

REALISM
AND CHRISTIAN FAITH
God, Grammar, and Meaning

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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: I.

² The formulation of the philosophical position is adapted from Dalferth 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.

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.

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).

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

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.

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.

with the pioneering work of Janet Soskice – its most philosophically able and influential exponent – reflects Bultmann's concern insofar as it is occupied with the question of 'how we can claim to speak of God at all' (Soskice 1985: ix). To use her preferred terminology, terminology subsequently taken up by many other theological realists, Soskice is concerned with how we gain 'epistemic access' to God and the problem of 'reality depiction', of the referential character of religious language.

Before looking at how theological realists argue for our being able to speak of God, it is worth noticing how epistemological and semantic approaches to realism such as Soskice's can inadvertently lapse into idealism. Michael Devitt has taken as maxims of his defence of realism that we should 'distinguish the metaphysical (ontological) issue of realism before any semantic issue' and 'settle the realism issue before any epistemic or semantic issue' (1991²: 3, 4). The reason for this is that if we make our statements about a putatively mind-independent reality in terms of our epistemic experience or causal relatedness to reality – as theological realists do – then it is quite possible to draw the conclusion that our experience *conditions* reality, and this will mean that we have not succeeded semantically in referring to a mind-independent reality.³¹ An illustration of how this argument might run is provided by Richard Wollheim in his exposition of the nineteenth-century idealist F. H. Bradley's 'traditional epistemological argument for Idealism'. He paraphrases Bradley as follows:

Everything that we come across or accept as real, everything that we call a piece of existence or a fact, is always found combined with experience; and if it is always combined with experience, then no meaning can be attached to the assertion that it could exist without experience; and if it could not exist without experience, then it is indivisible from experience; and if it is indivisible from experience, then it is, or is nothing but, experience. (1959: 198)

In addition to the principally theological reasons for beginning with ontology, this provides a *prima facie* philosophical case for doing so.

The answer theological realists give to the question of how we can claim to speak of God's reality is typically stated in terms of an argument based on analogies between the unobservability of theoretical entities in physics and the unobservability of God. Thus, if we can defend realism in the former case we might be able to transpose the arguments by which we do so into a theological key. However, this way of posing the realism question has a number of theologically undesirable consequences which can be brought to light by considering a series of questions addressed to the theological

³¹ Another consequence is scepticism: see Moser 1999.

realists' argument. We need to ask whether it is theologically proper to make the success of arguments for the reality of the creator dependent on the success of arguments concerning the reality of the creation. Or we might want to contest the theological realists' premiss that God is unobservable in a way which is sufficiently analogous to unobservability in particle physics for their argument to be run. Or we might want to question the correctness of their apparent assumption that God can be known in broadly similar ways to that in which the physical world can be known. More generally, theological realism takes realism about creation to be less problematic than realism about God; however, should the creation's reality really be more securely grounded in our theological framework than God's? But perhaps we cannot talk successfully about God, or find out how to do so, if we put the question of his reality in abeyance. We shall come back to this in later chapters, but here it should be noted that in our efforts to show how to speak about God, it might be that our methodology has tied our tongues and prevented us from speaking about God at all. To avoid this possibility, I propose that we need to argue from claims about God's reality and show what range of consequences for our views about the ontological, epistemological, and semantic aspects of the realism problematic follows from them.

The most real idol?

An important question to which I shall give more attention later is implicit in Barth's and Jüngel's concern that we should be speaking about *God*, that is, that we should be talking about God and not an idol. This concern is shared by others whose position is far from being realist. For example, Don Cupitt claims that 'Church Christianity eventually turned into the last great form of idolatry' (2001: 10). The most systematic treatment of the theme from an anti-traditional perspective is that of Gordon Kaufman in his radically and self-consciously constructivist approach to theology. The fullest statement of this is his *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (1993). His argument is built around the claims that 'theologians should attempt to construct conceptions of God, humanity, and the world appropriate for the orientation of contemporary life' and that 'these notions are (and always have been) human creations, human imaginative constructions' (31). Kaufman has usually been bracketed with non-realists, but although there are many themes in common this characterization is too crude: his position is both more subtle and developed with more

dialectical skill than that of most Christian non-realists.³² It is also more Kantian ontologically.³³

