

Review: The Presbyterian Philosopher

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Book: Douglas J. Douma, *The Presbyterian Philosopher: The Authorized Biography of Gordon H. Clark* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016)

Gordon Haddon Clark (1902-1985) was a prominent American Presbyterian philosopher and churchman in the 20th century, yet one would not know it by living in many contemporary 21st century American Presbyterian and Reformed circles. In this biography of this neglected American thinker, Douglas Douma does us all a great service by opening a window into the life of this man, helping us to understand his situation in life, and especially into the major controversy that has played a big influence in the formative years of one Presbyterian denomination, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) — the “Clark-Van Til Controversy.”

Before I begin the review, I must lay it out on the table that I am not unbiased neither do I come without baggage. I was first introduced to the writings of Gordon Clark through Monergism.com, and also through the writings of Robert Reymond. I cut my teeth on Reformed philosophy on Clark even before I have read anything of substance from Cornelius Van Til. In the course of my life, I have however joined the OPC, studied at Westminster Seminary California, and am currently (as of March 2017) a licentiate in the Presbytery of Southern California of the OPC. As of now, I am certainly sympathetic towards Gordon Clark, yet I have taken what I think of as a moderate position with regards to certain issues of philosophy and theology.

This biography begins with a look at Clark’s Presbyterian heritage, especially looking at his father David S. Clark (pp. 4-8). The formative influences on Gordon Clark were then explored, setting him on the course of Old-School Presbyterianism with a Neo-Platonic slant (pp. 17-23). Chapter 3 covers the formative period of the OPC, chapter 4 looks at Clark’s time at Wheaton College, including the internal politicking that resulted in Clark’s resignation from Wheaton (pp. 48-57). In chapter 5, Douma looks at the intellectual origins and history of the system known as Presuppositionalism. Chapters 6-8 covers the Clark-Van Til controversy. Chapters 9 deals with Clark’s years at Butler University. Chapters 10 and 12 deal with Clark’s intellectual output, with chapter 12 covering Clark’s ongoing thought, until his death, concerning the doctrine of God and the doctrine of Christ. Chapter 11 covers the sad legacy of some of Clark’s students in their misguided Neo-Evangelical experiment, while chapter 13 rounds the biography up with an account of Clark’s last years.

I would like to break up this review in looking briefly at Clark’s philosophy, then at Clark’s thoughts concerning theology proper and Christology. I would then move into the historical parts dealing with Clark’s students and Neo-Evangelicalism, and then finally, the Clark-Van Til Controversy.

Clark's philosophy

Clark's philosophy owes an intellectual debt to the great Dutch theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper, as well as Scottish theologian James Orr, with their focus on worldview (*weltanschauung*) and worldview thinking. Presuppositionalism, in both its Van Tilian and Clarkian varieties, depends on the concept of worldviews as holistic understandings of the world. Clarkian presuppositionalism is also fully anti-evidential and anti-empirical (p.69), a difference with Van Tilian thought that would be made manifest later on in the Clark-Van Til Controversy.

In the biography, Douma in chapter 10 points out four theological contributions of Gordon Clark: (1) an axiomatized epistemological system, (2) teleological supralapsarianism, (3) a solution to the problem of evil, and (4) arguments for a return to traditional logic. Out of the four, the fourth point is most definitely not theological, and it seems strange for it to be lumped in with the other three points which seem much more consequential. Furthermore, I do not see the significance of imputing or non-imputing existential import into Aristotelian logical statements.¹ Perhaps here we will benefit if Douma had spelled out why returning to traditional logic is so important that it would warrant a discussion alongside the other three major contributions.

Gordon Clark was a Presbyterian. As a Presbyterian, he held whole-heartedly to the Westminster Confession of Faith, including the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture (WCF 1.6). Clark however extended the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture to cover all of knowledge. All of knowledge, according to Clark, is to be derived from Scripture, and Scripture alone. This epistemological position, Scripturalism, is "aimed at answering philosophical questions in a consistent, systematic fashion, starting with the Christian Bible and its unique and central role in revealing truth from God to man" (p.186). As opposed to Rationalism (beginning with reason), or Empiricism (beginning with senses and evidences), Clark starts with revelation, the revelation from God. Another term for Scripturalism would therefore be Scriptural foundationalism, since the Scriptures are to be the foundation upon which all knowledge is to be built.

