

Carl F. H. Henry as Heir of Reformation Epistemology

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Conflatable Worldviews?

In recent years, it has become somewhat *en vogue* for evangelicals to engage in an increasing amount of self-deprecation. In a recent issue of *First Things*, the editor of the magazine, James Nuechterlein, reflected on the penchant that evangelicals seem to have for lament and self-criticism. Although Ralph Wood's review of Mark Noll's recent book on evangelicalism was specifically in view, Nuechterlein's comments were aimed at evangelicals in general. According to Nuechterlein, Ralph Woods of Baylor University bemoaned evangelicals' lack of ability "to embrace the ecclesial virtues of other Christian bodies, especially those of the [Roman] Catholic Church."¹ Nuechterlein, himself obviously sympathetic to much of Wood's critique, nonetheless observed,

The problem is that [Wood's] prescriptions call for, in effect, a squaring of the theological and ecclesial circle. . . . But all systems of thought, religious or otherwise, are partial. They are also all package deals. Their distinctive strengths come together with distinctive weaknesses. Neither in theology or anywhere else can we maximize all good things at once.

Prof. Wood wants an evangelicalism that will be at once individual and communal, fully engaged with the culture, and yet distinct from it, authentically Protestant and authentically Catholic. He wants, in short, an evangelicalism that will no longer be distinctly evangelical—even as he wants a Billy Graham who would no longer be Billy Graham. We cannot blend incommensurable qualities.²

¹ James Nuechterlein, "Evangelical and Catholic Together?" *First Things* (October 2001: 8).

² *Ibid.*, 9.

Nuechterlein's observations hit the mark. And they stung. They stung because they revealed so much about the identity crisis within evangelicalism, and about the ways in which we are constantly looking over our collective shoulders, doubting ourselves and our theological tradition. Now, at times, lament is certainly an appropriate theme, and clearly it can be done well. But I'm afraid that such persistent self-critical navel-gazing discourages a new generation of young evangelicals about resources of our own tradition, and leaves them especially susceptible to any other thoughtful alternative systems. And so in the last two decades evangelicals have witnessed a steady stream of defections from the camp to other groups within the broader Christian communion. In the mid 1980s, evangelicals lost Peter Gilchrist and a cadre of former Campus Crusade workers who sought the mysteries and compelling liturgy of Eastern Orthodoxy. Many evangelicals heaved collective sighs of either relief or sadness when we lost, variously, filmmaker/author Franky Schaeffer (son of Francis!), writer Frederica Mathews-Green, and journalist Terry Mattingly to the East as well. Additionally, theologian Robert Webber informed us of the many Wheaton students who were leaving the thoroughfare of evangelicalism to merge onto the Canterbury trail.³ And then, of course, there are the string of converts to Roman Catholicism, beginning, most notably of course, with Richard John Neuhaus, who was subsequently followed by Thomas Howard, Michael P. Shea, Scott Hahn, and many others.

This is not to say that there are not problems within the evangelical communion. There are many. If we wanted to open up the can, we could pass around the proverbial can opener. ETS alone could consume itself with various kinds of screeds, both

³ Robert Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail : Why Evangelicals Are Attracted to the Liturgical Church* (Waco, TX: Word Books 1985).

theoretical and practical. But increasingly evangelical arrows are aimed at the wrong places. In our various dirges, we may sometimes give way to a tacit critique of Protestantism as a whole. But evangelicals must remind themselves of the glorious advances which were secured as a result of the Reformation and its heirs. Our shortcomings are often the result of an abandonment of the presuppositions which once made evangelicalism great. As Os Guinness, Senior Fellow of the Trinity Forum, accurately observed,

At the heart of the Reformation was an insistence on the utter dependability of God and an unrelenting protest against any absolutizing of the created, the relative, and the purely human. . . . Protestant and evangelical are two faces of the same truth. Protestant is the critical stance of evangelicalism, just as evangelical is the positive content of Protestantism.⁴

Unfortunately, as Guinness concludes, “Yet the Protestant principle is weak in American evangelicalism today.”⁵ Yes, the church desperately needs reform. But this is precisely why I am glad to be an evangelical, whose very name is derived from the work of the Protestant Reformers; for it was they who challenged the medieval abuses of the church, both theological and practical, by urging a return to the word of God alone.