One of the most important features of the notion of theology as imaginative construction is that it demands that we clearly distinguish our ideas – especially when we speak of God – from the mysteries to which we intend them to refer. This helps keep us honest in our theological work on the one hand; and it acknowledges, on the other, the full independence of God from what we may think or say. In reminding ourselves of God's mystery we allow God in God's concrete actuality to be whatever God is, quite apart from our symbolizations; in this respect the concept of mystery, just because of its conceptual emptiness and openness, most directly forces upon us what it means to confess God's *reality*; to confess that God is truly *God*, the ultimate reality which is not to be confused with any of our imaginative constructions. (353)³⁴

There is much in this with which a more conventional realist about God might agree.³⁵ However, Kaufman's mistake is similar to that of the early Cupitt: he absolutizes God beyond a Kantian veil of perception as an exclusively noumenal entity.³⁶ In Kaufman's case, this is combined with the view that because theology is wholly a work of constructive imagination, revelation as traditionally understood is an impossibility.³⁷

For much of the Christian tradition – if at times only rather fitfully – God's hiddenness to humans is understood as a function of his holiness, his *moral* otherness, and this is why salvation and revelation are inseparable. By contrast, Kaufman's constructive theology is morally driven, but the moral agenda is written by us. Theology should promote an understanding of God that is 'human-affirming, human-sustaining, and human-enhancing' (424), but here it is a *human* vision of human fulfilment and well-being that fills out these values. '[O]ur construction of the image/concept of God' must be guided by that which 'will most effectively facilitate human flourishing and fulfilment' (42–3). Any understanding of God which obstructs the fulfilment of this vision is idolatrous, and for Kaufman this means most of the Christian tradition.

It is this question of idolatry rather than any knee-jerk supposition that he is a non-realist that should give us pause. Kaufman admits that to worship 'at the shrine of a God, the understanding of which we ourselves

³² Plantinga (2000: 31–42) and Trigg (1998: 187) clearly regard Kaufman as a non-realist; however, cf. Sonderegger 1997: 326ff.

³³ See 1993: 415; cf. 322–40.

³⁴ For the dialectical subtlety of Kaufman's understanding of the reality of God, see 1993: 320.

³⁵ Nor should Kantianism be prematurely dismissed by conservative Christians: see Westphal 1993b.

³⁶ See Cupitt 1985². ³⁷ See, e.g., 1993: 58.

have imaginatively constructed' will be seen by some as 'the crassest sort of idolatry'. To this, he robustly replies that the charge betrays a 'defensive mentality' and an 'authoritarian mode of theological argument' (50, 43). Faced with rhetoric of this kind, it is probably better not to argue but simply to lay one's cards on the table and repudiate the position. Debate cannot settle which understanding of God – that of Kaufman or the tradition he rejects – truly promotes human flourishing, for that would require us to occupy a position which is not available to us – a God's-eye view of the Gods. However, consideration of the crucifixion of Jesus and the moral, religious, and political debates surrounding and precipitating it might shed some light on both sides of the argument. And that is why, in pursuit of a Christian realism, of a realism that aims to be about *God* and not a humanly constructed idol, I shall orientate my argument around the claim that the living God has revealed himself in the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and glorification of Jesus Christ.

To put this in the terms of my overall argument, I begin from the ontological commitment that the triune God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ is the Most Real reality there is. By this I do not mean that his reality differs from ours merely as a matter of *degree*; rather, the creator is most real because he gives reality to creation and so is *absolutely* different from creation: its reality is derived, but his is not. I use the tag *ens realissimum* to abbreviate this claim about God. The content of the concept will become clearer in the course of my argument, but it is worth pointing out at this stage that it need not carry the freightage conveyed by Leibniz's and Kant's use of it in relation to what Kant called 'transcendental theology'.³⁸ As I said, this commitment has a significant impact on the form of my argument, for it means that my exposition of a Christocentric realism has the shape of a transcendental argument.

