

A Critical Appraisal of a Non-Realist Philosophy of Religion

An Asian Perspective

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The Philosophy of Religion: A Critical Introduction. By Beverley Clack and Brian R. Clack. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998. 224 pages. \$29.95.

Beverley Clack and Brian R. Clack are brothers, both British scholars in the field of philosophy and religious studies. This book is a protest to the realist approach adopted by most contemporary introductions to the philosophy of religion, and a defense of non-realist approaches exemplified by authors such as Don Cupitt and Stewart Sutherland. (On the back cover, Cupitt writes that this book is "just the thing for getting beginners involved with the subject.") Cupitt is quite influential in England. Especially after he has presented a BBC television series, *The Sea of Faith*, he has attracted quite a few followers. Now there exists a group, called "Sea of Faith," which has about seven hundred members in the United Kingdom, among which are fifty vicars and some Roman Catholic priests (often called "Godless vicars" and "atheist priests.") The group draws on several denominations and also other religions, but what binds the members together is the shared view that religion is a human creation.¹

The Clack brothers are dissatisfied with the traditional approach to the philosophy of religion which, they think, "offers a rather limited perspective on the nature and scope of religions and their practice" (7).² It is preoccupied with seeking *explanations* (and possibly justifications) for religious belief, and religious belief is seen as "one hypothesis among many... Religion here

¹ "The Vicars Who Don't Believe in God," BBC news, 13 July 1999.

² All in-text references are to the Clack and Clack book under discussion.

becomes something cool and dispassionate, in its essence something divorced from our emotions" (188). In contrast, they think that "religious systems are more like frames of orientation; they may express deep-felt emotions about the human condition; or they may be systems for self-reflection and assessment, rather than theoretical explanations of this world and the human life within it" (5). So they think philosophers of religion should center "on the human dimension of religion," and show that "religion can be meaningful if given a human focus, and that the philosophy of religion can be exciting if pursued in a creative way" (ix). This is deemed necessary because we are now living in a changed world, a secularized world: "Our aim is to take on board the changed situation in which we find ourselves, and to seek an understanding of religion appropriate to the modern age.... embracing the reality of secularization ... may ... suggest a future direction for the understanding and practice of religion, and, consequently, for the shape of the philosophy of religion" (169-70). The future of religion lies in the development of a non-realist approach to religion for secularized people with a vestige of religious sentiment.

While the authors lament the fact that most introductions to the philosophy of religion are apologetic exercises which advocate a prior theological commitment, clearly their book is another apologetic exercise for their own prior commitment, a non-realist approach to religion. I think it is worthwhile for the realist philosophers of religion to engage with their ideas. In this way, we can understand the non-realist approach better, and promote mutual understanding. For example, Clack and Clack's clear account shows that there are three main planks of support for the non-realist approach:

1. A philosophical thesis: traditional theism is an intellectually lost cause. In this book, Clack and Clack conclude that natural theology fails, and the challenges to theism are on the whole successful.
2. A sociological thesis: the secularization thesis is true and traditional religion is on the way out.
3. A theological thesis: religion is best understood as the expression of the creative impulses of human beings.

These three planks need one another to provide a secure basis for a non-realist philosophy of religion. The sociological thesis of secularization gives this approach a kind of necessity and urgency.³ The philosophical thesis is used to provide partial explanation of the inevitability of secularization. Furthermore, it gives the alleged sociological necessity an aura of rational justifiability. Finally, the theological thesis shows that the non-realist philosophy of religion is spiritually satisfying, and that the abandonment of traditional theism incurs no genuine loss from the religious perspective. If all

³ Don Cupitt also dwells upon this thesis at length in the beginning of his book *The Sea of Faith: Christianity in Change* (London: BBC, 1984).

these theses were compelling, the non-realist approach would indeed be the only way out for religious people.

I argue below, with reference to Clack and Clack's discussions, that neither the sociological thesis nor the theological thesis is in fact compelling. I will not say much about their philosophical thesis. I just assume that it is far from unchallengeable.⁴

On the Sociological Thesis: Is Secularization Really Inevitable?

