

# Is God an Internal Realist?

Stephen M. Clinton

The Orlando Institute

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Much confusion exists today, and many options are being discussed, regarding the proper basis or foundation for Christian thought. Malik commented on the confusion, "I am worried about the humanities, the interpretation of man as to his nature and destiny. ... It is in these realms that the spirit, the fundamental attitude, the whole outlook on life are formed and set." (Malik, 1980, p. 28, 30). At the heart of this confusion lies what we call truth, whether theological or philosophical.

The issue of "truth" is slowly moving back from being seen as an issue of epistemology focused on the methodology of knowing and judging, where it has been since Descartes, to the realm of ontology or metaphysics, focused on issues of perception and interpretation. From Abraham to Luther, truth was an issue about what is real, i.e., present in the created universe. Pannenberg, Putnam, Hauerwas, Clark, I and many others are arguing for a return to ontology, with some form of realism as the foundation.

A related issue is this: Is either epistemology or metaphysics the proper area for the issue of truth to be discussed? That is, should philosophy have any major role in the foundation of theology? There have been a number of responses to this question. One of the primary positions is that theology always has philosophical foundations, the issue is whether these foundations are seen and examined. The major views of the nature of the foundations are: dualism, idealism, and realism.

This paper will argue that realism, understood in a very modern sense, is the proper foundation for a biblically oriented systematic theology. Historically, naive realism was replaced with Scottish (critical common-sense) realism. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the primary form of realism is known in secular philosophy as scientific realism. The particular version of realism I will present is called theistic realism. In previous papers I have examined the contributions to a contemporary theistic realism from E. J. Carnell, James Collins, Karl Rahner, Geddy MacGregor, and Bernard Lonergan. Here I want to examine the view of realism articulated by Hilary Putnam. His position has been characterized as "internal realism," although he prefers the term "pragmatic realism." This paper will present his position briefly and examine it for its fruitfulness in the development of theistic realism. Then we will examine some related implications of Hauerwas' work on community and I will suggest direction for the road ahead. Like Gregory of Nyssa, the desire is for philosophy to be a handmaiden to theology, not the director of the system.

## **Putnam**

Putnam (1987) affirms a reading of Kant which leads to seeing Kant reject some philosophical ideas

correctly and affirm some options correctly, but not respond well to some larger issues. Kant rejected both the religious heteronomy of the mediaeval church and the rationalistic and materialistic options of the Enlightenment. Kant, incorrectly thinks Putnam, sought for a rational stance which could make sense of the subjective - objective perspective and tried to develop a rational perspective (pure reason) which could be used to adjudicate problems. But Kant had to adopt other perspectives (practical reason, aesthetic reason, etc.) in order to deal with issues of reality to which pure reason did not apply. This "multi-perspectivalism" was brought to focus and elaborated on by Peirce, Wittgenstein and Husserl. Putnam thinks that this growth to reject both forms of absolutism (religious and rational) is healthy in some specific ways (he does not call this Post-Modernism).

Putnam also thinks that cultural relativism is a dead end. Any thorough-going relativism (anti-foundationalist) leads to an inability to make any common-sense judgments or to cope with the very real issues of modern life. What is required is some kind of metaphysical or ontological foundation with which human judgment can interact.

The foundation for such an approach has been available for some time. Max Planck said, "As there is a material object behind every sensation, so there is a metaphysical reality behind everything that human experience shows to be real." (*The Meaning and Limits of Exact Science*, 1949, p. 319.) But Putnam does not follow this scientific realism approach.

What he proposes is another way of looking at "answers" to the question, "What is life all about?" Answers to these important questions are created by people with experience and insight, functioning within the actual world and within a community of interpreters. Older models called this common-sense realism or simply "wisdom" (cf. Collins, *The Lure of Wisdom*, 1962). In various human contexts there may be more than one functional answer to questions and more than one perspective which can be taken, in light of which life makes sense. Putnam calls this approach a modern form of common-sense realism combined with conceptual relativity (ie, relativity of perspective and perception, following Kant, Wittgenstein and Lonergan). He rejects the desire to find one "right answer" (metaphysical realism) or to find one right method (epistemological absolutism), and the equally misleading conclusion that all answers are equal and cannot be criticized. He does not rule out that there could be such a "right answer." But he rejects the above mentioned conclusions because he thinks that following this line of thought is not helpful, since none of us has an omniscient perspective.

This identification of the problem of finding proper answers is not unique to Putnam. Dewey said, "The problem of restoring integration and cooperation between man's beliefs about the world in which he lives and his beliefs about the values and purposes that should direct his conduct is the deepest problem of modern life. It is the problem of any philosophy that is not isolated from that life." (*The Quest for Certainty*, 1929, p. 255.) But Putnam does not directly follow this democratic integrative line either.