TRANSCENDENTAL ARGUMENTS FOR REALISM

In modern philosophy, transcendental arguments have their origin in Immanuel Kant's attempt in the *Critique of Pure Reason* to refute David Hume's scepticism. Typically they aim to show that given that a proposition *p* is accepted, certain other conditions must obtain.³⁹ For example, in his argument against Hume, Kant wanted to show that experience (which for him

³⁸ See Kant 1933: A631/B659ff; cf. A576/B604ff, A592/B620ff, and 1978: 34, 44–81; cf. Dalferth 1999: 127. For more theologically nuanced understandings of God as the *ens realissimum*, see Hilary of Poitiers 1954: 1: 5; Anselm 1979: III.

³⁹ On transcendental arguments, see Robert Stern 1999, especially 2–8.

includes sensory experience, beliefs, concepts, and judgements) is possible; amongst the several conditions of this is that we cannot know things as they are 'in themselves' (their *noumenal* reality) but only as they 'appear' to us to be (their *phenomenal* reality). Some scientific realists also use a transcendental argument to defend their position. For example, taking a lead from the Marxist philosopher of science Roy Bhaskar (1975: 23), Soskice claims that 'The [scientific] realist ... is committed ... to the intelligibility of what is essentially an ontological question, "What must the world be like for science to be possible?"' (122). She replies that some kind of realism about the world investigated by science must be presumed. Here, *p* is the proposition that 'science is possible', and we then enquire what must be the case for science to be possible with the answer that realism must be presumed.

Transcendental arguments from truth to God

Transcendental arguments have been used to defend the realism of Christian faith – though without apparent recognition that their form can be construed in this way – by Brian Hebblethwaite in his rebuttal of Cupitt in *The Ocean of Truth* (1988), and, following him, by Ian Markham in *Truth and the Reality of God* (1998).⁴⁰ Both versions are different in substance from my own, for they are arguments 'from truth to God' and claim that it is a condition of our being able to make truthful statements that there is a God.⁴¹ As Markham puts it, 'truth is only defensible if one believes in God. Take away God and there is no adequate safeguard against nihilism and scepticism' (1998: 23). Naturalism, these writers think, is an inadequate explanation for this ability of ours, and naturalistic accounts of realism are in any case 'vulnerable, in an atheistic context, to Nietzschean erosion' (Hebblethwaite 1988: 109). If Nietzschean atheism is right,

Nothing remains the same. Not only do traditional moral values crumble. Reality and truth, as well, are evaporated away. Not only God, but an independent, ordered external world, to say nothing of a given human nature, dissolve. In Nietzsche's own words, 'truth is fiction', and nothing remains but sheer Promethean self-assertion and will. (Hebblethwaite 1988: 31)⁴²

Thus, for Hebblethwaite even a 'common-sense realism' concerning the world of macroscopic objects is hard to defend against anti-realist

⁴⁰ S. R. L. Clark (1998, especially 17–49) has developed a Platonist argument from truth to God.

⁴¹ See Hebblethwaite 1988: 86–7, 102–13; Markham 1998: 69–96.

⁴² Cf. Markham 1998: 97–119.

'constructivism',⁴³ and both writers think that the decline of realism and the rise of constructivism is a consequence of the decline of objective theism. So, in order to underwrite our common-sense convictions about objective reality, we need to invoke a God who is the creator and sustainer of all that is as 'the most plausible hypothesis to account for this objectivity' (Hebblethwaite 1988: 109).