As Clack and Clack point out, "In advanced, industrialized societies such as ours, the status of religion has been drastically undermined.... The process of secularization is one in which religion loses its social significance" (169). For example, the "declining number of people regularly attending church services attest to the process of secularization" (170). Secularization also involves the privatization of religious belief. The consequence is that even the religious people do not care whether their belief is orthodox from the Church's viewpoint. The rise of contemporary paganism and revisions of religion as proposed by Cupitt and the feminist theologians are also aspects of secularization (170). The underlying impetus for secularization is basically the disenchantment of the world caused by the growth of science (171).

Clack and Clack enthusiastically endorse intellectual secularization. They believe that their book has shown that "consideration of the philosophical approach to religion reveals significant difficulties with the habitual way in which the nature and function of religion is understood within a western context. The arguments for the existence of God, as traditionally formulated, raise more problems for theism than they are meant to solve" (172). They also affirm "the strength of the arguments against philosophical

⁴ I have written detailed criticisms of Clack and Clack's treatment of natural theology but they cannot be included here due to limitation of space. I indicate briefly why their treatment is far from adequate. First, they write as if the past fifty years of development of philosophy of religion had not happened at all. For example, they fail to mention the *kalam* cosmological argument, the Intelligent Design movement, and the anthropic design argument. While Clack and Clack manage to mention Swinburne, Alston and Plantinga a few times, they seem to have no real understanding of the rationales behind Swinburne's and Alston's epistemology of religious experience, and Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology. Second, their treatment of the objections to theism (e.g., the naturalistic theories of religion) is largely uncritical. On the whole, their book seems anachronistic: the appeal to Findlay's ontological disproof which Findlay has later recanted, the endorsement of logical positivism which has been widely discredited, the acceptance of Humean criticisms of the design argument as final, and so on. Anyway, I believe it would not be difficult for the readers of this journal to find a more satisfactory treatment.

theism" (173), and they think that "we may no longer have recourse to a fully systematized and coherent theology" (188).⁵ It follows that if

religion is to be equated with worship of a divine being, a diminishment in its influence and validity seems increasingly likely. Against the backdrop of *a society which defines itself as secular* and thus rejects the idea that humans can transcend the physical world, belief in the theist's God becomes evermore untenable. From a philosophical perspective, the theist's case is far from unassailable; indeed, it could be argued that the paucity of evidence for the theist's God makes the rejection of such an account of religion inevitable. (172-73; italics mine).

We can see from the above that the philosophical thesis and the sociological thesis are closely intertwined. As I have indicated, the philosophical thesis is far from unproblematic. However, due to space limitation, I focus the attention on the sociological thesis in this essay.⁶ It seems to me their whole perspective is skewed: Euro-centric and academy-oriented. Despite their awareness of the Western bias in traditional philosophy of religion, they do not seem to understand that the secularization thesis seems self-evident only from a Western (and European in particular) perspective. As a famous secularization theorist, Peter Berger, acknowledges, the only places where the secularization thesis holds true are Europe and the academy, and "the rest of the world is as furiously religious as ever, and possibly more so."⁷ Later, Berger plainly admitted that his secularization theory was mistaken.⁸

In particular, there is no long term decline in the number of people attending church services in the United States⁹ and many Asian or African countries. Perhaps even the current trend of secularization in the United Kingdom might be reversed if the growth of charismatic and evangelical churches continue. As an Asian, I would like to testify to the enormous growth of Christianity in Korea and China, etc. Christianity was first brought to Korea in 1884 by H. N. Allen, a medical doctor, and the first church was established in 1885. During a century of rapid modernization,

⁵ This claim is contradicted by a stream of books on systematic theology in recent years. Perhaps they are not ultimately coherent but this needs to be shown rather than assumed.

⁶ Their discussions of the secularization theory are quite brief. The authors seem to be so confident of the secularization thesis that they do not bother to provide substantial evidence for it at all.

⁷ Peter Berger, *A Far Glory: The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 32.

