

**BOOK COMPARISON: KRAFT AND HIEBERT ON
EPISTEMOLOGY**

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We live in uncertain times. Terrorist attacks, highly mobile families, and rapid technological “advancement” color our daily lives. We are an assaulted people. Pressed in on every side, but unlike Paul can we truly say, “... but not crushed; persecuted, but not driven to despair” (2 Corinthians 4:8-9)? We have lost our cultural sense of certainty and self-assuredness. Once we were a people with unlimited vision.

The modern marvel of unfettered technological progress was to usher in a new world order of prosperity and equality. Where religion had failed, science would triumph. Our participation in the Enlightenment project was a God-send, each person could attain full self-actualization through the new scientific insights applied to every dysfunction of life. We *knew* that we knew the solid, unshakable, absolute truth. This was, of course, only discernable through proper, rational methodologies. But given enough time and freedom from the oppressive, dictatorial constraints of external authority we could achieve anything. The universe was at our fingertips, our knowledge would lead us.

But then something happened. Perhaps it was the realization that the war “to end all wars” did not actually end all wars. Perhaps it was the images brought into our homes by the modern miracle of television, the images of holocaust, genocide, and political betrayal. But something happened and as a society we became much less certain of what we thought we knew. Maybe nobody knows what is going on. Maybe whatever you think is right is just as good as what I think. We became a culture of “whatever”. Descartes could confidently proclaim, “*Cogito Ergo Sum*”, now t-shirts brag “I shop therefore, I am”. We are disillusioned.

Charles H. Kraft’s *Anthropology for Christian Witness* is a helpful book in looking at this cultural dilemma that we face. He speaks as a field-wizened missionary and careful scholar. But he is careful to do this without seeming the least bit arrogant or self-assumed. He speaks personally, with the heart of a pastor who cares deeply for his readers and their thinking. How do we make sense of this world? What can

anthropology teach us as citizens of the planet as well as heirs in the Kingdom? Kraft helps us see that how we know is as, if not more, important as what we know. Or to put it another way, “is what I’m looking at really like what I’m seeing? Or do my glasses alter or distort what is there” (1996: 15)?

Not surprisingly, as this subject matter will make clear, it is helpful to see these types of discussions from multiple sets of eyes. Paul G. Hiebert offers us that opportunity. He dedicates a large portion of *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* to this topic of epistemology, or how we know what we know. He refers to a “crisis in epistemology” and outlines various epistemological varieties and responses to this crisis (1994: 22). Hiebert excels at the fair and balanced presentation of an argument. He is deliberate and careful to spell out epistemology and theology in its various manifestations. He writes as a teacher who is concerned that his students receive a fair treatment of each position he outlines, prior to making an assessment or evaluation of them. This is a welcomed writing technique, for too many authors write as self-convinced promulgators of narrowly defined topic.

In Hiebert’s material, the reader gets a taste for the breadth and depth of a field. Furthermore, Hiebert allows for necessary caveats regarding his methodology. For instance, before presenting the “taxonomy of epistemological systems, a meta-epistemological grid by which to compare various epistemological options” (ibid: 21), he admits that there are dangers in setting up such a system. It tends to over-simplify the positions and their nuanced differences, as well as presupposes that “mutual understanding among them is possible” (ibid: 22). Again, this is refreshing because too often readers are led to believe that whatever measures and analysis an author presents are to be taken as final and normative. Both Kraft and Hiebert represent the best of Christian humility as scholars and writers. Neither presupposes their personal inerrancy. Kraft says as much, “You may detect in this chapter and elsewhere in the book touches of

the dogmatism of the direct realism that I seek to avoid. Sorry. But look out for the same tendency in yourself” (1996: 24).

Both Hiebert and Kraft advocate for a critical, or mediated, realist perspective of epistemology. They present their respective arguments in very different ways, but in the end, they arrive at a very similar place. Kraft limits his address to three perceptions of reality;

1. “Unmediated, Direct or Naïve Realism”,
2. “Idealism, Intuitionism, or Absolute Relativism”,
3. “Mediated, Indirect, or Critical Realism” (1996: 18).