In a nutshell, the argument from truth to God is this: our deep-rooted conviction that truth is a matter of discovery and not invention is best accounted for ... on the supposition of an infinite creative Mind that makes things what they are and preserves them as what they are for us to discover. (Hebblethwaite 1988: 110)

So, the transcendental argument from truth to God claims that God is the necessary condition for our beliefs about truth and objectivity.⁴⁴

Now, there are several problems with this argument, not the least of which are that our culture is increasingly relativist in outlook and that everything from Authorship to Zulu Nationalism via Facts, Quarks, and Reality has been regarded as socially constructed.⁴⁵ What is common-sense realism and morally absolute on one side of the street testifies to an old-fashioned 'binary opposition' and moral absolutism on the other. Although Hebblethwaite claims that it is 'very perverse' to argue that we cannot 'get outside our conceptual or linguistic skin and compare the way we see and talk about the world with how the world is in itself' (Hebblethwaite 1988: 112), in one form or another this perversity is very widely accepted (even if only rarely articulated in these terms). Transcendental arguments look for the conditions of possibility of commonly accepted beliefs, but Hebblethwaite's and Markham's starting point in our agreement about truth is by no means sufficiently well grounded in the population to which they appeal to provide a firm basis for such an argument. The question of the social construction of what we take to be real is increasingly open, and the question of whether Christianity is committed to the foundationalist account of truth and objectivity that Hebblethwaite regards as integral to realism and Christian theism is even more so.⁴⁶ So the argument from truth to God has to assume a lot before it can begin to be persuasive. By contrast, all or almost all participants in the debate about whether Christianity is realist will agree at least with the proposition that if Christians are realist, then their realism concerns the triune God who is worshipped by the

⁴³ Cf. Hebblethwaite 1988: 109–10. ⁴⁴ Cf. Markham 1998: 47–68.

⁴⁵ See the list compiled by Hacking 1999: 1.

⁴⁶ For a relatively constructivist defence of Christian realism, see Patterson 1999.

church. Indeed, this is often the starting point for repudiations of realism by Christian non-realists.

A more serious objection to Hebblethwaite and Markham emerges from the fact that in order to show that God exists as the creator, orderer, and sustainer of the universe, they rely on arguments of traditional natural theology.⁴⁷ This reliance is treacherous, however. The argument from truth to God was set up to show that the concept of truth requires the existence of God. So, if our concept of truth is to be secure we shall need to *know* that God exists. And since our knowing that God exists depends on *arguments*, we shall need to have good reason to suppose not just that our arguments for God's existence are formally valid, but that they are sound, that they are *true*: we can only claim to know that which is true. But this is problematical for Hebblethwaite and Markham: on their argument we need God to exist in order to ground our view of truth, but so far, all we have is (widely contested) arguments for God's putative existence. Without knowing that these are true we cannot know that God exists, but we cannot know that God exists without knowing that the arguments are true. The argument from truth to God requires that we can know that the arguments are true, but this is to beg the question and so render the argument viciously circular because it assumes its conclusion as a premiss.⁴⁸

The argument is treacherous for a further reason. Hebblethwaite holds that we can best account for our conviction that truth is discovered rather than invented by supposing a divine, creative mind. But we need to ask whether a God who is the terminus of an argument can be said to have been discovered rather than invented. Perhaps, to recall *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, God can be made to appear as easily in a puff of logic as he can to disappear. Markham is critical of Swinburne's defence of theism, for he thinks that it produces 'an irreligious view of religion ... Conversion, passion, conviction, and total love of God seem strangely inappropriate on Swinburne's account of faith. It is hardly the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' (1998: 8, 12). But is Markham's? He writes that 'The cause, the heart, and the hope of the universe are goodness and love. This is what a theist means by God. God is a being that causes all things to be.' And a little later: 'God ... is that in the absence (or presence) of which all beliefs are changed. It is a way of looking at the world' (19, 22, *sic*). I shall leave the puzzles implied by this second definition to one side and concentrate on the first. It is far from clear that the God who appears as the conclusion of Markham's

⁴⁷ Hebblethwaite 1988: 86–101; Markham 1998: 77–93.

⁴⁸ Hebblethwaite anticipates but does not adequately meet a similar objection in his 1982: 230.

cosmological argument is in any fundamental respects different from the God of philosophers such as Swinburne, who also offers a cosmological argument. Nor does Markham provide any argument for the view that the necessary being who is the ultimate explanation of the universe actually is goodness and love; he simply smuggles these characteristics into his definition of what a theist means by 'God'. Again, there is nothing in his cosmological argument from which it follows that the causally necessary being is actively involved in sustaining the universe (i.e. that the necessary being is to be construed on Christian or theistic lines). Thus it is not evident that Markham has avoided arguing for the deist God to which he thinks the argument from design leads.

