

Stackhouse's Critical Realism: A Pragmatic Epistemology on the Lam

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Seven years ago, in *Making the Best of It*, John Stackhouse advanced the following promise:

In a subsequent book, I intend to set out a full-fledged Christian epistemology. Here I can only sketch—with minimal detail and apologetic—how I think Christians should think about what it means to be a Christian: to follow Jesus, here and now. (2008, 165)

Apparently Stackhouse does not make empty promises and I take this symposium to be a critical celebration of the full-fledged Christian epistemology found in *Need to Know: Following Christ in the Real World* (2014). Stackhouse has provided a realist epistemology as indebted to Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff as his ethics are indebted to Reinhold Niebuhr. It is an epistemology that is socially-located¹ and yet does not give up on the claim that humans have “reliable access to reality” (86). It is an epistemology that—in a continual pentalectic (five-sided conversation)—draws on experience, tradition, scholarship, art, and Scripture through intuition, imagination, and reason. In all, it attempts to strike a balance between expecting too much or too little from human rationality (135). Glibly, one might say that if you are like Goldilocks, lost in the forest of epistemology, this may just be the porridge that is neither too hot nor too cold.

There is indeed much to celebrate in *Need to Know* and I want to give more than lip service to this recognition. In order to do so, however, I will need to begin to explain my subtitle.

Critical Realism: Freedom from Problematic Strictures

Certainly, the phrase “on the lam” is increasingly archaic and, for me, it evokes images of the richly drawn ephemeral characters that populate the novels of Hemingway and Steinbeck. To be “on the lam” is to be on the run, usually from the law. In this case, however, I want to shift the semantic register of “the law” from the criminal to the intellectual, to intellectual beliefs or practices that have the binding force of a system of rules. As implied above, Stackhouse has clearly and explicitly left “classic foundationalism” in the dust (135). In the ensuing freedom to “draw on a

¹ On this he is indebted to (Code 2006).

much wider range of resources," there are other options that ought to be rejected. For example, Stackhouse encourages running from the conservative Protestant belief that fidelity to the Bible alone is sufficient (6) and also from—in an opposing direction—routine appeals to mystical visions as the solution to all of life's questions (8). Although I do not want to over-psychologize the text, he is also running from the limits prescribed by the evangelicalism of his childhood (245-250) while also running from the knee-jerk absolutism of dogmatic relativism in the opposite direction (24-29). To use the language of running might give the false impression that Stackhouse is neither deliberative nor discerning—that would be to misrepresent his argument. Rather, I use the language of running simply because his epistemology is pragmatic and on the move in a particular direction. It is an epistemology concerned with getting things done (122-123).

To begin in this way, however, is to emphasize the "critical" aspect of his "critical realism," which may not be fair. Yet, perhaps it is also not entirely unfair because to begin this way is to take the rhetorical structure of *Need to Know* seriously (after all, there are over 50 pages of "critical" reflection before the grounding constructive notion of vocation is introduced). Whether fair or not, I take the book's greatest contribution to be its energetic and sustained attempt to illuminate just how many moving parts are involved in what are usually assumed to be straightforward Christian beliefs or decisions.

Once Stackhouse gets to framing these many parts in the context of vocation, however, I begin to get a little nervous. Admittedly, part of this discomfort may stem from my rootedness in the Anabaptist tradition (and there is no doubt that Stackhouse is working against the grain of John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, and others in the last decades that have given epistemological and ethical priority to the church community).² But, as I hope to illustrate below, there may also be other reasons for this discomfort. That said, I do not take naming these discomforts to be a necessary refutation or rejection of Stackhouse's critical realism. Rather, I take them to be challenges that may yet be amenable to his project and, at this point, I am prepared to let him decide to what extent they are compatible or incompatible with it. In sum, I would like to raise questions concerning first the anthropocentric and then the myopic nature of Stackhouse's realism. As I see it, attending to these questions reveals the potentially ephemeral and abstract nature of Stackhouse's pragmatic epistemology.

