# Farmington Papers

ZP278

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## MODERN THEOLOGY
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## 2. GOD - TO BE OR NOT TO BE?
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## HIGH TIDE

In 1867, in his last collection of poems, Matthew Arnold published *Dover Beach*, in which the poet looks out to sea and listens to 'the grating roar of pebbles which the waves draw back'. It prompts him into making this a metaphor of faith:

> *The Sea of Faith*
> *Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore*
> *Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.*
> *But now I only hear*
> *Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,*
> *Retreating, to the breath*
> *Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear*
> *And naked shingles of the world*

Arnold is here reflecting on the decline of faith which he perceived during his lifetime. But during my lifetime this poem has been interpreted in a more particular light. In 1984 the Anglican priest and theologian Don Cupitt published a book called *The Sea of Faith* in which he claims that Arnold's poem expresses 'the sense, common in his time,

that the ancient supernatural world of gods and spirits which had surrounded mankind since the first dawn of consciousness was at last inexorably slipping away'. [1]

Cupitt's interpretation is not surprising. Four years earlier he had published a work[2] in which he argued that the time had come for theists to abandon 'theological realism' (i.e. the traditional concept of God as existing objectively) and instead to translate the theological enterprise out of the objective into the subjective world. If 'God' is still spoken of in cosmic or in objective terms in the late twentieth century then the word will just be a fossilised anachronism employed by escapist minorities. If, however, we regard faith as an autonomous and self-consciously human pursuit of the religious ideal, 'God' might be resurrected (and more universally comprehended) as a 'mythical embodiment of all that one is concerned with in the spiritual life'. [3]

Cupitt's 'non-realism' is not a recent theological position. The debate between realist and non-realist understandings of religious language has been going on for

about 150 years[4], but in a philosophical arena. However, in recent years the debate has begun to extend itself into religious, and even clerical, circles. In the last two years, for instance, three books have been published by Anglican clergymen, each of which argues for a similar non-realist apprehension of faith. There is also an ecumenical movement called *The Sea of Faith Network*, which acts as a forum for those laity and clergy interested in, or committed to, a non-realist belief.

There are good grounds for supposing that the non-realist/realist dialogue is one that is here to stay. Some even think that it will, before long, be the main issue on the churches' theological agenda. Whether this is true or not has yet to be seen but surely the controversy is important enough to be expounded and taken up in discussion at sixth form level? *The Sea of Faith Network* is in high tide and for this reason alone there should be a wider understanding of the issues under debate.

## WHAT IS NON-REALISM?

There is a variety of forms of religious non-realism and it is important not to confuse these with the atheistic philosophies we might be more familiar with. Nearly all religious non-realists remain deeply and sincerely committed to the use of religious language and of the word 'God'. Their reason for doing so are included below in an outline of the non-realist thesis, which is based on the following assumptions:

**(1)** There is only one reality and that is the realm of material things and living organisms. There is no personal God 'out there' giving ultimate meaning to the world. There are no absolutes. God exists only *in mente* as a projection of the human mind, and not *in re*. There is no supernatural truth; in the words of Gertrude Stein, 'there is no there there.' (*The Sea of Faith Network* provides the

following working definition of non-realism: '...the view that there is nothing beyond or outside human beings, neither God or some notion like Ultimate Reality which gives life meaning and purpose. We do that for ourselves'.) [5]

**(2)** Although God does not exist *in re*, there is still an effective use of the word 'God'. Religious language has a vital function in expressing things of value. A.J.Ayer's logical positivism and similar philosophies do not do justice to the depth and pluriformity of life. It is through religious language that we can celebrate our personal and communal ideals, and symbolise them in their highest form. We are essentially linguistic beings who by our use of words create meanings for ourselves - including 'spiritual' meanings. We explore these meanings in our cultural and religious myths. Of course, all our language is relative to our historical context; language about God is therefore really about the self and does not emerge from somewhere outside of ourselves.