The Unwitting Reformation?

But in addition to the more overt kinds of self-deprecation, another kind of internecine poor-mouthing persists among evangelicals. This kind comes from our own evangelical cultural analysts who, in their attempt to explain what has gone wrong with the modern world, lay much blame (albeit without much fanfare) at the doorstep of

⁴ Os Guinness, “Introduction,” in *No God But God* ed. Os Guinness and John Seel (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Renaissance humanism in general and the Protestant Reformation in particular. Here's how the story goes. During the High Middle Ages, scholastic theology had achieved a glorious philosophical and cultural hegemony which served as the glue which held Christendom together. At the center of this hegemony lay the philosophy of Aristotle, as interpreted by St. Thomas, with its inherently teleological structure. This teleology gave the universe, and particularly human beings, a sense of place and interpretive scheme for understanding the world, a great chain of being into which everything fit. This epistemology was known as the *Via Antiqua* (old path) (read also here scholasticism and Aristotelian reason) and under its pedagogical gaze Christendom flourished and all was right with the world. With trusty guides such as Aristotle, St. Thomas, Duns Scotus, and Peter Lombard, one could glory in a culture produced by and for the Church. This epistemology offered a very tidy unified field of knowledge.

But one day, a philosophical disruption ruined Christendom's cultural and philosophical paradise when the scholastic theologian William of Occam (cue the villain music here) began questioning the medieval philosophical synthesis, and suggested a different course. This perspective was subsequently dubbed the *Via Moderna* or nominalism. Occam dissented from Thomism and basically claimed that St. Thomas had actually gotten Aristotle wrong. One need not, Occam allowed, divine some inherent teleological structure to the physical world in order to understand it. Rather, one could go to the particular things themselves and learn how that thing, in fact, worked. As a result, early modern thinkers like Francis Bacon, influenced by Occam, eventually said that if you wanted to understand what made a frog tick, you need not figure out where the frog fit in a universal scale of perfection – where the frog fit in the great chain of being –

and think your work was done. No, to understand the frog and its systems, you *dissect the frog*. The world is made up of particulars, Occam observed, and particulars alone. Contrary to St. Thomas' interpretation, Occam claimed that he rightly understood Aristotle.

Modern commentators largely agree on this point. As Luther scholar Bernard Lohse concludes, "Occam has often been charged with epistemological skepticism. But he merely applied the Aristotelian scientific principle more critically than other thinkers."⁶ Further, Occam taught, if you want to understand the universe, you need not guess at some mysterious teleology behind things that is somehow simply given and simple to figure out. Rather, things are the way they are simply because God has willed them to be that way, an idea which has come to be known as voluntarism. Due to this truth, the universe can be studied and understood on its own merits without constantly giving reference to all of the complexities of Aristotelian physics. Hence, Occam developed his law of parsimony, most commonly referred to as the "razor," which states that entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity. Occam's razor effectively made modern scientific inquiry as we know it possible, and precipitated huge advances in our understanding of the natural world. Jacques Barzun gives but one example of Occam's razor applied. He states:

William of Occam's principle of economy, that the best explanation is the one that calls for the least number of assumptions, was an argument against Ptolemy, in addition to the awkward facts. It impelled Copernicus to revise—not destroy—the system, by supposing the sun to be the center instead of the Earth. He was thereby able to reduce the epicycles from 84 to 30.⁷

⁶ Bernard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 18.

⁷ Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), 192.

Occam's thought effectively caused a split within medieval scholarship and precipitated a new school of philosophy which emphasized the freedom of the will of God in creation more than its predecessors. In other words, the nominalists/voluntarists said that the universe exists in its present form simply because God wills it to be that way, in accordance with God's own nature. And it was *this* idea which attracted a young Augustinian monk named Martin Luther, and, perhaps in a more indirect way, a French humanist named John Calvin. How do we know what the world is all about? We must go to the will of God. And how do we know the will of God? By reading Aristotle? The Church Fathers? St. Thomas? To the contrary, God reveals his will to those whom he wills, and he does this most preeminently in his Word. Only by the grace of God do we understand the full truth about ourselves and about the world. In the spirit of Paul's words to the Corinthians, the Christian worldview seems like foolishness to the worldly wise and nonsense to many religionists (1 Cor. 1:18-25). As Luther declaimed in his own inimitable way at the Heidelberg Disputation, "one cannot philosophize well unless he is a fool, that is, a Christian." And, "He who wishes to philosophize by using Aristotle without danger to his soul must first become thoroughly foolish in Christ."⁸ For his part, Calvin headed off the notion that a study of the particulars could be an end in and of themselves. The creation should be studied in consonance with what is revealed in Scripture if we want to understand the world in which we live. For as Calvin commented, "Therefore, however fitting it may be for man seriously to turn his eyes to