⁸ Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 2.

⁹ See Andrew Greeley, *Religious Change in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); idem, *Religion as Poetry* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995).

Christianity has also experienced tremendous growth. Now 20-25% of the Korean population are Protestants, and around 4% Catholics.¹⁰ In mainland China, according to the government's statistics in 1992, the number of Christians reaches 63 million, more than sixty times the figure in 1949. (We also need to bear in mind the fact that the government did not count those Christians in the underground churches.) During this period, the population of China has increased by only 150%.¹¹

The secularization theory does not fit the Latin American situation either. After surveying a vast amount of data, a Latin American sociologist concludes that "while a certain percentage of the population is influenced by secularizing currents ... this phenomenon occurs rather as a mere counter-current to the central trend. The central trend ... consists, on the one side, of the persistence, however eroded, of Catholicism and, on the other, of the growth of new religious expressions of various kinds, especially among the Latin American popular masses."¹²

I am not denying the impact of modernization but I dispute the claim that its effects on religion are inevitable or uniform. The facts seem to show that they are not. Modernization is compatible with a revival of traditional religion, revision of religion, and outright atheism. Despite Clack and Clack's claim that it would be too difficult for modern people to believe in a transcendent God, the statistics about *modern* people, who exist in the real world instead of the imagination of the secularization theorists, tell otherwise. The majority of Westerners still believe in a transcendent God. In countries like Ireland and the United States, believers in God constitute the overwhelming majority of the population. Moreover, as Berger says, "by and large, religious communities have survived and even flourished to the degree that they have not tried to adapt themselves to the alleged requirements of a secularized world ... experiments with secularized religion have generally failed; religious movements with beliefs and practices dripping with reactionary supernaturalism [i.e., the charismatics and the evangelicals] (the kind utterly beyond the pale at self-respecting faculty parties) have widely succeeded."¹³ Clack and Clack are covering up part of the facts when

¹⁰ *Religions in Korea* (Seoul: Korean Overseas Information Service, 1986).

¹¹ Jonathan Chao and Rosanna Chong, *A History of Christianity in Socialist China, 1949-1997* (Taipei: CMI Publishing, 1997), 605. This is a book in Chinese. Similar things happened in the other Chinese societies, Hong Kong and Taiwan. From the fifties to the seventies, the rapid growth of Christianity went hand in hand with the fast pace of modernization in both societies. See Donald E. Hoke, *The Church in Asia* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975). Besides, traditional Chinese religions and Buddhism are also immensely popular in Taiwan, especially in the past decade.

¹² Cristian Parker, *Popular Religion and Modernization in Latin America: A Different Logic* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 61.

¹³ Berger, *The Desecularization of the World*, 4.

they only "note the extent to which new and creative religious responses to the world are being explored" (173).

The assumption that the growth of science and technology *in itself* will lead to the demise of the supernatural can also be challenged. Its validity seems to be culture-bound. For example, Parker points out that while the Latin Americans have made use of technological products in their daily lives, we find in them "not a clear, modern-enlightenment rationality, but a more magico-mythic reading of nature in combination with a more scientific reading," and they do not find any contradiction in this combination.¹⁴ Similarly, David Martin observes that in the case of Latin American charismatics, "it is difficult to discern any shift toward rationalization or a diminution in a general presumption concerning the existence of a spiritual world. People seem able to move easily between the elements of advanced technological culture and another world infiltrated with healings, exorcisms, and providential interventions. There seems no obvious transfer from the strict causality and everyday nature of advanced technology to the inspirited mental furnishings of the personal world. Indeed, the technology subserves this personal world rather than vice versa."¹⁵ As an Asian, I have always been puzzled by the theologians who claim that it is impossible for those who use electric lights to believe in miracles. This seems to be quite an easy task for numerous Asians. If the growth of science is really an important cause of secularization in Europe, I think one crucial factor is the coupling of the prestige of science with the anti-religious and anti-clerical Enlightenment tradition. In Asia, this coupling is quite rare, and figures like Richard Dawkins and Peter Atkins are almost non-existent. I have been teaching Hong Kong undergraduates about the science/religion dialogue for many years. As a rule, the overwhelming majority of them will be inclined by the Chinese mentality of balance-seeking to reject scientism as an extreme position.

