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0521811090 - Realism and Christian Faith: God, Grammar, and Meaning

Andrew Moore

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CHAPTER I

*Realism and Christian faith: towards
an ontological approach*

INTRODUCTION

Obituary notices announcing the death of realism continue to appear in philosophical and theological works,¹ but what is it that is supposed to have died? The philosophical doctrine known as realism can be expressed in terms of three characteristic sets of claims which, though not held by all realists and opposed by some, can serve as a preliminary formulation.² *Ontologically*, the realist holds that there is a reality external to human minds and that it exists as it does independently of the concepts and interpretative grids in terms of which we think about it. Its being what it is does not depend on our conceiving it (as idealists hold), or on our conceptions of it (as Kantians hold), or indeed on our conceiving it at all. Reality is there to be discovered as it objectively is; it is not subjectively invented, constructed, or projected. Hence, *epistemologically*, the realist holds that reality can be (approximately) known as it is and not just as it appears to us to be (as empiricism holds). *Semantically*, the realist holds that it is possible to refer successfully to, and so make (approximately) true statements about, reality. That is, in classical terms, the truth of a proposition is a matter of its corresponding to reality independently of our being able to verify or otherwise confirm it.³ Thus, when Christian faith is subjected to philosophical scrutiny, typical realist claims are that (1) God exists independently of our awareness of him and of our will,⁴ but that (2) despite this, we can know him and that (3) human

¹ See, for example, in the philosophy of science, Fine 1996²: 112, in theology, Milbank and Pickstock 2001: 1.

² The formulation of the philosophical position is adapted from Dalfert 1989: 16f.

³ Although the correspondence theory of truth has been widely abandoned in philosophy, the Christian philosopher William Alston (1996) has argued for 'alethic realism' via a defence of a version of the correspondence theory of truth. In his 1995a (37ff) he briefly expounds his alethic realism to show that Christian non-realism is incoherent; regrettably he does not argue positively for the realism of the Christian faith.

⁴ The need to add independence from our *will* to the definition of a Christian realism will become apparent from Cupitt's voluntarism.

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language is not an inadequate or inappropriate medium for truthful speech about God.⁵ This, in broad outline, is the view defended and argued for in this book.

Concerning the world of macroscopic objects such as tables, chairs, and people, the realist position might seem so obviously correct as not to need defending; for sure, in everyday life we live as realists. In this sense, realism is alive and well; to recall Mark Twain's famous cable message, reports of its death are an exaggeration. But what about the atomic and sub-atomic particles out of which present-day science tells us the tables and chairs are made up: are these real? As we shall see in chapter 3, there are philosophers of science who deny that they are. For them, proclaiming the death of realism amounts to persuading us that objects many had thought to be real never were. And then consider our moral beliefs: do we hold them in virtue of some objective moral order? Or perhaps our moral beliefs are expressions of feelings of approval or disapproval, unconnected to any independent moral reality – as Logical Positivists and others have held. For them, moral philosophy has been a long wake for a dead moral realism.⁶ And, relative to the reader of these words, is the past in which they were written real? Again, there are philosophers who argue powerfully that it is not. What is more, they can consistently deny the reality of the past whilst accepting the independent reality of other people's minds. So being an anti-realist about one aspect of reality is not *prima facie* inconsistent with being realist about other aspects of reality.⁷

Yet it does seem *prima facie* inconsistent for a Christian who says the creed each Sunday, who prays to God as creator and preaches stewardship of the world as God's creation, to deny that the creator of the world exists independently of the mind and to regard the creed as 'a statement of

