therefore, emphasize Biblical theologies that look at God's acts and self revelation in specific historical and cultural situations (theologies of the road). As we shall see in the next article, we all need both. As we read the historical record of God's revelation in the Bible we all formulate implicit systematic theologies. The difference is that realists place greater emphasis on Biblical theologies that focus on historical revelation and less on systematic theologies that look at the structures of reality.

Finally, the current confusion over epistemological foundations has led to a breakdown in communication. When evangelical critical realist theologians and idealist theologians converse, they speak of the same things, but they have an uneasy feeling that something is amiss. The idealists accuse the realists of lack of certainty for the latter differentiate their theology from the Scriptures. They tend to preface their remarks with "I believe . . .", or "As I see it . . .". Critical realists, on the other hand, are upset at the dogmatic certainty idealists claim for their knowledge, knowing that all human knowledge occurs in the contexts of culture and history. They may, in fact, agree on the contents of theological truth, but disagree on the epistemological nature of theology.

The breakdown of communication is most evident when there are disagreements. Idealists require agreement for there to be harmony. Consequently, they tend to be conversionist and polemical in their approach to those holding other theological positions. And they must break with and attack those who refuse to accept their positions. Critical realists, on the other hand, recognize that Christians will disagree in their understandings of Scriptures, and that unity lies in a commitment to the same Lord and to an obedience to the same Scriptures. They tend to be confessional and irenic in their approach to those who disagree. Moreover, they are committed by their epistemological stance to continue discussions with those who disagree with them.

When two idealists or two critical realists disagree, both sides know what is going on. Communication of some sort goes on, whether in mutual attack or mutual dialogue, because both sides are playing by the same rules. But when an idealist and a critical realist disagree, confusion sets in because one is playing chess and the other checkers on the same board.

As evangelicals we need to differentiate epistemological issues from theological ones so that we do not waste our energies and can work toward a resolution of our differences, and so we do not attack

a brother or sister falsely. We need to guard against heresy. We need also carry out the mission Christ has given us in this lost and broken world.

How do the various epistemological positions in theology relate to the integration of theology and science, and to missions and our relationship to non-Christian religions? These are questions we will explore in the next article.

*To be continued in May/June TSF Bulletin.*

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