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Book Review: Need To Know Vocation As The Heart Of Christian Epistemology

Douglas Schuuman

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Need to Know: Vocation as the Heart of Christian Epistemology, by John Stackhouse, Jr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 280 pages. \$29.95 (hardcover).

DOUGLAS J. SCHURMAN, St. Olaf College

In this book, Stackhouse, the Sangwoo Youtong Chee Professor of Theology and Culture at Regent College, aims to answer the call to think Christianly about everything. He does so by developing an epistemology, “an outline of just how Christians ought to think about whatever they are called to think about.” He offers this epistemology as “a kind of recipe, a generic method, if not quite an algorithm, that Christians can use to consider whatever lies before them” (18). Based on his core conviction that God enables us to know truth sufficiently to do what God calls us to do, Stackhouse develops a critical realism that forms a middle ground between “radical, unobtainable certainty and radical, unendurable doubt” (20).

Stackhouse assumes it is “axiomatic that God does not call us to do something we cannot accomplish” (71). Similar to Kant’s claim that “ought implies can,” Stackhouse assumes that “vocation implies ability.” Because truth is essential to the ability to fulfill our vocation, vocation implies that God gives us, among other things, “grounds for confidence in human apprehension and comprehension of the world” (71). Stackhouse sums up his “critical realism” this way:

There is a world beyond myself, and a world beyond our communal description of it, and that world is accessible to us. It must be accessible to us, a Christian would affirm, or else we would not be able to fulfill our primary vocations. If we are to love God, we must have reliable apprehension of God. If we are to love our neighbors, we must truly know them such that we can care for them aright. And if we are to cultivate the rest of our planet, we must have extensive and reliable knowledge of it. Realism is entailed by the most fundamental tenets of our religion. (86)

Although sin disrupts human knowledge of reality, it does not so vitiate our noetic ability that we fall into radical doubt about our knowledge of truth. As Stackhouse sees it, this vocational basis for critical realism is “conspicuously lacking in so much modern epistemology” (71).

So what does God call humans to be and to do? Stackhouse speaks of our vocation in three ways: permanent, temporary, and particular. The primal and permanent human vocation is grounded in creation and directs human beings “to cultivate creation” as image bearers of God. Humans are called to love God, neighbors, and creation. The knowledge required for fulfilling what many call the “cultural mandate” is available to us. This

includes knowledge gained in various academic disciplines and arts, and through varied skills and practices.

Our temporary Christian vocation is to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the world and to make disciples. This vocation is redemptive of sinners who fail to love God, neighbors, and creation and so need the restorative Gospel. The Church is called to model and proclaim God's love for the world manifest in Jesus Christ. The epistemic implication of this vocation, per Stackhouse's axiom, is confidence that God gives the Church the knowledge it needs to accomplish this calling through the Holy Spirit and Special Revelation, mainly found in the Bible.

These two general vocations become actual for people in their particular callings. God calls individuals to all manner of occupations, spheres, and tasks—hotel managers, carpenters, pastors, professors, husbands, wives and all the rest. Humans fulfill their general callings concretely through their particular callings. As we fulfill these callings, we can have confidence that we have the reliable knowledge needed for fulfilling them.

The philosophical aspects of Stackhouse's epistemology are deeply shaped by Nicholas Wolterstorff, Alvin Plantinga, George Mavrodes, William Alston, and others who advance what is sometimes called "Reformed epistemology." He cites them frequently to support his own rejection of classical foundationalism, and his affirmation of having "warranted" beliefs as properly basic in one's noetic structure. He also shares their vision to think Christianly about every aspect of life and reality rather than to compartmentalize and privatize Christian faith. At a few key points he also relies heavily on John Locke's epistemology, particularly Locke's view of proportionate consent, the need for tolerance, and his claim that though we cannot have the absolute certainty Descartes sought, we can have enough knowledge to get along well in life.