⁵ It can be seen from this that the Scholastic debate between 'nominalists' and 'realists' over the status of universals is somewhat, though not wholly, remote from our present concern. Twentieth-century philosophical interest in realism received a major impetus when G. E. Moore effectively closed the nineteenth-century domination by idealism with his paper on 'External and Internal Relations' (1922: 276–309). The question of realism in something like its present form appears in Barth's 1929 lectures on 'Fate and Idea in Theology' (1986a: 25–61, cf. 1961b: 218–19). Barth influenced two of the key figures in twentieth-century discussions of the topic: T. F. Torrance (for example, in his 1969 and 1982) and Donald MacKinnon, who resolutely defended Christian realism from at least as early as his 1945 essay on 'Verifiability' (1968: 232–48; and see in particular 1979 *passim*, especially 138–65). Important and deserving of attention though his contribution is, Torrance's work lies outside the main stream of thought on which I focus. Rather unsatisfactory discussions of his realism can be found in Achtemeier 1994 and McGrath 1999: 211–20. Another tradition that has defended realism but which lies beyond the scope of this book is Transcendental Thomism, especially Bernard Lonergan's version: see, for example, his paper 'The Origins of Christian Realism' (1996: 239–61, cf. 218f).

⁶ However, with Logical Positivism itself dead and buried, realism is now resurgent in moral philosophy: see Sayre-McCord 1988.

⁷ This has been a major theme of Michael Dummett's work on realism: see, for example, 1991: 16.

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common purpose' (David A. Hart 1993: 82) – with no ontological reference beyond those who utter it. It seems even more inconsistent for a practising Christian minister and leading non-realist seriously to declare 'I place the death of God around 1730' (Cupitt 1990: 189) and yet (one presumes) to say 'and the love of God be with us all, evermore. Amen' at the end of a funeral service for a human being. So, to announce in a theological context that realism is dead is to make a very far-reaching claim concerning not just an abstract point in philosophy with no relevance to everyday life but one whose ramifications go to the heart of Christianity.

Although Christian denials of realism about God may seem inconsistent with professing Christian faith, they reflect not just academic fashion but also lively currents of opinion in contemporary church life. The Sea of Faith Network is a religious organization embracing Christian and other faiths which has amongst its stated objects 'to explore and promote religious faith as a human creation'.⁸ According to one of its official documents, God is not

a metaphysical entity 'out there'. Such a God is too small. 'He' is no longer credible. God is, and always was, a metaphor for the values which, though we understand them to be generated by human culture, we have come to think of as 'ultimate' and 'eternal' ... Sea of Faith suggests that it is time to 'take leave' of a real God 'out there'. (Boulton 1997: 9)

In their emphasis on the influence of culture in generating religious ideas and practices, proponents of Christian non-realism reflect the influence of the post-Structuralist stream of the phenomenological tradition. Important and rigorous versions of anti-realism have been developed in analytical philosophy, but although Kant has influenced anti-realism in analytic philosophy and Christian non-realism, his views have had less direct impact on the formulation of the latter.⁹ A significant exception here is the principal and originating force behind Sea of Faith, the British philosopher of religion and Anglican priest Don Cupitt.¹⁰ His classic statement *Taking Leave of God* (1980) has almost become a manifesto. In it he attacks realist

⁸ Quoted in Boulton 1997: 3, no source cited. The Network has lay and ordained members in many Christian denominations. It has branches in Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.

⁹ In analytic philosophy, see, for example, Goodman 1978; Rorty 1980, 1989: 3–22. Michael Dummett is generally regarded as an anti-realist (see, for example, 1978: 1–24, but cf. xxxix). Trigg 1989² offers a clear and forceful introduction to the debate; for his views on theological realism, see his 1992 and 1997.

Anti-realism and non-realism may be taken as cognate, though the former has a technical meaning associated with Dummett (1978: xxx, 145–6); the latter is the normal usage of Christians of that ilk.

¹⁰ Another notable exception is the American Kantian thinker Gordon Kaufman (e.g., 1993).

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Christianity on the ground that objective theism is ethically, philosophically, theologically, and culturally indefensible, and advocates its replacement by an 'expressivist' reinterpretation of Christian faith. Alvin Plantinga has described his views as possessing 'a certain amiable dottiness' (2000: 39 n. 7), and whilst there is some truth in this, to dismiss Cupitt as an eccentric is to miss both the depth of his learning (though this is often too lightly worn) and the brilliance of his rhetoric, and so also the power and impact of his opposition to religious realism.