Vocational Realism: The Anthropocentric Nature of What We Really Need to Know

For Stackhouse, the proper context for thinking is vocation. And the proper context for vocation is the biblical narrative. Certainly there are specific Protestant and Evangelical overtones here, and they are embraced wholeheartedly. For Stackhouse, the biblical narrative seems to contain four eras—Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation. We live in the era of Redemption or, more

² See, for example, (Stackhouse 2008, 6).

specifically, the part of Redemption post-career of Jesus (60). Christians cannot naively imitate Jesus, but they are called to contribute to the work of Redemption—the work of shalom-making—through their (a) work as gardeners in the world and (b) mission to make disciples of all nations by loving God, loving the neighbor, and loving creation (70). In good Kantian fashion, Stackhouse takes it as axiomatic that “God does not call us to do something we cannot accomplish” (71). And a postulate of practical reason appears in short order: “It follows, therefore, that human beings can rely on God to provide the knowledge we need, among other resources we need, to think what we need to think in order to be what he wants us to be and to do what he wants us to do” (71). This is the critical starting point and I will quote further to reinforce:

The doctrine of vocation provides grounds that are so conspicuously lacking in so much modern epistemology: grounds for confidence in human apprehension and comprehension of the world. We can rely on our knowledge of the world since without such confidence we could not possibly obey these primal commandments to love God, love our neighbors, and love the rest of Creation. (71)

Here, Stackhouse is as far from Reinhold Niebuhr as he is going to get (and perhaps it would also be fair to say that this is where he is most indebted to Dietrich Bonhoeffer). We do not have an impossible possibility. Rather, we have a confident pragmatic realism that assumes—based on the command of God—the possibility of sufficient knowledge necessary to become a “good and faithful servant” (242-243).

There is already much to discuss relevant to what I have briefly summarized, but I will limit my initial comments here to one issue, namely, the ambiguous relation between the Christian and the created world in this understanding of vocation. Reflecting on this relationship, I have three questions that emerge from the argument of *Need to Know*.

First, is there anything that ought to be said about the redemption of the non-human natural world? At various points, Stackhouse makes an effort to gesture to the vocation of tending the garden—referred to literally and euphemistically as “cultivating the world”—and to note that this commandment is not rescinded (70). This is right and good (and should be said more frequently). What sort of knowledge Christians might need to fulfill the literal aspects of this vocation, however, is rather underdeveloped. What we seem to have, for the most part, is an anthropocentric vision of vocation that (a) not only understands Creation and Redemption as two discrete historical and theological eras but (b) also understands the latter to be almost entirely focused on and concerned with the good of humanity. I am very willing to grant that this sort of implicit bifurcation could be unintended and accidental given the purpose of this particular book. But if this is the case, a further question could be raised.

Specifically, one could ask: Is there a role for the non-human natural world to serve as a resource for knowledge about Christian vocation? The reasons for distinguishing each part of the pentalectic are clearly laid out by Stackhouse and I am not calling those into question at this point. But it does seem odd, if he is already going

to include the human creations of art and scholarship as sources of knowledge, not to include the natural world itself, which is not only the object of so much art and scholarship and the context of human existence but also a creation of God. Certainly, a critical appeal to the non-human natural world—like all of the other resources—could be made even on Reformed grounds. Beyond that (and acknowledging tradition as a resource), perhaps one might recall the manner in which Thomas Aquinas drew upon the various inclinations humans shared with the rest of creation—(1) the preservation of life, shared with all living beings; and (2) procreation and education of offspring, shared with all animals—in order to highlight what is unique to humans alone—(3) the inclination to live in society and know the truth about God (1981 I-II Q94). And this leads to the final question:

Why is there no engagement with natural law? In the early 1960s, Paul Ramsey remarked that “Christian ethics, especially in Protestant circles, is bedeviled by the fact that, whether we come to praise or to bury them, we always have in mind continental theories of natural law. We have in mind a whole realm populated by universal principles” (1962, 14). But times are changing. Increasingly, Protestants of various stripes are recognizing that the theological category of natural law is neither the sole property of Catholics nor Enlightenment philosophers. Admittedly, much of this interest has emerged in political theology, but there are exceptions, perhaps most notably Michael Northcott's *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (1996). And perhaps the seeming qualitative shift between the non-human natural world and human redemption that lies within Stackhouse's epistemology could be diminished further by attending to the manner in which Aquinas construes the diverse yet complementary participation of natural law, positive or human law, and divine law (divine revelation) in God's activity.³ Of course, this question may be at least as unfair as all “why not X” questions are. That said, moving forward, I am convinced that Protestants and even Evangelicals can no longer ignore the resources the natural law tradition—even if internally contested—can provide for thinking through many of the most pressing challenges that Christians have to face today, especially if one already is working from realist commitments. Or, to rephrase, perhaps natural law might provide a much needed way to see the role of the non-human natural world as necessary for shaping and guiding vocation.

In these questions, I have been stretching the limits of Stackhouse's methodology in a particular way. What appears on the surface to be merely an enrichment of resources and vocation, however, also entails a deeper undercurrent that also seeks to root the human being—all human beings—in a shared context that defies modern or postmodern trends. This is what I fear Stackhouse's methodology is inadvertently running from as well. What we do know (and is often taken too lightly) is that all people need food to eat, all people need air to breath, and all people need clean water to drink, if staying alive is important. This aspect of reality is reliable and is the absolute ground floor for human flourishing. To that end, all people depend straightforwardly on the non-human natural world in a manner that cannot be ignored. Therefore, I would suggest that tending the garden and loving the neighbor

³ See, for example (Aquinas 1981, I-II Q93). I take this suggestion to press in various directions but, at the very least, upon Stackhouse's brief reference to human nature (222-223).

in our global world are profoundly intertwined in Christian vocation wherever one finds oneself. Of course, discerning what that means in each context is certainly a matter to be worked out prudentially, but perhaps in a manner and to an extent not quite foreseen in *Need to Know*.⁴

Shalom and the Limits of Realism: Deciding Against Ourselves

Shifting from a focus on the context of vocation, my final comments press Stackhouse's description of the decision-making process in an ambiguous world. First, I want to affirm that, at a common-sense level, much of his description makes very good sense, including the account of proportionate assent and the role of good theology and healthy spiritual disciplines. Further, no doubt he is right that there is no way to guarantee an infallible process for arriving at certain truth.

That said, the final worry I would like to register is whether—at the end of the day—Stackhouse's critical realism is at least a little less critical than he would like it to be. Or, to rephrase, I wonder whether the fear and trembling that seems to permeate the epistemic process throughout is resolved all too quickly into a trusting and thankful comfort that effectively, even if unintentionally, affirms the status quo. My worry here is at once theological, epistemological, and ethical. To flesh this out, allow me to highlight what I take to be a latent theme in *Need to Know* that needs more emphasis.

As he develops criteria for decision-making, Stackhouse acknowledges that there are some circumstances that “put people in epistemically privileged situations, whether permanently or temporarily” (181). These people can provide special and even superior angles of vision on the subject (181). In this way, he affirms that epistemology turns out to be inescapably political and economic (182). He is certainly right in this claim, and I was heartened to find Gustavo Gutiérrez on the very next page. Yet, he stops short of mentioning—let alone embracing—something like the notion of the preferential option for the poor, one of the basic late-twentieth-century principles of Catholic social teaching. In short, this appeal to the preferential option for the poor is no romantic gesture to poverty; it is not a celebration of marginalization. Rather, “the preferential option for the poor” is a statement about reality that has ethical and epistemic entailments: in the former, the poor and marginalized have an urgent and unequal moral claim on Christians because of the dire status of their existence; in the latter, the perspective of the poor and marginalized is preferred over other perspectives because they experience and understand aspects of the real world that are usually hidden from others.⁵ In neither

⁴ I take Stackhouse's comment on ecological thinking that takes account of the full *oikos* (2014, 194) to be sympathetic to this line of questioning.

⁵ For example, the reality of the profound exploitation of seasonal agricultural laborers in Mexico is hidden from the average salad-eating American whose dietary choices are determined merely by budgetary or nutritional concerns. In this case, the poor and marginalized (and virtually trapped) agricultural laborer is in a privileged position concerning the real costs of fresh vegetables. To begin to explore this particular example, see <http://graphics.latimes.com/product-of-mexico-camps/>

case is the entailment absolute or isolated from other considerations. In both cases, however, Christianity is committed to the specific privileged ethical and epistemic perspective of the poor and marginalized.