We are therefore left in doubt as to whether the God of the argument from truth to God is a God who can evoke passion and total love – whether this God is in fact the same as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or whether he/it/she is in fact an idol.⁴⁹ As I shall go on to argue, Christians who wish to be realists about the triune God need to ensure that they do not confuse this God with other claimants to divinity. It is far from clear that Hebblethwaite and Markham have succeeded in this. Recall Jüngel's question 'in what sense must God be spoken of?': Hebblethwaite's and Markham's answer seems to be, 'As the ground of truth and objectivity'. But then it is not clear that they give adequate attention to the ontological demand that we ensure that 'our speaking is about *God*': this is the main reason to reject their transcendental argument from truth to God.

Outline of the argument of this book

I have suggested that to argue for a realism concerning God we need to begin with God in his self-revelation in Jesus Christ. This is why my argument is transcendental in structure. One can for illustrative purposes regard Jüngel's paraphrase of Barth's question – 'in what sense *must* God be spoken of in order that our speaking is about *God*? – as setting in train a transcendental enquiry into the conditions which make this speech possible. As Jüngel shows, the most important of these is that God is regarded as 'prevenient': 'God's being *goes before* the theological question about God's being' and therefore before theological questions about the sense in which we must or indeed, can, speak of God (2001a: 9). In the case of the present argument, I

⁴⁹ Cf. Hebblethwaite 1988: 89; cf. 8, 97–9.

seek to show that, given that God is the prevenient *ens realissimum*, certain semantic, epistemological, and ontological conditions follow if we are to be Christian realists.⁵⁰ Because the range of issues needing to be addressed is very broad and because of the primarily linguistic focus of contemporary debate, I give most attention to the semantic rather than epistemological and ontological conditions that follow from accepting God's prevenient reality as the *ens realissimum*.

To demonstrate the importance of God's ontological status for the debate, in the next chapter we look at some problems that can arise from not beginning a defence of realism from a clear ontological commitment to the triune God. Then in chapter 3 I criticize theological realism's epistemological and semantic construal of the problematic. It will emerge that theological realism is inattentive to the distinctive 'grammar' of Christian faith. In chapters 4 and 5 I expound and criticize the arguments of D. Z. Phillips and George Lindbeck, both of whom seek by taking a grammatical approach to stress the particularities of religious forms of life. We shall see that their accounts of Christian faith and its realism are seriously but instructively flawed. Their views help us to see how God shows his independent reality through Christian practices – especially the eucharist – and to offer an account of the relationship between philosophy and theology suitable for defending realism. Taken together these chapters show how Christian faith is distorted if a Christian realism does not begin from an ontological commitment to the triune God.

In chapters 6–9 I present a positive argument for a Christocentric realism. In chapter 6 I discuss, in relation to the reconciling work of Christ, the questions of representation and meaning as they arise in contemporary literary theory and Christian theology. The fruits of my findings are then used to propose a theological account of meaning. In chapter 7 I develop a doctrine of God that is orientated to the realism problematic and suggest the considerations that should orientate theological epistemology and ontology given that God is the *ens realissimum*. With this argument in place I go on to defend in more detail realism's ontological commitment to the prevenient reality of God and argue that realism should be construed as having a regulative role over Christian faith. Chapter 8 draws together the themes of my argument by returning to the question which set it in motion, that is, of Christian speech about God. I examine some parallels between speech act theory and the doctrine of God, especially with respect to

⁵⁰ Jüngel 2001a and Thieme 1985 defend God's prevenience.

some philosophical and theological consequences of promising. In the final chapter I put my argument in the context of some contemporary philosophical discussions of realism. We then return to the account of meaning proposed in chapter 6 and see how Christian realism can be fruitfully construed as God's conforming human words to his 'world' and the world to his word.