Nevertheless, Cupitt (and many other members of Sea of Faith) is at pains not to be seen as either anti-religious or as an atheist. Cupitt believes that we must take leave of the God of realism for religious reasons.¹¹

Religion is not metaphysics but salvation, and salvation is a state of the self. It has to be appropriated subjectively or existentially. There is no such thing as objective religious truth and there cannot be. The view that religious truth consists in ideological correctness or in the objective correspondence of doctrinal statements with historical and metaphysical facts is a modern aberration, and a product of the decline of religious seriousness. (Cupitt 1980: 43)

Cupitt's expressivist Christianity is intended to promote salvation by liberating people from the cramped, heteronomous confines of realism's 'cosmic Toryism' (1990: 54) and the church's 'highly bureaucratic salvation machine' (2001: 7). Instead, he proposes an autonomous faith in which 'God is the religious requirement personified and his attributes are a kind of projection of its main features as we experience them' (1980: 85).¹² 'The religious requirement' is 'that we must become spirit' (1980: 85), and this means that 'when we choose God we choose a demand upon ourselves which is *a priori* and overriding, namely the demand that we shall become individuated, free, responsive and purely spiritual subjects' (1980: 88).¹³

Cupitt is a prolific writer and his position has changed over the years, but its broad moral and philosophical outlines have not.¹⁴ Thus, in his agenda-setting book *Reforming Christianity* (2001), he reaffirms that 'we are thoroughgoing anti-realists, to the point of nihilism' (39) and advocates a return to 'religious immediacy' and the Kingdom teaching of a Jesus unencumbered by ecclesiastical dogma. We must 'give up ... the old belief in objective truth'. We need to

¹¹ The phrase *Taking Leave of God* is adapted from Meister Eckhart, and Cupitt sees his position as an organic development of Christian tradition (see his 1984a). See also David Hart 1993: 5, 14, 134.

¹² See also Cupitt 2001: 9, 27–31.

¹³ As this passage illustrates, there is a Gnostic strand in Cupitt's thought; see also 1980: 11 and 1992: 134.

¹⁴ For a survey see Stephen Ross White 1994.

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learn to do without ... the belief that we are presented with a ready-made world, a cosmos whose reality and intelligible order are determined from a point that is both outside ourselves, and also outside and beyond the here and now ... No spirit world or transcendent entity mediates the real to us. *We* order the world. (30)

And because we order the world, we need to drop 'the belief in fixed, objective defining essences of things ... things are what we currently take them for' (31). This attack on what he calls essentialism is in keeping with the 'constructivist' vein in much contemporary thought.¹⁵ For Cupitt Christianity is rather like Humpty Dumpty's 'glory' in *Alice in Wonderland*; since it has no essence, Christianity can be whatever Cupitt wants it to be.¹⁶ Thus, although 'people will say that the kingdom religion I describe is "not Christianity"', he replies that 'we must of course be utterly indifferent to that charge, because it is based on an obsolete assumption' (31).

Realist Christians sometimes ignore the role that culture, language, and institutions play in shaping Christianity and mistakenly identify the faith with one particular cultural or ecclesiastical manifestation of it. They can be far too committed to the view that only one historical or doctrinal expression of the faith expresses it definitively. But if it is true that *ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia*, the kind of essentialism Cupitt attacks in the name of a Kingdom religion based on Jesus' ethical teaching must be false. Cupitt's argument gives the strong impression that he is trying to define out of existence the construal of Christianity accepted by those who disagree with him. Superficially, his anti-essentialism is a neat move against a Bishop wishing to remove turbulent anti-realist priests from his diocese.¹⁷ When a Bishop suggests to anti-realist clergy that what they are preaching and teaching is not Christianity, these priests, armed with Cupitt's argument, can simply reply that the Bishop's view is based on the outmoded notion that there is such a thing as 'Christianity'. But this move is unlikely to persuade. Realist Christians can, for the sake of argument and as a rhetorical strategy, accept Cupitt's denial that there is such a thing and, by Cupitt's own argument, reply that their construction of Christianity, their historical narrative, is

¹⁵ 'Constructivism' is a term widely used in debates about realism. Its precise meaning varies, but in general it suggests the view that the area of reality under consideration is created rather than discovered by us; see Devitt 1991²: 157. Versions of constructivism are frequently encountered in postmodern ontologies; for an (ironic) example, see Sokal and Bricmont 1998: 241. A sense of what is at stake theologically is hinted at by the analytic philosopher Hilary Putnam when he argues that on Nelson Goodman's philosophical view 'there is nothing that we did not make to be what it is. (Theologically, one might say that Goodman makes man the creator)' (Putnam 1992: 113).