⁸ Martin Luther, *Luther's Basic Theological Writings* ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989, 32.

contemplate God's works, since he has been placed in this most glorious theater to be a spectator of them, it is fitting that he prick up his ears to the Word, the better to profit."⁹

Understandably, Thomists expressed displeasure at the new configuration of the philosophical landscape, and have been understandably complaining about it ever since. Unfortunately for Occam and the Reformers, their critics have only increased in number in recent years. In addition to his Thomist and Roman Catholic detractors, Occam and the residue of voluntarism in the Reformation draw the fire and ire of evangelical philosophers and those who have inspired recent evangelical philosophy. The list includes many writers I greatly admire, including, variously, Richard Weaver, Arthur Holmes, William Dembski, Craig Gay and others.¹⁰ All of these point to Occam and the Reformers as the either witting or unwitting fountainhead for all of the subsequent problems of modern (and now postmodern) philosophy. As Richard Weaver breathlessly (and quite peremptorily concludes) in *Ideas Have Consequences*, "It was William of Occam who propounded the fateful doctrine of nominalism, which denies that universals have a real existence. . . . the practical result of nominalist philosophy is to banish the reality which is perceived by the intellect and to posit as reality that which is perceived by the senses."¹¹ By focusing on the particulars apart from the traditional medieval synthesis, Occam, or so Weaver and others charge, precipitated an unhelpful empirical

⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.6.2.

¹⁰ See for example, William A. Dembski, *Intelligent Design* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 110ff; Craig Gay, *The Way of the Modern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 65ff, 237-270; Arthur Holmes, *Fact, Value, and God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 68ff.

¹¹ Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 3.

turn in philosophy which gave birth to the subjective turn in philosophy with whose bitter fruit we are still dealing today. Further, these authors intimate that because the Protestant Reformers broadly followed the *Via Moderna* (i.e. nominalism as opposed to the old medieval realism), they are unwitting accomplices in the demise of the West. If only the poor Reformers would have known better, some say, perhaps we may have never gotten to Nietzsche. As the prolific Thomist Ralph McInerny forthrightly, if viciously, condemns, “It is not just a well-turned phrase that modern philosophy is the Reformation carried on by other means. Most of the major figures are Protestant or apostate or both. Luther’s attack on reason and his Manichean split between nature and grace poisoned the well of thinking.”¹²

There is, no doubt, some explanatory power to this analysis. Clearly *something* went wrong in the modern period. Modernity gave way to modernism. To offer a biblical allusion, the Thomist, the Calvinist, and the Postmodernist can all lie down and let a little child lead them together on that issue. But to suggest that the blame and bane of modernism as we now know it is to be laid at the feet of the Reformers, is, quite frankly, ludicrous. That notion lacks a serious amount of perspective and two-dimensionalizes intellectual history in an unhelpful way. Although it lies beyond the purview of the present paper to offer a thoroughgoing response to these charges, allow me to suggest three observations.

First, as far as Occam himself is concerned, Occam did not deny the existence of universals quite in the way he is often taken to have done. Rather, as far as I can deduce,

¹² Ralph McInerny, *A Student’s Guide to Philosophy* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1999), 25.