Stackhouse develops a model highlighting the major resources for Christian thinking. Building upon the Wesleyan "quadrilateral," which identifies four sources and norms for Christian theology (scripture, tradition, experience, and reason), Stackhouse proposes a "pentalectic" that identifies five resources, not only for Christian theology, but for all Christian thinking. He defines this as "five-way conversation among our interpretations of experience, tradition, scholarship, art, and Scripture" (148). Though Scripture has primacy, the five sources should be seen as a "web" of complex, ongoing conversations. Christians should be open to new insights as these emerge from new interpretations of one or more of these sources. Truth gained from any of them is partial and ever in need of revision. We engage in the conversation among these resources through intuition, imagination, and reason.

For Stackhouse *experience* includes our senses, memories, self-awareness, mystical intuitions, and more (94). He says that experiential apprehension of the world is generally, but not always, reliable. *Tradition* includes the great minds, ideas, stories, and practices of the past. Since these are varied and often conflicting, Christian thinkers must scrutinize

them and creatively select and interpret aspects of tradition that will promote shalom and resist evil. *Scholarship* includes the deliverances of all academic disciplines. Christians need natural and social sciences, and humanities, if they are to fulfill their callings and “engage in a world of shalom-making” (107). The *arts* are also valuable resources for Christian thinking, since art-making “is a means of exploring and expressing what is, what is not, and what might be” (109).

Scripture is the most important resource for Christian thinking and living. The fundamental purpose of the Bible is to tell people what they need to know for salvation and to “train us in the patterns of right living—shalom-making—so that each Christian will be fully equipped to do excellent work in the world” (118). Though he rejects the view that the Bible is inerrant in every grammatical, historical, and scientific way, Stackhouse affirms the historical reliability of the basic contours of the Biblical account of God’s dealings with Israel and the Church. The Bible is “true” in the sense “never false, never deceptive, never misleading” in telling us “what we need to know and in the way we need to know it” (119). He notes in passing that not all Christian groups affirm that the Deuterocanonical or Apocryphal books are canonical, but he does not raise questions about the impact of this on the Bible as the most important resource for Christian thinking.

In his discussion of the primacy of scripture, Stackhouse should say more about how the scope of Biblical authority relates to where and how scripture is primary. For Wesley the primacy of scripture is in the discipline of theology. Scripture speaks with authority on what we need to know and do to be redeemed. It is less clear how and why scripture has primacy in non-theological disciplines or other aspects of Christian thinking. So if you are thinking about the age of the earth and the universe, the reasoned views of astronomers should weigh more heavily than scripture. Or if one wants to know how to build sound buildings, the reasoned views of trained engineers should reign—rather than, say, the Biblical instructions for how to build Solomon’s temple. Here classical distinctions between “nature and grace,” “two cities,” and “two kingdoms” helpfully delineate how and where scriptural revelation holds sway, on the one hand, and where reason prevails, on the other. Thus for Martin Luther, reason (not scripture) is queen in the temporal kingdom, but reason is utterly unreliable in the spiritual kingdom where scripture reigns supreme. Stackhouse would likely agree, but he should say more about how scripture is, and is not, primary among the five sources of Christian thinking.

Stackhouse says we gain knowledge from these five resources with three modes of apprehension. Firstly through *intuition*, which he says comes in every day forms of having a sense for what is true and in expert judgments based on professional experience. Here he also includes what Alvin Plantinga calls “properly basic beliefs” such as Calvin’s *sensus divinitatis* and Pascal’s “reasons of the heart.” Secondly *imagination* forms connections between our intuitions and the other resources in the

pentalectic conversation. Thirdly *reason* comprehends, evaluates, and organizes apprehensions from intuition, imagination, and the five resources for Christian thought. Contrary to rationalism, Stackhouse says reason remains “a humble worker . . . noticing, sorting, and arranging as best it can, according to the disciplines it has learned along the way and drawing on the right mode or modes of reasoning appropriate to the occasion, the materials presented to it moment by moment in the providence of God” (138).