¹⁶ At one time he regarded his outlook as 'a modest advance on Buddhism' (1992: 50).

¹⁷ The *cause célèbre* here is the Bishop of Chichester's dismissing the Revd Anthony Freeman from his post as a Priest-in-Charge in the mid 1990s.

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different: Cupitt is welcome to his, but from a realist perspective, he is recognizably in dialogue with what Christianity is and therefore it is still an open question whether what he describes is 'Christianity'.¹⁸

It is hardly surprising that the question of whether Christianity is or can be realist has become a matter of increasing and sometimes heated debate amongst Christians – both those who are theologically trained and those who are not. Nevertheless, whilst Cupitt and the Sea of Faith serve to introduce some of the themes of this book, my main purpose is not to reply to or to refute their position, and there are two reasons for this.¹⁹ The first is that Cupitt's main argument for non-realism begins from the same philosophical foundationalism as the objective theism to which he thinks realist Christianity is committed. However, foundationalism suffers major weaknesses and has had as bad an impact on arguments for realism as it has on those against it. It therefore needs to be dealt with in its own right and will be a significant theme of my argument throughout this work, particularly in chapters 4 and 5. The second reason is a development of the first: foundationalism is preoccupied above all with how we secure the foundations of our *epistemological* claims. Again, because this concern has distorted the understanding of Christian faith in both traditional and radical versions, it helps explain why realists and non-realists often seem to argue past each other. What is needed is an attempt to deal with the philosophical and theological issues underlying the dispute in order to get beyond this impasse, and that is what I undertake.

More generally, the Sea of Faith Network and Cupitt's work should be regarded as symptoms of a general philosophical and cultural malaise at the end of modernity rather than as causes of a specific and novel theological problematic. To attempt to deal with this malaise head-on as well as to argue for the realism of the Christian faith would make my project impossibly large since it would require both detailed scholarly diagnosis and

¹⁸ Cupitt seems to concede this: see 2001: 39.

Issues concerning the exercise of power and authority are never far from the surface in Christian non-realists' arguments, and the approach I have sketched could, if undertaken without great pastoral sensitivity, and perhaps inevitably in any case, confirm non-realists' suspicions. Nevertheless, (Archbishop) Rowan Williams is correct when he points out that 'it is not at all clear that non-realism is politically innocent. The implicit claim . . . that non-realism represents the irreversible direction of human thinking is a powerfully political one; and the use of "we" by the non-realist (or anyone else, of course), as in "we can no longer believe that . . .", is a claim to power and legitimacy of a kind' (1997: vii). See also (Bishop) Peter Selby's 1997 and Thiselton 1995: 105–17. I have addressed some of the pastoral and ecclesiological dimensions of Christian non-realism in my 1999.

¹⁹ For arguments explicitly directed against Cupitt, in addition to Stephen Ross White 1994, see Keith Ward 1982; Hebblethwaite 1988; Thiselton 1995: 81–117; Rowan Williams 1984; Stephen N. Williams 1995: 110–42.

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rigorous constructive argument. Such an attempt would also be likely to be over-burdened by methodological considerations, which, whilst important in their own right, might distract attention from the substantive doctrinal considerations that ought to shape a Christian theologian's diagnosis and treatment of any conceptual problems, particularly those surrounding realism. David Ford has stated 'The question of how or whether one maintains some sort of realism . . . is central to much current theological debate' (1992: 209). Nevertheless, perhaps because of the historical and philosophical scope of the problems related to the debate about realism, very few theological works have recently been published focussing on realism as a topic in its own right. The majority approach it in a polemical way (Cupitt is the usual target), or via another problem (such as that of religious language, as in the case of Janet Martin Soskice). Although he is widely regarded as an anti-realist, the very distinguished Catholic philosopher Michael Dummett suggested that 'anti-realism is ultimately incoherent but . . . realism is only tenable on a theistic basis'.²⁰ Substitute 'Christian' for 'theistic' and that could almost be my argument in a nutshell. Dummett has not published the paper in which he argues this, for, as he candidly admits, 'I do not think I know nearly enough about the question of realism to be justified in advancing such an argument' (1978: xxxix).²¹ Those who know Dummett's work will disagree; nevertheless, where philosophical angels fear to tread . . .!