Perhaps Clack and Clack will respond by saying that in the end the East will catch up with the West as it becomes more advanced. They write, "It must surely affect our judgment as to the truth of religion to learn that religious ideas are more prevalent in cultures where knowledge is less advanced than it is the western world; or that ideas prevalent in religious thought, concerning spirits and disembodied agents, are typical of more primitive thought-processes" (81). This comment again betrays Clack and Clack's obnoxious Euro-centrism. If their line of thinking is correct, then why is it the case that religious ideas are more prevalent in America where knowledge

¹⁴ Parker, *Popular Religion and Modernization in Latin America*, 224.

¹⁵ David Martin, "Religion, Secularization, and Post-Modernity: Lessons from Latin American Case," in Pal Repstad, ed., *Religion and Modernity: Modes of Co-existence* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996), 41.

is more advanced than it is in a number of European countries? Moreover, the Western world may be more advanced, scientifically and technologically speaking, but it does not mean that they are more likely to get the answers to ultimate questions right. Religious thought-processes are indeed "more primitive," in the sense that these thought-processes have a very long history. But it eludes me how we can argue from primitiveness in time to falsity. No less primitive is naturalism, which Clack and Clack tend to accept. Furthermore, some feminists think that the "primitive" belief in goddesses has more truth in it than western rationalism, and Clack and Clack seem to be sympathetic with them.

While some may grant that religion may continue to exist, they emphasize that religion will become more and more privatized. There is some truth in this claim but I doubt that this is an irreversible development. The role of public religion is hotly debated by scholars. George Weigel has pointed to the public role of the Catholic Church in recent decades, especially under the leadership of John Paul II.¹⁶ The thesis that religions cannot play a role in the public arena has also been effectively challenged by Jose Casanova. He produces empirical evidence to show that in the eighties, most political conflicts have a not-so-hidden hand of religion behind. Moreover, religious activists and churches were becoming deeply involved in struggles for liberation, justice, and democracy throughout the world. As Casanova argues,

Throughout the decade religion showed its Janus face, as the carrier not only of exclusive, particularist, and primordial identities but also of inclusive, universalist, and transcending ones ... we are witnessing the 'deprivatization' of religion in the modern world. By deprivatization I mean the fact that religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them. Social movements have appeared which either are religious in nature or are challenging in the name of religion the legitimacy and autonomy of the primary secular spheres, the state and the market economy. Similarly, religious institutions and organizations refuse to restrict themselves to the pastoral care of individual souls and continue to raise questions about the interconnections of private and public morality and to challenge the claims of the subsystems, particularly states and markets, to be exempt from extraneous normative considerations. One of the results of this ongoing contestation is a dual, interrelated process of repoliticization of the private religious and moral spheres and renormativization of the public economic and political spheres.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid., chapter 2. See also George Weigel, *The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 4-6. See also John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

So all aspects of the secularization theory have been forcefully disputed.¹⁸ Is it possible that the story of secularization is a mythical projection of the immediate environment of the secularization theorist, a Western academy? Perhaps we need to adopt a non-realist approach to secularization theory, and treat it as a product of the creative impulses of human beings.

The non-realists are fond of telling the traditional people that we are now living in a new era. However, what they do is in fact antithetical to the spirit of the postmodern era which recognizes plurality and diversity. It is quite true that our era is characterized by a diversity of religious expressions. However, these expressions, besides including new cults and revisions of traditional religions, also include many kinds of fundamentalism and traditional religions.¹⁹ Non-realists may not approve of traditional religions but they shouldn't pretend they do not exist and are on the way out. It just isn't likely. If the churches in Europe are dying out, possibly in future generations missionaries from the East will re-evangelize it.²⁰ Postmodernists have always protested against totalizing discourses who suppress otherness. We need to beware of a new totalizing discourse which marginalizes the traditional. I have grave doubts about whether we can talk of the essence of the modern society. In view of the diversity of religious positions of modern people, it is quite misleading to talk of "a society which defines itself as secular." The society seems far too heterogeneous to have an unified mind to define itself. This alleged definition is the myth of the secular, modern man which is basically Clack and Clack's projection. As Basil Mitchell argues, even if the society in which Clack and Clack are living, the United Kingdom, is no longer a Christian country, it is not anything else.²¹ As another sociologist of British religion, Grace Davie, says, perhaps the case of the British people can be described as a case of "believing without belonging."²²