Occam feared positing universals in a way similar to Platonism, universal ideas which superceded even God. In other words, Occam wanted the biblical God who creates *ex nihilo*, not the demi-urge-like craftsman Plato suggests in *The Timaeus*.¹³ This is why, for instance, Occam claimed to be the true heir of Aristotle. Occam did not deny the objectivity of truth, he simply cautioned against adding a fourth or possibly more transcendental(s) or hypostasis(es) than the one God in three persons. To do that would be to commit heresy. As philosopher Ernest A. Moody stated, “Insofar as Ockham is called a nominalist, his doctrine is not to be construed as a rejection of *any* ontological determination of meaning and truth, but rather as an extreme economy of ontological commitment in which abstract or intensional extralinguistic entities are systematically eliminated by logical analysis.”¹⁴ [emphasis mine]

A second reply to the charges against Occam and the Reformation listed above include the fact that Luther and Calvin were hardly faithful or slavish followers of nominalism as it developed throughout the remainder of the scholastic period. Luther’s *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*, for example, is replete with references to Luther’s significant and sizeable disagreements with Occam and Gabriel Biel, ostensibly Occam’s most famous disciple.¹⁵ Specifically, Luther and Calvin chafed at the

¹³ Plato’s cosmology and theology are contained in his dialogue, *Timaeus*, available in *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. 2, trans. B. Jowett (New York: Random House, 3-70).

¹⁴ Ernest A. Moody, “William of Ockham,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 8, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: The Macmillan Company and The Free Press, 1967; reprint, 1972), 307.

¹⁵ For example, thesis 56 reads, “It is not true that God can accept man without his justifying grace. This is in opposition to Ockham.” Cf. Luther, *Basic Theological Writings*, 17.

Pelagianism of the writings of the Scholastics in general and Occam in particular. Still, the Reformers certainly appreciated Occam's work insofar as it emphasized the sovereignty of God over his creation. Stated differently, while interchangeable terms, the Reformers focused on the concept of "voluntarism" (i.e. God's will) as an appropriate critique of the medieval synthesis over and against "nominalism" – a philosophy which certainly did take an unexpected, modern turn. The truth of voluntarism points humanity to our absolute dependence upon divine revelation for true understanding about both God and the created order. The world as we know it is so because God, who never changes, declares it to be so. In his brilliant introduction to Luther's *Bondage of the Will*, J. I. Packer beautifully sums up the ethos of the epistemology of the Reformation. Packer writes,

[Luther's] unflagging polemic against the abuse of reason has often been construed as an assault on the very idea of rational coherence in theology, whereas in fact it is aimed only at the ideal of rational autonomy and self-sufficiency in theology—the ideal of philosophers and scholastic theologians, to find out and know God by the use of their own unaided reason. It was in her capacity as the prompter and agent of natural theology that "Mistress Reason" was in Luther's eyes, the Devil's whore; for natural theology is, he held, blasphemous in principle, and bankrupt in practice. It is blasphemous in principle, because it seeks to snatch from God a knowledge of Himself which is not his gift, but man's achievement— a triumph of human brain power; thus it would feed man's pride, and exalt him above his Creator, as one who could know God at pleasure, whether or not God willed to be known by him. Thus natural theology appears as one more attempt on man's part to implement the programme which he espoused in his original sin—to deny his creaturehood, and deify himself, and deal with God henceforth on an independent footing. But natural theology is bankrupt in practice, for it never brings devotees of God; instead it leaves them stranded in a quaking morass of insubstantial speculation. Natural theology leads men away from the Divine Christ, and from Scripture, the cradle in which he lies, and from the *theologia crucis*, the gospel doctrine which Christ sets forth. But it is only through Christ that God wills to be known and gives saving knowledge of

himself.¹⁶

A third point in response to the criticism of the Reformation as the fulcrum upon which modernism pivoted is that Renaissance humanism and late medieval scholasticism contributed much, if not more to the rise of modernity as did the Reformation, and it did so largely under the auspices of Rome's blessing and supervision. History is not so easily compartmentalized. The results of the collective efforts of humanism, the Reformation, and the Counter-Reformation helped to give rise to modern science as we know it today. The change was inevitable. Fourteenth and fifteenth century intellectuals realized increasingly that certain crucial elements of Aristotelianism could not be rehabilitated. Craig Gay of Regent College, at least a partial supporter of "the Reformation opened up a modernistic Pandora's box" theory, nonetheless qualifies his discussion of the matter with the following candid observation:

It is important to stress . . . that, quite apart from the actual impossibility of turning the clock back, the attempt to reconstitute the medieval social order would not be a very good idea . . . In the first place Aristotelian science is simply not believable any more. Even more significantly, attempting to revitalize Aristotelian teleology by way of Aquinas would not really solve the problem of human individuality and creativity. Whatever the Aristotelian "god" is, it is not personal, and the Aristotelian system does not permit any real space for human freedom and creativity. Indeed, even modern scientific nominalism allows more latitude for personal agency than medieval (Aristotelian) science did.¹⁷

¹⁶ J. I. Packer, "Historical and Theological Introduction," in Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1957), 45-6.