TOWARDS AN ONTOLOGICAL APPROACH

Some terminological clarifications

A major proposal of my argument is that we need to approach the question of realism in Christian faith from an *ontological* perspective. This needs some elaboration. First, I am not concerned to advance an argument for *religious* realism. This is because the doctrinal outlooks of particular religions will require their realism to be defended in ways appropriate to their own particular ontological commitments, and, in any case, not all religions are realist. For example, on the latter point, Francis Cook has written that

The [Zen] Buddhist contribution to the debate [about] language is its discovery that reality does not disclose itself in the form of language but rather reality is obscured by habitual, innate patterns of thought and language which are imposed

²⁰ The philosopher and practising Jew Hilary Putnam has hinted at a similar view: see 1983: 226.

²¹ However, see Dummett's very intriguing 1994.

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on a reality that is void of what the language names. In other words, we do not discover the real and then name it, we rather impose or superimpose over reality what it does not possess . . . It is a process of *creating* reality rather than *discovering* it. The reality which is so compelling to us that we fight and kill in its name is nothing but mental construction totally lacking in an objective base. (1993: 68)

Most people who debate ‘religious realism’ are in fact arguing about the Christian religion and/or theism. However, in the light of Cook’s words, it might be wiser, more honest, and possibly more respectful to other faiths not to lump all religions together but to seek instead to find out what realism means with respect to particular faiths, and then to examine what degree of overlap – if any – there might be which could justify a general religious realism. Furthermore, it is arguable (one thinks of the Old Testament prophets) that ‘religion’ can in good measure be a human construct that hides more than it shows of God. Thus, properly speaking, it is not concerning *religion* or *faith* as human phenomena that Christians are or are not realists, but concerning the God who is the object of their faith and the referent of their language.

A second elaboration is that I shall defend a *Christocentric realism*, not *theological realism*. There are several reasons for this. First, although ‘theological realism’ has become a portmanteau phrase to describe what classical orthodox Christianity upholds and what non-realists such as Cupitt oppose, my own use of the phrase is somewhat narrower and ideal-typical. We shall look at this position in detail in chapter 3, but I have in mind a cluster of methodological moves and philosophical tendencies according to which theology learns how to be (or, how it succeeds in being) realist by drawing from the philosophy of science and philosophical theism. Although no single author demonstrates the position in a pure form, many – for example, Janet Soskice, Arthur Peacocke, John Polkinghorne, and Wentzel van Huyssteen – explicitly claim to be defending ‘theological realism’, and there is sufficient conceptual overlap and mutual influence between them to identify their common position generically as ‘theological realism’. As we shall see shortly, theological realists construe the realism problematic in epistemological and semantic terms, but this has problems which, I believe, can only be tackled from a Christocentrically focussed ontological perspective.

At many points in the argument, I shall refer to ‘a Christian realism’. This phrase is intended as a generic term for that which opposes Christian non-realism, but it is also meant to draw into the foreground of the debate the argument that if the triune God reveals his independent reality to humans, it is likely that this will be detected by attending to the practices

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of individual and corporate Christian discipleship which together make up the Christian faith. As the eminent church historian James Atkinson once said, 'If you want to see God at work, you need to go to the back streets of Sheffield, not the university library.' My argument involves looking in detail at some of these day-to-day 'non-theological' practices of Christian faith, and we shall see that these are at least as important in expressing the reality of God as (academic) theology.²² Despite the technical nature of the questions discussed, my deep concern is for the witness and well-being of the church.