A key thing to take note here is that Clark denigrates empiricism in all its forms, which is why all knowledge is to be derived from Scripture alone. Critics of Clark's philosophies, when they claim the use of the senses to read the Scripture, or when they speak about "Science" (whatever they think it means), ignore the fact that Clark begins with an anti-empirical slant from the beginning. For Clark, the reason why all knowledge is to be derived from Scripture alone is not because he is some form of a solipsist, but because all other "sources" of knowledge are not reliable. Clark's occasionalism functions here to explain how the senses and "science" are mere "occasions" for God to reveal knowledge. Such an axiomatized epistemological system, being fully anti-empirical, would strike

¹ Douma's point here is to put forward Clark's view of logic and the necessity of existential import into universal statements (e.g. "All A are B"), as opposed to Bertrand Russell's modern variety, which continues to hold on to Aristotelian logic while denying existential import into universal statements.

many of its critics as smacking of rationalism, but that is to ignore what Clark actually taught for a caricature of one's own imagination.

One weakness which I perceive in limiting epistemology to the Scriptures alone is that personal statements cannot be judged as true or false in such a system. I can deduce that "All men are sinners," and that "All who believe in Christ alone by grace alone through faith alone will be saved." But how can I judge the veracity of the statements "I believe in Christ" or "I am assured of my salvation"? Clark's Scripturalism is indeed helpful in many regards, yet it does not seem that his system is sufficient for all of knowledge, in my opinion.

The second contribution is that of teleological supralapsarianism, which is also (and more widely) promoted by the Clarkian Robert Reymond in his *Systematic Theology*.² On this technical subject, I concur with both Clark and Reymond in their discussion of the topic, showing how a logical ordering of the decrees should actually be logical, not discussed utilizing temporal categories.

The third contribution is that of the problem of evil. Clark's solution is to distinguish human responsibility from God's causative agency. This is certainly a helpful solution which the Reformed world should utilize, yet I do not see it as solving the question completely. Despite this great contribution in Reformed theodicy, Clark's occasionalism will prove to be a liability when applied more consistently to this topic. While Clark correctly holds and teaches the orthodox teaching that God is not the author of sin, but its ultimate cause,³ other less confessional and rationalistic philosophers like Vincent Cheung will utilize occasionalism to make God into the author of sin.⁴ We can rejoice in the blessed inconsistency and confessional fidelity of Gordon Clark, that he treasures the Scriptures and the Westminster Standards so much that he does not veer into heresy like Vincent Cheung with his monstrous deity.

Theology Proper and Christology

In his later years, Clark wrote many theological and philosophical books. The last book, which was left unfinished at his death and completed by John Robbins, was Clark's musings concerning the doctrine of Christ.⁵ Clark's treatment concerning the Trinity seems orthodox enough, yet his definition of the person as "a collection of thoughts" would prove problematic later on.⁶ Defining a person according to intellect would result in a controversial Christology as stating that Christ is two persons, yet in a manner that is not truly Nestorian, as Douma has correctly pointed out (pp. 221-2).

² Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (2nd Ed.; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 488-502

³ See for example Gordon H. Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?* (Unicoi, TN: Trinity Foundation, 2001), 37-8. Douma also correctly points this out in page 193: "Yet while God is the ultimate *cause* of sin, He is not the *author* of sin. The author is the immediate cause, whereas God is only the ultimate cause of sin"

⁴ Vincent Cheung, *The Author of Sin* (Boston, MA: Vincent Cheung, 2005), 20, 25

⁵ Gordon H. Clark, *The Incarnation* (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1984)

⁶ Gordon H. Clark, *The Trinity*, (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1985), 105. As cited in Douma, 217