If one is offended by the appeal to this notion that has come to be a staple of Catholic social teaching, I would be happy to employ Reinhold Niebuhr to raise the same issue. Writing in the late 1950s, Niebuhr boldly proclaimed:

The dominant pattern of social activity in our society is that of profit-seeking. The constitution of our civilization was written by Adam Smith, who gave himself to the illusion that each man could be selfish without any other restraint but that which the selfishness of others offered, so that a society of selfish individuals would nevertheless create a social harmony. This is the creed by which America lives, whatever its protestations. (Niebuhr 1959, 70)

He continues with a story—no doubt compositely drawn from his own experience as a pastor in Detroit—contrasting the experience of a factory worker and a sincere and well-meaning majority stockholder of that same factory. He concludes that the stockholder, on his own accord, will never see the truth of his unethical existence. And he then continues:

Some of the Christians of our day have no honest desire to live as God wants them to live with their fellows. They must literally be reborn. But there are others who are too ignorant to bring their life into a really social and ethical relationship with their brothers. They must be guided and instructed. (Niebuhr 1959, 76)

Why? Niebuhr responds: "Such is the inevitable defect in the human imagination that we never quite see the interests of others as clearly as we see our own" (Niebuhr 1959, 75). This is the critical aspect of Niebuhr's thought that is not quite as pronounced rhetorically and substantively in *Need to Know*. What both Niebuhr and Catholic social teaching insist is that more reliable access to reality is available but it is often not discovered as a result of our own considered decision-making. Rather, occasionally (and perhaps frequently) we ought to decide against ourselves in favor of those whose social situations are not merely imaginary "plausibility places" (Stackhouse 2014, 187) but crushing economic and social contexts from which there is no escape. That is to say that a good amount of the Christian tradition does affirm what Stackhouse refers to as a form (or forms) of "epistemological chauvinism" (234). And in nearly all those forms of epistemological chauvinism, it is precisely educated, wealthy, and portable people, people privileged in many respects, that are in the wrong. One need merely point, for example, to the woman who was a sinner (Luke 7:36-50), the woman at the well (John 4), the woman who gave her two mites at the Temple (Luke 21:1-4), the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14), and the "good Samaritan" (Luke 10:25-37) to begin to see the biblical pattern that the poor and marginalized get the truth or understand the real world better than those one would expect. Certainly, Stackhouse is aware that we still live in Niebuhr's

America, where even “a relatively modest amount of wealth and education insulates us against the realities of, say, the lives of those we hire for domestic duties or menial jobs at work, the lives of prisoners and their families, the lives of street people, the lives of the mentally ill” (182). What I am still looking for, however, is something more than an ad hoc engagement with this systemic reality that goes all the way down (including how we interpret Scripture), something that will prohibit a too quick assumption that allows me to conclude that I have looked at all the available options and picked what seems best to me (241).

By this point, it should also become clear that this second set of comments, which began with a concern with how to decide in an ambiguous world, cuts all the way back to an understanding of vocation as well. This is not arbitrary. Rather, I see this as inherent in Stackhouse's pragmatic methodology rooted in a Christian understanding of vocation oriented to getting things done. As an ethicist, I certainly understand and perhaps even appreciate this move (though I wonder whether the debts to Kant here are more significant than acknowledged). In the above, however, I have sought to press what I take to be a lack of emphasis on two of the concrete and privileged aspects of the vocation for all Christians engaged in shalom-making—the demand to care for and learn from creation, the poor, and the marginalized. These cannot be “misplaced obligations” (238) but must be continually pursued regardless of what other resources we consult or guidance we need. In fact, I would even go so far as suggesting the following: to the extent that creation, the poor, and the marginalized are ephemeral or abstract in our understanding of vocation, so too are we as Christian thinkers. Stated most starkly, that is my deepest concern with Stackhouse's continually-on-the-move pragmatic epistemology.

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