In his practice of justifying principles of perception and interpretation, Putnam has turned to warrants, or justifying conditions, for the conclusions people draw. Some of his warrants include reasoning, or evaluating long term effects. But some of his warrants are simply, "This is what I do, this is what I

say. ... I don't know how I know these things. I have reached bedrock and this is where my spade is turned." (p. 85) We might call this a kind of critical realistic foundationalism.

Putnam's internal or pragmatic realism affirms a consistent reality which is shared, at least roughly, by all humans. Thus it is known only from inside (internal) to human experience, not necessarily transcendent. His position also affirms a series or pluralism of methodologies of knowing (empiricism, rationalism, common perceptions, self-evident truths, etc.) each of which has a relevant sphere of application within human experience. Internal realism is the reality known by the experience, which, under scrutiny, is real to him. This lays a foundation for a whole philosophy of personal experience. In dialog with others truth, a description of reality, is discerned and affirmed, to the best of our knowledge.

## **Response to Putnam**

What sense can we make of this from a Christian perspective? We believe that there is one true world: the one created by God and sustained by Him. But God has been pleased to limit almost all of our knowledge of the world to what is discoverable in the world through senses, and to what we find in ourselves. Thus, our situated, experiential knowledge is partial and will remain so in this life.

In the theological arena, we say that we have an inerrant Word, but clearly not a Word with complete explanations, that is, an inerrant systematic theology. We evangelicals do not even agree on the proper hermeneutic by which to interpret the Bible theologically or the events of Christ and the early church historically. It is clear that when we extend God's revealed teaching in keeping with the "reason" of any particular person (theologian) or group (denomination), the result is less than inerrant. There are many Christian philosophies and theologies, denominations and schools. We have a real revelation from God which tells some truths - descriptions of reality. But it does not tell us all truth. Also, we do not have an infallible method of perceiving and interpreting that revelation or drawing conclusions from it (in spite of Justinian's conclusions in AD 545).

We think we know some absolute truths about God. But our knowledge is based on interpretations of scripture, on personal and corporate deductions from the world, and on human experience. This does not invalidate the truthfulness of our knowledge, but it does mean we must use caution in evaluating various theological and philosophical perspectives, warrants, and arguments.

Some theologies assert that our knowledge should be expressed negatively (apophatically): God is hidden or greater than we can know, so we know what God is not like, e.g. He is not untruthful. But until we all have a better grasp on spiritual reality we should treat our positive expressions as finite attempts to describe the infinite. There could be an inerrant theology, of course, but God has not revealed such to us.

In realists' terms, we have a created world which presents itself to us, but an incomplete procedure for knowing or analyzing that world. We do know from scripture that the world consists of far more than is discoverable by our five senses at present.

Internal realism suggests that the truth for one individual is not exactly the same as the truth for other individuals. But it does affirm that there is sufficient overlap for fruitful discussion and debate, since we live in a common world. It does not directly affirm, but certainly implies, the existence of values which are real, or true, and thus are more or less common for all humans (Rokeach, Rawls, Kohlberg). Science, art, religion, morality, take their rise from this sense of values (axiology) within the structure of being. "Each individual embodies an adventure of existence." (A. N. Whitehead, 1929, p. 48). This knowledge is true (coherent with all we experience, both personally and socially) and fits reality so far as we are able to interpret it. Thus we are responsible for acting in ways in keeping with this personal knowledge (cf. Polanyi). But our knowledge is not exhaustive, ie, not absolute. God has been pleased to make it finite.

## Post-modernism and Putnam

The post-modern movement, from Nietzsche and Sartre to Foucault and Derrida, begins with epistemological considerations and concludes that human efforts to know things "certainly" are impossible of accomplishment and that the search for certainty is futile. Realists agree, but for different reasons. Post-modernists would rather discuss what each of us would like reality to be like and then work to make it that way. In the field of education for example, the journal *Educational Theory* produces very good philosophical discussions about meaningful, relevant educational issues. But the articles do not draw conclusions about what ought to be the case or how we ought to change the future, but rather about what we can do simply because we wish to; not because it is right to do so.

Putnam's position suggests that post-modernism has gone too far down the path toward relativism. According to some post-modernists we no longer have a shared world or the possibility of common meanings, or common values. Putnam's pragmatic realism would pull the discussion back toward what can be done which would be good for all of us, as best we can tell. This clearly pragmatic focus may be helpful philosophically. Note that it implies a sense of community or solidarity of humanity.

But what Putnam does not discuss is that his perspective and any similar perspective is subject to the historically instantiated perspective of the thinker and the culture which surrounds him or her. Truth, a description of reality, is limited to a finite perspective at a given time, in a given culture. However, unless the decision, suggestion, or value is given or fixed, ie. established in reality for at least that time and place, all discussion at an interpersonal level is simply word play. If a situation is established such that it can be examined and discussion can take place and conclusions drawn and a resulting action taken, then the situation is sufficiently fixed that descriptions can be judged true or untrue. Evaluations can be made and positive or negative valences assigned. This communal sharing of significant elements of reality will enable a pragmatic realism to describe the real world, as best we can interpret it, and assign values, which leads to a conceptual understanding and statements of meaning.