On the Revisionist Understanding of Religion

Clack and Clack put great emphasis on the value of creativity: "Religion arises from the creative impulses of individuals" (170), and is "the outpouring of human creativity" (174). They make positive use of

¹⁸ See Steve Bruce, ed., *Religion and Modernization* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Robin Gill, *Competing Convictions* (London: SCM, 1989); Pal Repstad, ed., *Religion and Modernity: Modes of Co-existence* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996).

¹⁹ Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

²⁰ In fact, this is already happening to some extent. I know of many Chinese Christians who have joined the Love Europe Mission organized by the Operation Mobilization.

²¹ Basil Mitchell, *Faith and Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 153.

²² Berger, *The Desecularization of the World*, chapter 5. See also Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

Feuerbach's projection theory, e.g., by interpreting baptism as "celebrating our grounding in this world" (175) and the Eucharist as "celebration of the ordinary acts of eating and drinking ... [and] the fruits of nature and human ingenuity at the cultivation of nature" (176). Theology "itself must embrace the need to be creative. God (or gods) are not found, but created.... The theologian is less like a scientist, seeking some kind of objective fact, and more like an artist, endlessly seeking to express different ways of giving meaning and purpose to human life" (176). They then expound the Solar Ethics of their favourite theologian, Don Cupitt, who urges a thorough acceptance of the transitory nature of our life (177). For Cupitt, religion is an "individual self-expression, rather than the acceptance of a core set of beliefs which are binding and authoritarian" (178). He believes in no external God, and celebrates our "freedom to create our own image of the divine" (179).

To further explain the idea of the theologian as an artist, Clack and Clack discuss the ideas of Iris Murdoch and Dennis Potter. Since Murdoch's novel "allows for diverse accounts of the nature of God, and what constitutes the good life" (184), she shows us how to be good without "God." Dennis Potter views religion as the wound and not the bandage (185): religion should not be a sop to the hardship of life, but a way of thinking critically about the human condition (186). All these are to bolster their major contention that "religious systems are more like frames of orientation; they may express deep-felt emotions about the human condition; or they may be systems for self-reflection and assessment, rather than theoretical explanations of this world and the human life within it" (5).²³ Earlier, they have used Buddhism as an example to show that belief in God is not essential to religion: in Buddhism, "belief in gods and spirits is absent. And even where the existence of gods is contained within the world-view of the Buddhist, these beings play no crucial role within that religion" (3).

It can be spiritually uplifting to read some of these accounts of religion. Religion is certainly concerned with the quest for meaning, the wounds and deep emotions of life, and so on. Religious rituals like baptism and the Eucharist certainly possess rich existential significance. However, these insights do not belong to non-realism alone. They are certainly compatible with a realist philosophy of religion. When the non-realists say that traditional theists or the realists are treating religion merely as "theoretical explanations of this world" and God as an entirely external and transcendent entity, they are offering a caricature. Certainly, Christian realists believe that God is both transcendent and immanent. He will exist whether we conceive

²³ Clack and Clack have another argument against realism: "If God's existence can be 'proved', this would seem to suggest that God is an object amongst other objects: God can be described in terms similar to those applied to dogs, human beings, rocks" (8). I can see nothing objectionable to say that in some sense God is similar to the mundane objects.

of Him or not, but at the same time He is nearer to us than ourselves. Religion is a comprehensive worldview which provides both theoretical explanations and frames of orientation. I cannot see any incoherence in these ideas. So in principle the merits of non-realism concerning religion can be possessed by realism as well.

