

[1973. *Review of Faith Seeks Understanding by Arthur F. Holmes, Westminster Theological Journal, 36(1), 117–119.*]

Arthur F. Holmes: *Faith Seeks Understanding*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1971, 175 pp. \$2.95.

*Faith Seeks Understanding* is a effort in syncretism to outline a Christian philosophy, or at least to suggest elements from widely different systems that Christians can use. As would be expected, the extremes of Behaviorism and Logical Positivism are rejected; but insights or bright ideas from nearly everything else are utilized as much as possible. The discussion on the whole is interesting. Professor Holmes is a fine Christian gentleman of pleasing personality. From his point of view it is unfortunate that the reviewer does not care for unsystematic, disjointed syncretism.

The book assumes "that the reader has some acquaintance with the views discussed here;" and hence one expects a more technical and accurate defense of a position than could be given in an elementary, superficial account, for such a reader will be a more severe judge of its argumentation.

Because of the syncretism nearly everyone will agree with something. Empiricists will no doubt agree with various appeals to experience. Presuppositionalists will also agree with other principles enunciated: e.g. "Metaphysics is perspectival. Exploration begins with a perspective . . ." (p. 46) ; and "There is no direct line of argument from the facts of science and history to the truth of any one metaphysic or world view. For example, while assertions about an empty tomb are open to empirical investigation, the assertion that 'God raised him for our justification' is not" (p. 55).

Unfortunately the argumentation of which these quotations form a part, and the way they are put together for Christian use, leave many questions untouched. In the pages on science and religion, for example, the author asserts that there are "facts" of science. But since the literature on the philosophy of science uses the term "fact" in at least five different senses, some of which make the existence of a fact impossible, and since the author gives no explanation of what he means by "fact," the reader cannot follow the argument. This lack of intelligibility becomes acute when, later (e.g., p. 148), the author tries to say something constructive.

Then, too, when the author wishes to refute a position, he seems to think he has accomplished his aim when he adduces the case of someone who has rejected it. For example, operationalism in physics is discarded simply because "its critics insist that not all scientific concepts can be operationally defined" (p. 18). This sort of fallacious argument is useless.

Or consider Dr. Holmes' rejection of this possible position: "Some Christian philosophers have [argued] : if God is all knowing and has made men in his own rational image and revealed truth to them, why should we not be able to develop a complete and final 'system to end all systems' from the truth we know?" (p. 38). The author then rightly notes that we cannot discover enough premisses from which to deduce all truth; and from this he concludes that we must therefore redefine metaphysics or abandon it. Now, if by *metaphysics* the author means an empirically based system, let us abandon it. If, however, he means a system based on revelation, there is no reason to redefine it. The fact that we cannot complete the system is no reason for rejecting the ideal and no excuse for inconsistent syncretism. For example, a mathematician who knew five of Euclid's axioms could deduce a large number of theorems; they would form a consistent system; his ignorance of the sixth would indeed deprive him of many other theorems, but it would not affect his actual deductions.

Similar defects occur in the following chapter on history. In the reviewer's opinion Dr. Holmes is completely justified in asserting that history cannot be objectively written. Further, one would like to agree that "Facts alone are not self-explanatory . . . Fact and meaning are therefore conjoined" (p. 67). But agreement is impossible because no definition of a "fact" is given. What is worse, the author proceeds as if anyone's objection to an historiographical theory disproves it: "The notion of inevitability hides a nest of assumptions which, especially since World War II, philosophers have found untenable" (p. 62), and he cites Isaiah Berlin (not listed in the Index). Now, to be sure, the theory of inevitability, like any other theory of history, presupposes a nest or complex of assumptions; and Sir Isaiah argues vigorously against inevitability; but neither his rejection of inevitability nor a few foolish assertions by some of its exponents, disprove it. One must actually examine the arguments (as I have done elsewhere) and on this basis decide whether the theory is actually untenable.

The same faulty procedure continues in the chapter on *Moral Knowledge*: "It will not do to reiterate the unlimited absolutism of legalism, for both the Bible and moral experience make it

evident that not all decisions we make are prescribed by law, and not all the moral rules we ourselves follow are universally binding" (p. 93). Do the author's reasons support his conclusions? Granted that the Bible does not prescribe all our decisions (e.g., there is no law requiring a young man to become a stock broker rather than a butcher); but this in no way conflicts with the "unlimited absolutism" of any actual divine law. Second, it is not clear that "moral experience" makes anything evident. Third, "not all the moral rules we follow are universally binding" because as sinners we may actually follow evil rules that bind no one. Therefore the author's premisses do not support his conclusion.

The chapter on *Personal Knowledge* is similarly unsatisfactory; and when the final summation occurs in *Religious Knowledge*, the result is confused because it all depends on many of the earlier unsupported conclusions. In fine, the reader must decide whether or not he likes unsystematic syncretism. Obviously the reviewer's remarks are "perspectival."

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