Also, while Putnam identifies the possibility of dialog and community, he does not develop the conceptual basis for shared communication on long-term, meaningful decisions or actions. Now many pragmatists and post-modernists do make such judgments and do assign values and do make suggestions

for changes. They do form communities of dialog and do discuss change and development as if these were positive things that will shape the future in positive ways. Thus they are not always faithful to the minimalist and temporary values of the positions which they supposedly represent. Because of this bifurcation of life from theory, they are not able to give a conceptual grounding to the reality of their hope and practice. Christian hope, based on grounded faith, leads to true values and meaningful love. This is a clear contrast in the contemporary world.

## **Values about Community**

A different approach to the issue of life together has been to focus on the nature of the community which is formed by the participants in a dialogue. Hegel, James, Dewey and Wittgenstein anticipated, as did theologians such as Watson and Hodge, that the nature of the community of interpreters forms a bond which has affects upon interpretations. We are influenced by the thought and forms of expression of those around us in time and space.

This discussion of the influence of community was described by Wittgenstein, but not elaborated to a full theory of human interaction and communication. It has been researched in depth for many years in Russia, especially as social theory by Vygotsky. An understanding of the reality of community is at the foundation of sociology and social psychology (cf. Turner, 1991). In recent times here in the U.S. contributions to a biblical sense of community have been elaborated by Hauerwas:

The only reason for being Christian is because Christian convictions are true; and the only reason for participation in the church is that it is the community that pledges to form its life by that truth. ... The church is an international society only because we have a story that teaches us to regard the other as a fellow member of God's Kingdom. Such regard is not based on facile doctrines of tolerance or equality, but is forged from our common experience of being trained to be disciples of Jesus. (*A Community of Character*, 1981, Univ. of Notre Dame Press, p. 1.)

This community is formed, not by a few men and women at a limited point in history but by the Spirit of God who draws people into the kingdom and into a fellowship which is sometimes uncomfortable. This fellowship, and its collective wisdom, span the last 2000 years.

"Our common experience of being trained to be disciples of Jesus," is not a simple or straightforward experience. 400 denominations in the United States, and over 2000 denominations in Africa, for example, point to the disunities of experience and unwillingness to be trained together which has characterized the church since before Nicea. We Christians certainly cannot describe the living church as a spotless answer to the world's need for community and a living body of consistent, wise interpreters of life. We do not demonstrate the unity called for in the Bible nor the solidarity desired in modern community.

But we can point to the church as the best possibility to build a community which knows and does truth,

given the revelation of God, while in the midst of the world. Most groups who claim to build true community retreat from the world in some way. Some collective forms work locally (from cults to cell-churches), but are very difficult to build or form in diverse cultures. The current search for a multi-cultural community which can be distributed throughout the world is part of the longing for togetherness which humanity has expressed since the failure of Babel, and reflects our social nature in the image of the triune God. In the early church, becoming part of the Christian community and learning to live by its rules and values was part of the process of becoming Christian. In Eastern Orthodoxy, the importance of the role of community is strengthened far more than it usually is in the hierarchical or individualistic West.

## Conclusion

The Great Commandment speaks in relevant ways to the issues addressed above. We are to love God (the original community of triune persons) with heart, soul, mind and strength. Jesus came to found a community which would find truth, salvation, hope, and power in the midst of finite and sinful life. He called this community His church. We who know Christ are to be an intercultural community of holiness and acceptance, modeling virtue and reaching out with the gospel to those who have spiritual, personal and social needs, as we have.

We all have a desire for a conceptual center from which to interpret life. The Bible tells us that that center is found in a relationship with a person. Through a conscious, committed relationship with Him we can begin to understand the truth of what is real and how life is to be lived. Jesus gives us truth in personal relationships. "A revolutionary lifestyle comes from a person who has integrated the Bible into his or her life, and has confronted the issues present in his culture. ... A world view is being hammered out in the midst of life." (Clinton, 1988, pp. 13-14)

The felt need for community leads us to dialog, present papers, teach classes, and other forms of making disciples. We are told that the "growth of the body depends on the proper working of each part" (Ephesians. 4). Jesus draws us together as the community of the faithful. He works through His church in the power of the Spirit.

God has the perspective, authority and ability to create a central meaning for each life (Eph. 2:10) and has already established the center point of history: the incarnation, atonement, and resurrection of Jesus, as a revelatory point of the future of existence. He has told us that the way, the truth and the life are found in Jesus. As O'Donovan and Pannenberg point out, He has shown us the future of humanity in the resurrected Christ. Theistic realism forms the basis for a philosophy, a systematic theology and a holy life.

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