**(3)** Worship is an end in itself. Religious non-realists continue to take part in services, sing hymns and recite creeds - not in response to an ultimate transcendent reality but because liturgies offer us ways of connecting with our deeper selves and with one another. Kant argued that ethical autonomy was its own reward - so too is our participation in liturgies. The language of religion is able to craft the interests and concerns of our community in a uniquely spiritual way.

**(4)** Although the realist God is no longer intelligible to us and has 'died', there is no cause for despair. We have to take our lives in our own hands, be creative with our language, be high in our aspirations and seek what is humanly good. We may be orphaned but we are free. Think like Prospero:

*Now my charms are all o'erthrown.*
*And what strength I have's my own.* [6]

## HUMPTY DUMPTY LANGUAGE?

Non-realism has hit the news. The Press is especially keen to report on non-realist clergy because of the attraction of a headline about 'atheist vicars'. But religious non-realists strongly deny the accusations of atheism made against them. They still maintain the use of the word 'God' and therefore regard themselves as theists. But 'God' does not have to refer to a supernatural being at the apex of an impossible thesis. Hugh Dawes, an ordained minister of the Church of England and a religious non-realist, explained his position to *The Independent* newspaper as follows:

'I strongly object to being described as an atheist, which I am not. There are many ways of being a theist, and I do not accept that it is possible to speak of God only from within a supernatural worldview. My life and my ministry are both a response to a whole nexus of meanings, values and principles for which only the language of God suffices - a way of life to which one will give one's life and which flows from the man Jesus and those who, in different ways, have looked to him down the centuries. I freely acknowledge that this is not quite the same as 'classic' theism, but it is a very long way indeed from what is usually meant by atheism.' [7]

The first issue which needs attention, then, is the morality of language, the limits which can be imposed on the project of redefinition. Is Dawes twisting words like Humpty Dumpty to mean what he chooses them to mean? Are the non-realists redefining theological terminology to create their own private language? Or can non-realists use language about God in such a non-referential way and still remain within the Christian tradition? Personally, I do not see why not. All of us have our own interpretative skills when praying to and talking about God, no matter how unconscious we are of them. The non-realist worshipper is no different

from the religious believer in this respect. In the present religious climate, a rather cold climate in which we need to huddle together, inter-faith dialogue celebrates the fact that we invoke the 'God of a thousand names'. The non-realist God is surely but one of these thousand. We must all be aware of the danger of thinking that we alone possess the correct name of God. Such thinking is often really about the business of self-approval. It is right for all thinking believers to engage with what non-realists have to say about the more traditional understandings of God, for such dialogue may reveal to us a genuine need for a revision of our own pattern of belief.

## TRADITIONAL OR REALIST?

There is also a corresponding need on the part of non-realists to be more keenly aware of the variety of ways in which realists conceive of God. In many of their recent publications there is a tendency to use the words 'traditional', 'classical', or 'orthodox' interchangeably to describe the theism of *all* realists. This does not do justice to the views of those who have moved far beyond a 'traditional' understanding. The authoritarian and interventionist God whom Cupitt and others want to dismiss is a God whom many realists have also dismissed.

One non-realist author rejoices in the freedom that he received in his conversion away from the God 'who watched over one's every action and would finally judge everyone for what they had done in this life'[8]. Another enjoys his freedom from the 'Celestial Controller' giving wisdom from above, to whom Christianity's language still appears always to point, and from the God 'who pulls the strings to control the universe'.[9] Yet another author writes: 'Freed from the burden of trying to believe in a *supernatural* world, we shall find a new joy in the *natural* world and in human life'. [10]

## CRITICAL REALISM

It seems then that religious non-realism 'frees' people - but from what? From the burden of trying to maintain a belief in a God who is irrelevant to the people of today? From a God who was once praised as all-powerful and immutable, but who is now commonly thought to be implausible too? If this is the case - and it does appear to be - then there are many realists who also would want to join the non-realists in their desertion of such a Celestial Controller, but who nevertheless find it misleadingly fundamentalist in approach to deny totally God's existence *in re* purely because we have come to a knowledge of the complexities and fallibility of human understanding; this knowledge does not necessarily lead to an affirmation of the vacancy of God.

