The intended audience of this book, that is written in the style of a dialogue, is not scholars or professional philosophers, but “those who believe in God but are confused about their intellectual right to that belief” and “those who do not believe in God but are willing to inquire as to whether there is more to such belief than blind faith” (9). Let us see what Clouser has to offer to each of these groups respectively.

The first piece of comfort for the confused believer is that he can be in his intellectual right to belief in God even in the absence of arguments for God’s existence. This is fortunate enough, for in Clouser’s opinion none of them is successful. The believer has an intellectual right to belief in God because that belief “is both acquired and justified by [religious] experience”, where ‘religious experience’ refers to any experience by which a religious belief is acquired, deepened or confirmed. A belief is a religious belief, Clouser tells us, when “it is a belief in something as divine or a belief about how to stand in proper relation to the divine, where something is believed to be divine provided it is held to be unconditionally nondependent” (24). On this understanding of ‘religious belief’, then, a materialist has a religious belief too; for he believes that matter is unconditionally nondependent, or, which comes to the same, has ‘independent existence’.

Clouser argues that no person is without religious belief, i.e. no person is without a belief about what has independent existence. He furthermore denies that such beliefs “can ever ... be justified by evidence and argument” (35). Still he holds that they can be justified. How? By experience: “those beliefs have an experiential basis” (39).

What is the experiential basis of theistic religious belief? Clouser lists “voices, visions, and miracles”, “the sense of a presence”, and “mystical communion”. Still, he warns that these extraordinary and sudden experiences do not exhaust the field. For religious experiences need not be sudden, they can develop gradually. Here he exploits an analogy with aesthetic experience: “We may be exposed to a particular work of music or a painting but not think much of it at first. As time goes by, however, it strikes us more strongly; we say it ‘grows on us’. Similarly, belief in God can come on gradually as well” (61-2). In all these cases, however, theistic belief is not produced by reasoning. It is a “basic belief”, i.e. “not derived from other beliefs” (65).

Clouser heavily emphasizes that theistic religious beliefs are “self-evident”. But he has a rather idiosyncratic understanding of that notion. On the traditional understanding of it, a proposition is self-evident provided one need only understand it (i.e. understand the words or concepts involved) in order to see that it is true. Clouser, however, talks about self-evident belief, which he defines as “a belief that appears compellingly certain without being inferred from any other belief” (72). On this understanding of “self-evident”, perceptual beliefs (such as: right now the sun is shining over my table) and memory beliefs (such as: last year I was in Aberdeen) are self-evident too (which, on the traditional understanding, they are not).

So, theistic belief is “self-evident” (on Clouser’s understanding of that notion). One wonders how this fits in with Clouser’s insistence on experience as the basis of such belief. The answer is that Clouser thinks of an episode of something’s being self-evident to someone as an experience; as he thinks of it, we experience various things as self-evident.

Clouser stresses that “self-evident beliefs” are not “infallible”, i.e. it is possible that one has a self-evident belief that is false. Furthermore he tells us that “the certainty to be derived from self-evidency is person-relative” (79). So, what is self-evident for one person, may not be so for another. Here he draws a parallel between theistic belief and belief in e.g. the Axiom of Equals (things equal to the same thing are equal to each other). For Clouser this axiom is self-evident; but for others maybe not. In this respect theistic belief and belief in the axiom are in the same epistemological boat. Since no
one would claim that one has no intellectual right to believe the Axiom, no one
should claim either that one has no intellectual right to believe in God.

This, then, is Clouser’s comfort for the confused believer. His message for the
other half of his intended audience (viz. those who don’t have the experience that
belief in God is self-evident) is that they put themselves in a position to have the
requisite experience. One gets oneself into that position by reading the Scriptures
(116), by putting oneself in contact with a community of believers in God, by the
reading of some theology “as a help to opening up your experience” (117), and finally,
by saying prior to each Scripture reading something like "If you’re really there, God,
show me" (118).

The penultimate chapter deals with a number of objections that might be raised
against Clouser’s comfort and his message, viz. that the Scriptures are unreliable, that
biblical teaching is inconsistent with the findings of science, that there is so much
suffering in the world that God can’t be what Scripture tells he is, and that appeal to
self-evidence equally supports incompatible beliefs. Clouser ably deals with all of
them.

Clouser’s is an interesting book in that it, obviously, draws from two reformed
philosophical traditions that generally don’t get in touch with one another. Clouser’s
notion of ‘religious belief’ (belief in what has independent existence) is clearly from
the Dooyeweerdian stable. Clouser’s epistemological position is clearly influenced by
Plantinga and Wolterstorff (the thesis that belief in God can be properly basic, what
Clouser calls “self-evident”; he also avails himself of Plantinga’s notion of “proper
function”). In the main I find myself in agreement with much of what Clouser says.
On various minor points (minor with respect to the overall argument of the book)
however, I find his book unconvincing. I will list them.

1. Clouser definitely takes a very negative stance towards arguments for God’s
existence. They don’t work and he claims that no one ever came to belief in God
through them. On both counts I disagree. Arguments for God’s existence can work,
so long as the non-theistic believer can accept the premises of the arguments offered.
The fact that not every non-theistic believer can accept all the premises of such
arguments, should not close our eyes to the fact that some can accept some premises.
This point has been argued by George Mavrodes in the charming little book that
Clouser himself refers to! Second, the claim that no one ever came to believe in God
through arguments is an empirical claim for which Clouser furnishes no evidence
whatsoever.

2. Clouser’s use of a number of epistemological notions isn’t always satisfying. (i)
The notions ‘being in one’s intellectual right’, ‘justification’, and ‘having a basis for
one’s belief’ are used more or less interchangeably, but aren’t discussed with any
rigor, although they are the objects of considerable controversy in current analytical
epistemology. (ii) As indicated, Clouser has a rather idiosyncratic understanding of
the notion of “self-evidence”. Perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, theistic belief and
belief in the Axiom of Equals are all tagged “self-evident”. I had rather stick to the
traditional distinction between what is “immediately evident” and what is “self-
evident”; some mathematical and logical propositions may be self-evident, but no
perceptual proposition ever is, although very many of them are “immediately evident”
and, like many mathematical and logical propositions, “basic” and certain. (iii)
Clouser talks as if beliefs can be self-evident. It is, however, not so much beliefs that can
be self-evident, but rather the content of beliefs (that which is believed). Being self-
evident is not a property of belief but a property of a proposition. (iv) Clouser talks as
if beliefs can be fallible. I should think we had better say that beliefs can be false, but
that faculties, or persons, can be fallible. Fallibility is, or can be, a property of faculties
or persons, not of beliefs. (v) Clouser uses “knowledge” in such a way that in order for
someone to know that p, it isn’t required that p be true. All that is needed for
someone to know that p, is that p is certain and justified. So, on Clouser’s view,