Hiebert’s taxonomy, however, outlines six different epistemological positions;

1. “Absolute Idealism”
2. “Critical Idealism”
3. “Naïve Idealism/ Naïve Realism”
4. “Critical Realism”
5. “Instrumentalism (Pragmatism)”
6. “Determinism” (1994: 23).

The number of positions is really not very significant, as much as with how they are dealt.

Kraft frames his argument theologically. “With respect to the God we serve, we have to distinguish between the REALITY of God (God as He is) and how we perceive Him” (1996: 19, emphasis in original). Kraft differentiates between capital “R” Reality and lower-case “r” reality. This represents the critical realist position. There is an objective, absolute Reality (capital “R”) and that is what God sees and knows. Further, we have access to that Reality, but we can never know fully to what extent we are operating in Reality (as God knows it) and reality (as we perceive it). A Naïve Realist would assume that what we know is Reality as it is. This can take the form of empirical

epistemology – we can only know what is material and provable. Similarly, in religious fundamentalism – we (the pastor, set of believers, theological position) know the full and complete Reality of God. In either case, dogmatism is common, if not required. This is the heritage of the Enlightenment, the rationally knowable, statistically verifiable positions of both scientism and religious fundamentalism.

The reaction to this claim of epistemological supremacy led society into “absolute relativism”. With this utterly relative approach assumes that only what is “real” for me is “real” at all. In other words, there is no Reality apart from my personal reality. This belief has been propagated by social scientists and liberal theologians. Everyone is “right” in absolute relativism. Kraft, and Hiebert, reject both of these claims, naïve realism and absolute relativism. They both suggest a way through this false dichotomy. That way is the critical realist approach.

Hiebert takes a critical realist approach to theology. He holds the Bible to be “the source and rule for Christian faith and life, the final criterion against which to measure theological truth” (1994: 30). In our theologies we must recognize that we, as individuals, or even as communities, cannot be fully and completely privy to all Truth. Truth, God’s reality, does exist but we cannot be the sole possessors of such a thing. In light of this, Hiebert emphasizes the priesthood of all believers.

The Holy Spirit is at work in all believers who are humbly open to his guidance, leading them through the Scriptures and the Christian community into growing understanding of theological truth and its meaning for their lives (ibid: 30).

A critical realist understanding of theology affirms the People of God as a “community of interpretation” (Kraus in Hiebert 1994: 30). It is the community of faith that provide the appropriate hermeneutic of Scripture. Epistemologically, the church together forms its understanding of God’s self-revelation by way of its common life together. It is the embodiment of God’s Word in the community that shapes how truth is understood

contextually. “The authentic community is the hermeneutical community. It determines the actual enculturated meaning of Scripture” (ibid: 30).

This does not mean that truth, God’s ideal, is decided upon arbitrarily or “willy-nilly”. Quite the contrary. Hiebert suggests “three checks against theological error”; first, all theologies must be founded in Scripture; second, the Holy Spirit is active in the community making God’s truth known through the Bible; and third, individual believers and churches must rely on one another to discern what God is saying. Persons and communities must be open to critique, questioning, and dialogue. Not the fruitless dialogue of absolute relativism, but the orienteering discernment of the People of God in pursuit of, and in relation to, God himself.

In conclusion, Kraft and Hiebert each help nuance the various commonly held assumptions regarding epistemology in our world today. They help the reader, and by extension the Christian community, to understand the shifting epistemological ground on which we stand. They insightfully point out our cultural assumptions and expose them to the light, the true light, of God’s revelation. Most importantly, their work can be an impetus to break from the cultural captivity we experience in the Western church. For too long we have capitulated to the prevailing societal norms instead of critically assessing them by Kingdom ideals. The critical realist position is one that can help the church speak prophetically and invitingly to world in crisis. May God grant us courage to be so bold and so loving at the same time.

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