Such realists - let us call them 'critical realists' - think that much of orthodox belief is outdated, mistaken and/or in need of revision, but deny the non-realist assertion that talk of God is really just talk of the self and its ideals. To use a Kantian framework, the fact that God is in the category of the noumenal (i.e. the ultimate reality which is beyond the grasp of human consciousness) rather than the phenomenal (i.e. reality as perceived and conceptualised by humans) does not make God less real. Religious realism does not need to imply a timeless and immutable system of thought. Neither does it have to imply that the older the faith the more pure it is; nor does it need to deny the fact that all language is human and culturally-conditioned. Some theological realists may deny these things, which many other realists regard as simply naive. We cannot unthinkingly just accept the God who has been handed down to us by previous ages. Instead we need to acknowledge the inevitable anthropological character of all that we say and think about God, and to unravel parts of our tradition in order to re-knit a theology for our own generation.

Relativism does not necessarily imply non-realism.

## POSSIBILITIES OF A VIA MEDIA?

For critical realists then - and I count myself as one - the non-realists may well be guilty of systematizing their impatience with the orthodox past too soon and too radically. A total scepticism about metaphysics is not necessarily the second step in revising theism. There may well be later steps which might lead some into non-realist territory, but before we reach them we need to embark on a rigorous and critical reshaping of a theology concerned to explore that particular human response to life that ultimately reality may be trustworthy and that we may be able to apprehend 'in extremely partial and highly imagistic ways truths about reality beyond those that we apprehend through the other varied ways in which we learn from the world around us'.[11] Our experience still suggests to us that there is a depth to life which is gift-like and which needs our attention:

*All that we do*
*Is touched with ocean, yet we remain*
*On the shore of what we know.*[12]

Believing that reality has a gift-like nature calls for as much faith as does the belief that nothing exists outside of our language. For some of us, however, it is a mistake to think that seeing in a single moment all the words in a language is equal to seeing 'God'.

Critical realists acknowledge that theology is a human construction but are also aware that the source of beliefs and the validity of beliefs are separate things. That religion involves projection need not disprove the existence of an object of religion. Culturally - and historically - conditioned symbols may still have an extra-human reference. We affirm that there is a transcendent divine reality, which the theists refer to as God, and

we are conscious that the way this reality is thought of and experienced by us is shaped and coloured by our humanity. We perceive the real through our religious categories.

Brian Russell compared the position of the critical realist to that of someone looking at Lincoln Cathedral on a foggy night, in which the spotlights shine up onto the beyondness of the Cathedral which reaches back down into our midst; but the light is reflected towards us by the fog. There is only reflected light, but an impressive though inexactly identified reality beyond and within the light.[13]

I do not think that this just an obscure metaphysical fancy but that it actually does some justice to the intuition that there may be more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in non-realist philosophy. As one critic of Cupitt has noted, 'Part of our difference is, I think, that Mr Cupitt actually cuts the Gordian knot of the objectivity of God, where I would wish to go tracing its several strands and trying to see why it has taken these particular contours'.[14]

The non-realists value their freedom. What freedom can the critical realist enjoy? Well, it is not the same as the autonomy celebrated by Cupitt, for instance, who decries the 'despotism of mystery' in which obedience is a sin. But it is a freedom born of an 'owned' commitment, a freedom sought through a right dependence on a modern and meaningful concept of God, which is neither naive in its realism nor dismissive in its reactive voluntarism. Critical realists hold on to the hope that theology is not to be played with for our own advantage, but can be used as a telescope to get a glimpse of the sacred. Hope cannot be deconstructed. Worship is an autonomous activity for the critical realist too. Worship is born of awe and love and not of fear. But it is worship of the ultimate transcendent and the Real.