¹⁷ Gay, *The Way of the Modern World*, 278-9. The context for Gay's comments here relate to a theology of personhood. His consideration of the *imago dei* includes definition an ontological definition of person which this author found compelling.

Carl F. H. Henry: Faithful Heir of Reformation Epistemology

Returning to James Nuechterlein's query toward evangelicals as to whether we can see our way to remain authentically evangelical, I say yes we can. But to do this we must begin with the epistemology of the Reformers and their dogged, untiring insistence that human beings rely, as Luther once put it, "upon the poor tokens of the Word of God alone." But the Reformation happened so long ago, and evangelicals have since lost their way, both philosophically and theologically. Further, the Reformers never considered the conditions of modernity as must we. To whom can we turn? Although many worthies might be offered, as the title of *this* paper indicates, I suggest that evangelicals turn once more to the model set forth by Carl F. H. Henry, a man who inherited the epistemology of the Reformers, and faithfully applied it to the challenges of modernity. Henry considered the respective trajectories of fundamentalism, liberal theology, and neo-Thomism, and unstintingly found them wanting in the light of a Reformed theological perspective historically, but also lacking theologically in the gaze of a distinctly Hebrew-Christian worldview. To Henry's level of vision and engagement we would do well to return again, specifically taking into account his full corpus of written work. As Paul House so eloquently has argued recently, Henry's early work especially is impressive in its scope and consideration of the issues. If you have not done so, I would encourage to read such early Henry volumes as *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, *Remaking the Modern Mind*, *The Protestant Dilemma*, and *The Drift of Western Thought* which engage then contemporary scholarship with an ability which reminds us why the early neo-evangelicals gained the attention of the broader culture.

Henry espoused a Reformation-inspired voluntarism in the best sense of the term. He stressed the absolute dependence of human knowledge upon divine disclosure, whether natural or particular. In other words, according to Henry, we know what we know, because God wills both the possibility and the content of that knowledge. Henry came to these views early on in his theological career, and never wavered. Defining “the Christian Revelation-Claim” Henry wrote,

In a sense, all knowledge may be viewed as revelational, since meaning is not imposed upon things by the human knower alone, but rather is made possible because mankind and the universe are the work of a rational Deity, who fashioned an intelligible creation. Human knowledge is not a source of knowledge to be contrasted with revelation, but is a means of comprehending revelation. . . . Thus God, by his immanence, sustains the human knower, even in his moral and cognitive revolt, and without that divine preservation, ironically enough, man could not even rebel against God, for he would not exist. Augustine, early in the Christian centuries, detected what was implied in this conviction that human reason is not the creator of its own object; neither the external world of sensation nor the internal world of ideas is rooted in subjectivistic factors alone.¹⁸

Thus God circumscribes and determines what can be known. Nonetheless, the world remains knowable because God himself is an intelligent Deity. Contrary to the trajectory of rationalism, no autonomous standard for reason can be offered since reason itself loses meaning apart from the divine character. Since the Divine discloses himself as person, revelation is personal in nature and can therefore speak to all of humanity. Consequently, revelation both coheres and corresponds to reality because God is one. It is not a truism to say therefore that divine revelation is communication which we can trust. Thus, as Henry declares, “*Only* the fact that the one sovereign God, the Creator and

¹⁸ Carl F. H. Henry, *The Drift of Western Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 104.