Moreover, realism possesses one advantage which non-realism does not have. Realism provides ontological grounds for our framework of orientation and values. It guarantees that the wounds of humanity reflect something real and not merely figments of imagination. In contrast, for the non-realists, what are the grounds of celebration when all values are gone and suspect? The non-realists may reply that it is in fact the merit of non-realism. Since there are no external constraints, we are perfectly free to create any value and image of the divine we like. But why value creativity so highly? The cult of creativity is very Western and not necessarily intelligible from the perspective of an Easterner who highly values tradition, continuity and uniformity. If religion is just my own creation, why believe in it? This question is especially acute in many Asian countries where belief in the Christian God incurs real risks and costs, e.g., in mainland China, Malaysia, and Japan. Isn't it quite foolish to invent an image of the divine, then believe in it, and finally sacrifice one's life (or risk social ostracization and persecution) for it? In general, in the East, Karl Barth is more favored than Don Cupitt, and conservative evangelicalism a much stronger force than liberalism. Moreover, it is arguable that the phenomenology of moral experience shows that values are something that address us, that call upon us to respond, rather than something that is generated by our arbitrary will.²⁴

If the authors manage to appreciate many accounts of the good life without God, I just wonder why can't they at least acknowledge the fact that for many, life with God (a realist, transcendent God) is the foundation of their good life? To be genuinely pluralistic, we should not leave out something just because we don't like it. It is interesting to observe that exactly because Christians believe in a transcendent God, many non-Christian Chinese scholars think that Christianity can contribute to the renewal of the Chinese culture.²⁵ The Chinese do believe in the Heaven (*T'ian*) but they tend to

²⁴ Indeed, Clack and Clack have expressed well this point when they criticize the positivist account of ethics and Braithwaite's account of religion: "The positivist account makes it the case that ethical right and wrong *consists* in our preferences for certain actions. But it could be argued that we prefer those actions (and spurn others) *because* they are right (or wrong). Moreover, it seems bizarre that a believer's actions would be determined by the entertainment of *fictional* stories: the believer's attitude towards the world seems instead to be based on the conviction that the world is *in reality* the creation of God" (91).

²⁵ In the past decade, the Chinese scholars' interest in the study of Christianity has greatly increased. A Department of Religion has been established within the Peking University. Research centers for Christian studies have been set up in the People's University of China, the Chinese Academy of Social Science, and many other places.

domesticate it and confine it within the realm of human subjectivity. However, the lack of transcendence in Chinese culture has impeded the development of democracy and the rule of law. Those Chinese scholars will have no use for Clack and Clack's domesticated, non-realist God either.

Clack and Clack's comments on Buddhism evince a typical academic understanding of Buddhism which is gained through books alone. "Religion without gods or God" is a correct characterization of some schools of Theravada Buddhism. However, the Mahayana schools develop doctrines about supernatural beings like the Bodhisattvas, which play vital roles in their religions, and surely the overwhelming majority of people who call themselves Buddhists in Asia are polytheists. In fact, existing Buddhism is mainly dominated by the Mahayana schools rather than the Theravada. It is arguable that exactly because a religion without gods is not spiritually satisfying, the Mahayana schools have developed and flourished. So the case of Buddhism does not really help their case for the marginalization of the theistic elements in religion.

Conclusion

I have argued that two major theses of Clack and Clack's non-realism are quite doubtful. Of course, in such a short space we cannot look into all the arguments and counter-arguments. I just want to indicate that their case for non-realism is far from being made out. However, some of their criticisms of the traditional philosophy of religion are justified. I think the realist approach to religion is defensible but this approach should be combined with an appreciation of the human and existential dimensions of religion. This suggestion is much in line with the Asian spirit²⁶ which seeks integration rather than dichotomy.

²⁶ Of course, Asians are also very diversified. In this essay, terms like "Asian spirit" and "Asian perspective" mean nothing more than a tendency or viewpoint which is more prevalent in Asia than in the West.