A question often posed to religious non-realists is 'I can see why you find the concept of God exciting but why on earth do you continue to address Him?' The critical realist addresses God in the hope of living according to the divine will and purpose - like R.S. Thomas

*leaning far out*
*over an immense depth, letting*
*your name go and waiting somewhere*
*between faith and doubt*
*for the echo of its arrival.*[15]

## HONESTY IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

It is obviously important that those involved in the religious education of young people of today should encourage honest discussion in the classroom. Such an approach of honesty and openness should now include a study of the realist/non-realist debate. Many sixthformers will understand the non-realist objections to orthodox belief and will find the non-realist interpretation interesting. Others may perhaps welcome the non-realist interpretation of worship as a confirmation of their feeling that religion is more about usefulness than about 'Truth'. But there may be more than a few who will find the non-realist use of religious language helpful and, indeed, a way into their own participation in a religious tradition.

To conclude, then, it is the thesis of this paper that many may be helped by a better understanding of the issues raise by non-realism. As a recently-ordained minister of the Church of England I find these issues highly stimulating and challenging. Many of the proponents of non-realism have voices which speak powerfully to the modern crisis of belief. But increasingly I find their offering unsatisfactory. Their thesis contains much that is true and corrective but it is also founded on a certainty and finality which I cannot share.

My faith as a critical realist is more of a collage than a system - an attempt to piece together a theology shaped by the innumerable events, perceptions and circumstances that give my life its form. These perceptions often include a sense of unveiling a depth and meaning to life, and are like matches struck in the dark. It is a faith rooted in a tradition but not dictated to by it, and it is cumulatively, slowly and often painfully acquired. It is a *via media* between an intransigent orthodoxy and an intransigent non-realism, and its vulnerability can only be spoken of by an honesty which is, in the words of Professor Leslie Houlden, 'not synonymous with speaking one's mind in all circumstances....still less with enjoying intellectual excitement; more a matter of weighing all relevant considerations, then combining firmness with tentativeness, strength with provisionality, clarity with scepticism, because of the character of our knowledge of God and our pilgrim-like relationship with him'. [16]

JULY 1994

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *The Sea of Faith*, Don Cupitt, BBC 1984 p.22
2. *Taking Leave of God*, Don Cupitt, SCM 1980
3. Ibid, p.166
4. One might for instance argue that the work of Feuerbach was instrumental to a non-realist understanding of religion.
5. *Notes for Newcomers* for Sea of Faith III Conference 1990
6. From the Epilogue of *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare
7. From a letter to *The Independent*, 8th September 1993
8. *Faith in Doubt*, David A. Hart, Mowbray 1993 p.7
9. *Freeing the Faith; A Credible Christianity for Today*, Hugh Dawes, SPCK 1992
10. *God in Us: A Case from Christian Humanism*, Anthony Freeman, SCM 1993
11. Review by Maurice Wiles of *God in Us* in *Theology*, January 1985
12. *For Dudley* in *Walking to Sleep*, Richard Wilbur, Faber 1971
13. *With Respect to Don Cupitt*, Brian Russell, in *Theology*, January 1985
14. *Religious Realism*, in *Modern Theology* 1984,4
15. *Later Poems* by R.S. Thomas, London 1983
16. *Frontiers of Honesty* by J.L. Houlden in *God's Truth*, ed.Eric James, SCM 1988

## RECOMMENDED READING

### (a) Introduction to Non-Realism

*Atheist Priest? Don Cupitt and Christianity*, Scott Cowdell, SCM 1988

*Taking Leave of God*, Don Cupitt, SCM 1980

*The Sea of Faith,* Don Cupitt, BBC 1984

*Freeing the Faith: A Credible Christianity for Today*, Hugh Dawes, SPCK 1992

*God in Us*, Anthony Freeman, SCM 1993

*Faith in Doubt: Non-Realism and Christian Faith*, David A. Hart, Mowbray 1993

*Theology in Postliberal Perspective*, Daniel Liechty, SCM 1990

### (b) Critical Realism

*Connections: The Integration of Theology and Faith*, J.L. Houlden, SCM 1986

*In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*, Gordon D. Kaufman, Harvard 1993

*Real Presences*, George Steiner, Faber 1993

*Faith and the Mystery of God*, Maurice Wiles, SCM 1982