Stackhouse highlights complexities in the interpretation and apprehension gained from the five resources of Christian thinking. These include social conditioning, brain neurology, and formative experiences that affect our intuition, imagination, and reasoning. Moreover, each of the five sources shapes our interpretations of the others. Martin Luther’s interpretation of scripture was profoundly influenced by his experience of forgiveness; that experience, in turn, was influenced by a new apprehension of a short section of scripture about justification by faith. Stackhouse searches for images, believing that the “hermeneutical circle” and “dialectic” among interpretations of experience, tradition, scholarship, arts, and scripture is too simple. “Thus the hermeneutical circle becomes a spiral, heading (one trusts) toward great apprehension of reality” (148). For Stackhouse, knowledge of truth is a complex web that continues to develop and progress. He challenges “well-meaning Christians” who think truth can be known “exactly, completely, and certainly” (146).

He grapples with postmodern critiques, learning from them but confidently affirming that there is a grand narrative—that of the Bible and Christian tradition. He takes seriously Thomas Kuhn’s work on “paradigm shifts” without falling into the epistemic relativism or skepticism that some use Kuhn’s work to support. He helpfully distinguishes “plausibility,” justifiable beliefs a rational person might affirm, from “credibility,” what beliefs out of the plausible ones I should affirm. He also proposes a hermeneutics of love as a counterbalance to a hermeneutics of suspicion (189). Love prompts communication, paying attention to others, giving the other the benefit of the doubt, and considering a change of mind.

The central axiom of the book, that God’s callings imply ability to know truths needed to fulfill them, is questionable in the call to faith and love. For Reinhold Niebuhr, and many Christian thinkers, God’s callings and commandments represent “impossible ideals” that bring about awareness of our sin and need of repentance. Jesus’s directives in the Sermon on the Mount, for example, seem to some beyond what is morally possible for sinful humans living in a fallen world. Stackhouse is careful to say that the knowledge needed to fulfill our callings is partial and always in need of revision. From this we might infer that fulfilling our callings is likewise fragmentary and in other ways imperfect. But problems remain, especially in the vocation to believe the good news and to love God with all one’s heart, soul, strength, and mind. As sinners, we resonate with the

apostle Paul's struggle: "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Romans 7:15). A deep Augustinian conviction is that we are in bondage to sin, and so not able to trust and love God unless God elects us and gives us the gift of faith, something God does not do for everyone. Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and many other leading theologians believe sinners are called to faith and love, but are not able to fulfill this calling without selectively given divine help.

This book does what it sets out to do, constructing a fruitful and useful model for Christian thinking. One of the valuable contributions of this book is the way it draws together central claims and insights of "Reformed epistemology" while placing them in a broader theological and intellectual context. Stackhouse uses postmodern sources well, learning from them without accepting the relativism and skepticism so often affirmed by postmodernists. The book synthesizes so many complex issues and sources that it falls short of the more thorough treatment one might want on fewer topics. But it does make many stimulating proposals that will reward further work.

Socrates and the Gods: How to Read Plato's Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito, by Nalin Ranasinghe. South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2012. 256 pages. \$28.00 (hardcover).

DOUGLAS V. HENRY, Great Texts Program, Baylor University

Books abound explaining how to read Plato's dialogues. By way of subtitle, Nalin Ranasinghe self-identifies his contribution within this niche. Yet unlike the others, *Socrates and the Gods* says far less than it shows about how to read the dialogues dramatizing Socrates's final weeks. That is, Ranasinghe devotes far less attention to self-conscious reflection on methodology than he does to practicing a method. Therein are bound together the book's central strengths as well as a besetting weakness.

Ranasinghe's interpretive method defies easy characterization. Partly this is due to the "proudly autochthonous" quality of the book (2). Further complicating matters is his "seemingly cavalier disregard of three and twenty centuries" of scholarship concerning the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Crito* (2). But even apart from these idiosyncracies, he simply fails to indicate straightforwardly his methodological commitments, an omission reflecting a pervasive rhetorical style given to enthymematic argument. In consequence, readers must work hard to identify his hermeneutic, his conclusions, and his reasons for them. While these deficits constitute frustrating liabilities for a "how to" book, no less is it the case that Ranasinghe's