A further reason for arguing for a Christocentric realism is that whilst the Christian faith is a proper object of philosophical scrutiny, the converse relation also holds. Theology is bound to 'take every thought captive to obey Christ' (2 Cor. 10:5), and that includes philosophical thoughts.²³ So Christianity and philosophy are conversation partners, but if they are to address each other clearly in their own true accents they should not distort or ignore each other. Thus, whilst realism is a problematic that arises when Christian faith is (as it should be) subjected to philosophical scrutiny, I shall give as much attention as possible to Christian faith's own resources for dealing with it. Traditionally, it has been Christianity's focus on Jesus Christ that has distinguished it from other philosophical and religious outlooks. So by using the phrase 'Christocentric realism' I am indicating that I shall endeavour to meet the problematic from an explicitly Christocentric perspective. One of my central points against theological realism will be that it pays insufficient attention to either the distinctively theological issues that give rise to the debate about realism or the distinctively theological resources that can be used to find a way ahead. In this sense, 'theological realism' is not theological enough; if it were more Christocentric it would be a more genuinely *theological* realism.

The third and most important elaboration of my preference for an ontological approach to the question of the realism of Christian faith is that I write from the perspective of one who confesses the living reality of the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ.²⁴ This means that I write as a Christian theologian who is interested in and loves philosophy, but not as a philosopher of religion.²⁵ It also has a significant impact on the form of my argument for a Christocentric realism. I shall come back to that shortly, but first I need to deal with an objection to this confession. It might appear that

²² *Mutatis mutandis*, we shall see that this point has been well recognized by Christian non-realists.

²³ For a sustained dogmatic and philosophical meditation on Paul's dictum, see Bruce D. Marshall 2000.

²⁴ I discuss this in detail in chapter 7. ²⁵ For an elaboration of this, see my 2001.

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in making it my argument fatally begs the most important question by assuming the independent reality of the one whose independence I wish to defend. Against this, it seems to me that some such circularity is unavoidable in any argument for realism, and in this I agree with the philosopher John Searle, who, defending his ‘external realism’, writes that ‘I do not believe there could be a non-question-begging argument’ (1995: 184).²⁶ One is reminded of Barth’s famous image of the ‘self-enclosed circle’ within which theology and its epistemology operate: theology ‘realises that all its knowledge, even its knowledge of the correctness of its knowledge, can only be an event’ (1975: 42, cf. 1957: 243–54) – that is, a self-originating divine action which can be understood only in terms of itself. Reason is accountable to God and helps us clarify why we believe what we believe, but concerning the things of God, its deliverances fall short of incontrovertible proof.²⁷ Even regarding the existence of the external world, proof is still wanting. This is not, however, merely a *tu quoque* argument:²⁸ it is not that among six equally weak and more or less indefensible positions – Christian realism, Christian non-realism, atheist realism, atheist non-realism, agnostic realism and agnostic non-realism – one might just as reasonably opt for a Christian realism until non-question-begging proofs are in. Rather the claim is that the ordering of ontological and epistemological priorities proposed here results in a more theologically coherent understanding of divine and human reality than competing views because it allows us to deal with the problems with which they tried to deal whilst avoiding the pitfalls of those approaches.²⁹

The importance of the ontological commitment expressed here can be brought out by considering Eberhard Jüngel’s observation in his important essay on (philosophical aspects of) the Christian doctrine of God, *God’s Being Is in Becoming* (2001a). Unlike Bultmann, he claims, Karl Barth ‘does not ask what it *means* to speak of God, but, rather, in what sense God *must* be spoken of in order that our speaking is about *God*. And Barth asks that question on the presupposition that speech of God is meaningful and possible’ because it has to be ‘“acknowledged as a fact”’ that human speech about God takes place ‘“on the basis of God’s own direction”’ (Jüngel 2001a: 1, 2, quoting Barth 1975: 90).³⁰ The theological realism associated

²⁶ Keith Ward (1982: 5–7, 14) and John Hick (1993: 15) seem to hold somewhat similar views.

²⁷ On this and on epistemic circularity, see Alston 1993.

²⁸ On *tu quoque* arguments, see van Huyssteen 1989: 36ff and Helm 1994: 70ff, 209–10.

²⁹ For a somewhat analogous approach to the philosophical debate, see Devitt 1991².

³⁰ For Barth’s own treatment of these concerns, see 1957: 224–36. The Bultmannian problematic is a bequest of Kant. For a lucid discussion of the influence of Kant on these issues, see Wolterstorff 1998.