Lord of all, stands at the center of divine disclosure, guarantees a unified divine revelation.”¹⁹

Every condition of knowledge (i.e. justified true belief), therefore, stems from an allowance of either common or particular grace to the end that we live in the world God has actually created and glorify the agent of said creation, even Jesus Christ. In an address before an emerging evangelical audience at Soong Sil University in Seoul, South Korea in 1987, Henry summarized his views thus:

The Christian ontological axiom is the living, self-revealed God. The Christian epistemological axiom is the intelligible divine revelation. All the essential doctrines of the Christian world-life view flow from these axioms: creation, sin, and the fall; redemption, by promise and fulfillment; the incarnation, substitutionary death and resurrection of the Logos; the church as the new society; the approaching divine consummation of history; the eschatological verities.²⁰

Certainly the most programmatic exposition of Henry’s Reformation-inspired epistemology comes from the panoramic *God, Revelation, and Authority*, Henry’s six volume magnum opus which is often alluded to, but seldom read with patience. The fifteen theses spell out in brief what Henry delivers in detail throughout volumes two and three of GRA. In thesis five in particular, Henry happily shows his voluntaristic colors:

5. Not only the occurrence of divine revelation, but also its very nature, content, and variety are exclusively of God’s determination.

God determines not only the *if* and *why* of divine disclosure, but also the *when, where, what, how, and who*. If there is to be a general revelation—a revelation universally given in nature, in history, and in the reason and conscience of every man—then that is God’s decision. If there is to be a special or particular revelation, that, too, is God’s decision and his alone. Only because God so wills it is there a cosmic-anthropological revelation. It is solely because of divine

¹⁹ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol.2: *God Who Speaks and Shows* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1976), 9.

²⁰ Carl F. H. Henry, *gods of This Age, or God of the Ages?* ed. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994), 209.

determination, Paul reminds us, that “that which may be known of God is manifest . . . for God hath shewed it . . . For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead. (Rom. 1:19-20, KJV) It is solely by God’s own determination that he reveals himself universally in the history of the nations and in the ordinary course of human events. He is nowhere without a witness (Acts 14:17) and is everywhere active either in grace or judgment.²¹

With these words, Henry modeled a flowering of the Augustinian/Reformation perspective with a clarity rarely matched in modern evangelical theology. What we know, Henry avers, we know because God wants us to know it. In this sense, then, Henry defies the sort of foundationalist label with which some have recently attempted to place upon him, a trend which began when Hans Frei responded to Henry’s critique of narrative theology. Unfortunately for the Henry legacy, the impression stuck and has been repeated by other postliberal writers such as George Hunsinger.²² Certainly, evangelical neo-Thomists such as Norman Geisler, R.C. Sproul, and Douglas Geivett would be surprised to say the least that Henry is somehow a co-belligerent with them in the realm of foundationalist apologetics and epistemology. For Henry, there is no neutral, antiseptic path to knowledge. Knowledge, properly defined in the way Henry defines it, is both permitted and circumscribed by God himself. In Kuyperian fashion, Henry avers that all knowledge owes its origin to God who speaks and shows.

²¹ Henry, GRA, vol. 2, 9-10.

²² For example, see, variously, Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992), 84; Carl F. H. Henry, “Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal, *Trinity Journal* 8 n.s. (1987): 3-19; and George Hunsinger, “What Can Evangelicals and Postliberals Learn from Each Other? The Carl Henry-Hans Frei Exchange Reconsidered,” in Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis Ockholm, ed. *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation* (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996): 134-150.

Henry's doctrine of creation is not, further, deficient on the grounds that it does not appropriate natural theology. On the contrary, Henry distinguishes between general revelation and natural theology. Henry gladly affirms the fact that God speaks in and through creation, but he rightly reminds us that general revelation remains precisely that – revelation. And yet for this very reason, Christians have a genuine and meaningful point of contact with the nonbelieving world simply because we all benefit, whether witting or unwitting, from God's rational self-disclosure whether in creation, or most preeminently in his written word. If anything, this principle explains simply Henry's longstanding gripe with the epistemology of Karl Barth. When Barth argued that the *imago dei* was obliterated in the Fall, Henry repeatedly retorted that Barth summarily closed down the conduit through which God speaks to human beings, whether regenerate or not. Recent attempts to rehabilitate Barth's legacy on this point in particular and on revelation in general have not yet explained satisfactorily – at least in this author's estimation – to anyone still appreciative of Henry's withering critique of neo-orthodoxy how Barth's acceptance of Kant's radical phenomenal-noumenal distinction can produce a worldview which simultaneously engages and yet challenges the prevailing secular culture.²³ In sum, as British evangelical theologian Peter Hicks concurs, "Henry's central thesis is that *God reveals and speaks*. There is no reason why we should limit God to one form of revelation (through either a person or a book, through either encounter or concept). God reveals and speaks in a number of ways, in his creation, in general