As *The Incarnation* was left unfinished at his death, it is a matter of speculation whether Clark's views were settled or if he was still wrestling with the specter of Nestorianism. What can be said is that traditional Chalcedonian orthodoxy defines "person" differently, as a "subsistence" or *hypostasis* (ὑποστασις), while predicating "mind" to "nature," not to persons. Since *The Incarnation* was not published during Clark's lifetime, it is speculation as to whether what was published portrays Clark's final thoughts on Christology. We can however say that Clark's error was due to his wrong definition of "person." While that would work with the doctrine of the Trinity, because each person of the Trinity has one personal "mind" each, it would not work with the person of Christ, who has two natures and thus two distinct "minds." Is that confusing? It certainly is, and I do believe that further clarification concerning our doctrine of God could perhaps be achieved in the future.

Clark's error here can be seen as he deals with ontological issues (concerning God and Christ) in an epistemic fashion. Ontology and epistemology are distinct fields of philosophy and they should be treated accordingly.

"Clark's boys" and the problem of Neo-Evangelicalism

Chapter 11 of the biography is devoted to the prominent former students of Gordon Clark, notably Harold Lindsell, Carl F.H. Henry, Edmund Clowney, Edward J. Carnell, and Paul King Jewett (p. 200). In this sad chapter, Douma points out the compromise of those who chose to join the emerging Neo-Evangelicalism (Henry, Carnell, Jewett), and Clark's feeling of betrayal by these his former students. Clark was a Presbyterian, and a Presbyterian of the Old School tradition, but those of his former students who joined the Neo-Evangelicalism did not follow him in that tradition (p. 204). In the founding of Fuller Seminary, the "strong reformed distinctiveness" (p. 203) that characterized seminaries like Westminster Theological Seminary were minimized, and a bastardization of Clark's original dream of unity with other fundamentalists upon a Reformed foundation (p. 90) was created, resulting in an almost predictable catastrophe.⁷

Douma narrates to us the slow rot of Neo-Evangelicalism among some of "Clark's boys" and Clark's reactions to it. Douma shows us that Clark was livid after Carnell critiqued J. Gresham Machen for being "sectarian" (pp. 206-7), and that he muttered "something like 'betrayal'" when Carnell admitted to Karl Barth his struggle with the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. (p. 208-9). Clark's reaction to Neo-Evangelicalism should lead us to conclude that he was no friend of Neo-Evangelicalism especially in its doctrinal minimalism, contrary to the portrayal of Gordon Clark and his supporters in the OPC as wanting to reconfigure the OPC along minimalistic evangelical as opposed to Reformed confessional

⁷ See for example George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), and Iain H. Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2000)

lines.⁸ Gordon Clark remained a confessional Old School Presbyterian, and was not an Evangelical minimalist as some have accused him of being.

The Clark-Van Til controversy

Finally, we have come to the major controversy in Gordon Clark's life and ministry, which takes up three whole chapters in the biography. Douma covered the controversy much more comprehensively than previous efforts, some which admittedly have a particular axe to grind.⁹

Douma aids us in our understanding of the controversy by pointing out the politicking going on in the background, thus showing us that the controversy is not as clear-cut as many have portrayed it to be. In all, Douma points out four causes for the controversy: (1) Van Til's concerns about Clark's philosophy, (2) the question of whether to include other fundamentalists, (3) Clark's resolution for alcohol abstinence, and (4) seminary control and the denomination's theology (pp. 87-99). Douma shows us that differences in theology, while not insignificant, were not the main driving force behind the *Complaint* against Gordon Clark's ordination. Rather, theological issues were the presenting issues behind struggle for power, control and direction of both Westminster Theological Seminary and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. It should be grievous for Christians to read of the shenanigans that went on behind the Clark-Van Til Controversy, yet not altogether surprising since pastors and theologians are still sinners.

Regarding the theological issues, Douma crystalizes the differences into the following questions: (1) In what manner do we understand the incomprehensibility of God, (2) what is the relationship of the faculty of knowledge to other faculties of the soul, (3) what is the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, (4) is there a free offer of the Gospel, and (5) is Clark promoting Rationalism. Douma goes through the issues one by one and shows how Clark is innocent of the various charges, noting also that the *Complaint* seems confused as to what they themselves mean by their own language of "content" (p. 137).

