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

Andrew Moore

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REALISM AND CHRISTIAN FAITH

God, Grammar, and Meaning

The question of realism – that is, whether God exists independently of human beings – is central to much contemporary theology and church life. It is also an important topic in the philosophy of religion. This book discusses the relationship between realism and Christian faith in a thorough and systematic way, and uses the resources of both philosophy and theology to argue for a Christocentric narrative realism. Many previous defences of realism have attempted to model Christian belief on scientific theory, but Moore argues that this comparison is misleading and inadequate on both theological and philosophical grounds. In dialogue with speech act theory and critiques of realism by both non-realists and Wittgensteinians, a new account of the meaningfulness of Christian language is proposed. Moore uses this to develop a regulative conception of realism according to which God's independent reality is shown principally in Christ and then through Christian practices and the lives of Christians.

ANDREW MOORE is a Fellow of the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture, Regent's Park College, University of Oxford. He was formerly Chaplain of Jesus College, Oxford. He has published articles in a variety of church and academic journals, including *Religious Studies* and the *International Journal of Systematic Theology*.

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The great temptation and danger consists in this, that the theologian
will actually become what he seems to be – a philosopher.

Karl Barth

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Preface

It was in a smoke-filled seminar room in the Philosophy Department of the University of York that I first began thinking about realism. Some of the smoke came from Martin Bell's pipe and I recall gratefully his inspiring, imaginative teaching and personal encouragement. This book has been a long time in gestation; I have incurred many debts in the process and it is a pleasure to be able to record them here. There will be those who think that this book carries with it too much of the whiff of the philosophy seminar room; others will think that there is not enough. Probably the former are right. Certainly, had I written on realism before studying theology, the argument would have been very different. For example, my views on the relationship between science and Christianity have changed significantly and positions for which I would once have argued now seem to me to be mistaken and in danger of distorting the content of Christian faith. For related reasons, I am now more sympathetic towards approaches in theology and the philosophy of religion that are indebted to Wittgenstein. As in the case of the relationship between science and Christianity, it is a better appreciation of the history of philosophy and theology in the modern period that has helped change my mind.

It is no accident, therefore, that I now try to approach the philosophical problems to do with the question of realism and Christianity from a much more theological perspective than once I might have. For encouraging me to set out on the path that led to this book, thanks are owing to Alister McGrath and Oliver O'Donovan. When I was an ordinand, the then Bishop of St Albans, John B. Taylor, firmly steered me towards doing doctoral research. I am grateful to him for his clear sense of the vital links between so-called 'academic' theology and the life of the church. The fact that I attempt to treat my themes theologically is also a result of the demands of Christian ministry. To Peter Adam, Martin Bleby, Jim Minchin, and David Warner, colleagues in the ministry, thanks for their friendship and influence during a very happy period in Melbourne, Australia. The first draft of this

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book was written whilst I was Chaplain of Jesus College, Oxford. I cannot imagine a setting that could manage simultaneously to be more congenial, stimulating, and challenging; many colleagues and friends there influenced and informed my thinking in relation to this project. For comments on portions of what became that first draft, thanks to Adrian Brown, Rowan Williams, Stephen N. Williams, and James Wood. For reading the whole of that draft and offering detailed suggestions for its improvement, thanks to Harriet Harris and Maurice Wiles. Many thanks also to Alan Torrance for his constructive criticism and encouraging me to bring the work to publication. I am grateful to Arthur Peacocke for making available to me otherwise hard-to-obtain works by and about him. Michael Scott read several chapters of the manuscript and I am very grateful to him for his comments on them, for hours of argument, and for advice on philosophical matters.

Suffering is part of all our lives and it is an important theme of the Christocentric argument for realism presented in this book. To Robert and Anna Booy, Kenneth Cragg, Tim and Sally Dakin, Alan Garrow, Jeremy and Ruth James, Tim Pidsley, John Roe, Adam Roberts, and Frances Whistler who have supported and encouraged me through some hard times: thank you.

I am grateful to the Principal and Fellows of Regent's Park College, Oxford for electing me a Fellow of the Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture. Thanks especially to Nick Wood, Director of the Centre, and to Fiona Floate. My colleague John Taylor read two chapters of the manuscript and his searching comments proved most useful. Regent's is a very happy, thriving, and stimulating centre of Christian learning in the Baptist tradition, so I am specially thankful for its hospitality to a dyed-in-the-wool Anglican.

It has been a privilege to have Kevin Taylor as my editor (and occasional running partner). I am grateful for his interest in this project, for his advice, and for the professionalism with which he has seen it into print. I am grateful also to the anonymous readers appointed by Cambridge University Press for their many helpful criticisms and comments.

The argument of this book is that through their redemption in Christ human beings are granted to show the reality of the triune God. All those I have mentioned have pointed me to this; however, a few people have been special lights on the way. Oliver O'Donovan read a portion of an earlier draft and offered helpful comments. He also proved – painstakingly, tenaciously, and (to my mind) conclusively – that university bureaucrats were made for academics, not academics for them. More importantly, over

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the years he has kept me mindful of the fact that a theologian is called only ever to be a servant of the Word. John Webster encouraged me to publish the manuscript and has been very generous in practical help and friendship; like Oliver's, his learning and vision of the theological task have been a major inspiration. I have incurred a debt to Paul Fiddes that I shall never be able adequately to repay. He has given me extraordinary loyalty, friendship, and encouragement. He has been generous with time he did not have and read every sentence of an earlier draft, some not just once, but several times. Without his interpretative skills, perspicacious criticism, and many helpful suggestions this would be a much poorer work.

In the end, mortal words falter and then Irenaeus's dictum comes to mind: 'The Glory of God is the living human being; and the life of the human being is the Vision of God.' My parents, Dennis and Ailene, taught me to love the Word. My wife Penny has been a constant companion and friend, and her love has reflected His. Without her practical support this book could not have been written. All three have shown in their lives that of which in the following pages I have tried to speak. 'I moved in your light to see the light.'