²³ For example, see Bruce McCormack's recent paper, "Is Barth Really the Bad Guy After All? Barth's Doctrine of Scripture Reconsidered," Paper Presented Before the Wheaton Theology Conference, March, 2001. To a lesser extent, a similar approach is undertaken by Stanley Hauerwas in *With the Grain of the Universe* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001).

revelation, and supremely in Christ, the incarnate Word. But, additionally and foundationally, he is able to formulate and communicate truth in an epistemic word, in which he articulates truth verbally through ‘intelligible disclosure; and this, in sovereign grace, he has chosen to do.’²⁴

Recently, in a spate of books on the future of evangelical theology, an array of authors have criticized Henry’s emphasis and insistence upon propositional revelation in verbal-conceptual form. Although a thorough consideration of the relative merits of Henry’s contribution in that area lie beyond the purview of this essay, a passing word might note that some of the treatments of Henry’s work border on caricature. For example, in *Evangelical Futures*, Alister McGrath condemns Henry’s understanding of revelation to be “purely prepositional” (McGrath’s words, not mine) and slavish to Enlightenment rationalism.²⁵ While Henry certainly takes the position that thought is not possible without words, McGrath’s statement overlooks Henry’s own words and clear position that “in both general and special revelation—in nature and in history, in the mind and conscience of man, in written Scriptures, and in Jesus of Nazareth, God has disclosed himself.”²⁶ Such sentiments seem, at least in the estimation of this author, potentially square-able with McGrath’s own recent emphasis on the history of redemption. What is much less certain, however, is whether McGrath’s recent move toward narrative theology maintains the theological boundaries which propositional revelation provides. When considering Henry’s contribution, the danger for evangelicals is this: in the rush to

²⁴ Peter Hicks, *Evangelicals and Truth* (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1998), 89-90.

²⁵ Alister McGrath, “Engaging the Great Tradition,” in *Evangelical Futures*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 150.

²⁶ Henry, *GRA*, vol. 2, 10.

dismiss the particular contours of Henry's definition of revelation, one might lose something important about Henry's *disposition* toward theology – something which is distinctly Protestant. And that distinctive includes no less than the following: that God and God alone is the source and dispenser of all wisdom and knowledge, and that God himself determines the bounds and limits of all true knowledge. In some ways, one might say that Henry poses the following fundamental question to evangelicals today: is the truth the truth because God wills it to be the case and reveals it to human beings? If so, do you *trust* God to decide what human beings can know? Before answering that question with an “of course,” one must revisit one's epistemological commitments.

As recently as 1995, Carl Henry was still holding forth articulately for a Reformation worldview in the pages of *First Things* in his straightforward article, “Natural Law and a Nihilistic Culture.” Essentially, Henry dropped a plumb line before his readers in a refreshingly direct way. Choose ye this day, he seems to say, which epistemology you will serve: natural law or divine revelation. For his part, Henry casts his lot with the Reformation.

The greatest appeal of natural law theory lies in the claim that it mirrors universally shared norms and moral principles that lift humanity above modern subjectivism and relativism. Yet the Reformers in principle questioned the epistemic viability of natural law theory, whether stated in pre-Christian Greco-Roman terms or on premises pursued by Thomas Aquinas. The Reformers do have a doctrine of transcendent and universal morality, but it is based upon different foundations. Upon the resolution of this conflict may well turn the moral fortunes of the Western world, and beyond that, ultimately, the planet.²⁷

²⁷ Carl F. H. Henry, “Natural Law and a Nihilistic Culture,” *First Things* 49 (January 1995): 55-60. [database online: available at: <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9501/articles/henry.html>; accessed on 2/26/02.

Given *First Things* primary audience, Henry's argument hardly won for "most beloved article of the year." Nevertheless, Henry continues to this day on the Editorial Advisory Board of the journal. One wonders whether Henry, now in his 89th year, is the last authentic Evangelical Protestant Richard John Neuhaus and James Nuechterlein could find.