One possible improvement I would suggest is to see the difference between Clark and Van Til as the former proceeding upon the basis of epistemology and the latter proceeding upon the basis of ontology. Such is how this reviewer came to understand Van Tilianism especially as he reads works appropriating Reformed Scholasticism, for example R. Scott Clark's critique of Gordon Clark as being "rationalistic."¹⁰ In my opinion, Van Tilians like R. Scott Clark misread and misunderstand Gordon Clark because they interpret him

⁸ John R. Muether, "The Whole Counsel of God: Westminster Seminary and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church," in David VanDrunen, ed., *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries — Essays in Honor of Robert B. Strimple* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004), 233-4

⁹ See Herman Hoeksema, *The Clark-Van Til Controversy* (Hobbs, NM: Trinity Foundation, 1995) for a highly sectarian look at the controversy

¹⁰ R. Scott Clark, "Janus, the Well-Meant Offer of the Gospel, and Westminster Theology," in VanDrunen, ed., *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine*, 150-2, 156-64, 171-4

according to Scholastic categories, not according to [Gordon] Clark's own terms and definitions. [Of course, it is a question whether Van Til himself understood all those scholastic categories R. Scott Clark is using in his critique of Gordon Clark in the early 21st century]. Perhaps putting the difference between [Gordon] Clark and Van Til this way would help us in achieving greater clarity concerning how the two sides can sometimes be seen as talking past each other. Of course, with the recovery of Reformed Scholasticism in the contemporary academic scene, such misinformed critiques of Gordon Clark might become more frequent. As someone who has read both [Gordon] Clark and Van Til, and am sympathetic to elements of Reformed Scholasticism, it would be helpful to frame the differences as showing how Van Til proceeds from ontology, prioritizing God as the *principium essendi*, while Gordon Clark proceeds from epistemology, focusing on the very modern question of the justification of knowledge, and thus from God and His Word as the *principium cognoscendi*.¹¹

Lastly, concerning the issue of the "free offer," Douma shows us the shadow of the controversy in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) looming over this issue, in the CRC's Three Points on Common Grace at the 1924 Synod of Kalamazoo. Douma attempts to argue that such is a specific Dutch imposition upon the Presbyterian Church (p. 122). I am however unconvinced of Douma's assertion that the 18th century Scottish Marrow Controversy was similarly over this idea of the "free offer" (pp. 118-9), but I am open to reconsideration. In my opinion, the way the issue of the "free offer" has been discussed so far has not been conducive for constructive engagement, since everyone has their own definition of what the "free offer" means. This reviewer for instance would hold to the "free offer," as defined as God presenting all sinners with the call of the Gospel that does not require any work on their part to believe, but I would reject the "well-meant offer," as defined by God sincerely calling all sinners without exception to repent and believe the Gospel, with a true, and thus ultimately frustrated, desire to save them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this biography by Douma has been an excellent read. As also the only biography of Gordon Clark at the time of review, this book is an honest and relatively impartial introduction to the person and work of Gordon Clark. In fact, I would say on the Clark-Van Til Controversy, the three chapters in Douma's biography should be required reading for those who wish to understand the Controversy, without the spin put on it by various other partisan authors and observers.

While Gordon Clark has been sidelined in the contemporary Presbyterian and Reformed world, his books and thoughts are still very helpful to address various questions faced in the churches and in society. Even if one were to disagree with Clark, an honest interaction with Clark's thoughts should be greatly beneficial. As such, it is my hope that Douma's

¹¹ A way to synthesize the Scholastic differentiation of *theologia archetypa* and *theologia ectypa*, with Clark's epistemology, can be seen in my article: Daniel H. Chew, *The Archetypal/Ectypal distinction and Clarkian Epistemology* (2010).

biography of this great confessional American Presbyterian thinker would be more widely read, and serve as an introduction to the seminal thinking of Gordon Haddon Clark.