

Elements in the Philosophy of Religion

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“I’m afraid I’m a practical man,” said the doctor with gruff humour, “and I don’t bother much about religion and philosophy.”

“You’ll never be a practical man till you do,” said Father Brown.

G. K. Chesterton, ‘The Dagger with Wings’, from
The Incredulity of Father Brown (1926)

Prologue

During an episode of the long-running television series *Inspector Morse*, based on the novels of Colin Dexter, passing reference is made to the (fictional) Bishop of Banbury. ‘Oh yes,’ says Morse, ‘the one who doesn’t believe in God.’¹ We aren’t told what the Bishop does believe, but this is clearly an ironic reference to a phenomenon which, by the late 1980s (when the series first started), had become familiar to the viewing public: an ordained minister who explicitly disavows a traditional conception of talk about God as being, literally, talk about a transcendent being, in favour of some other way of interpreting theological language. The sources of that phenomenon within theological writings go back some time – we can trace one source to the nineteenth century in Matthew Arnold’s *Literature and Dogma*, and in the twentieth century to the writings of theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich. Arguably, it first came to the attention of a wider public with the publication in 1963 of Bishop John Robinson’s *Honest to God*, and again in 1984 with the BBC series *The Sea of Faith*, written and presented by Don Cupitt. (And it is fair to conjecture that Cupitt, rather than Robinson, was the model for the Bishop of Banbury: more contemporary, more radical, and much more direct.)

The natural and inevitable reaction to a statement by a member of the clergy to the effect that we need to replace a traditional conception of God talk is an accusation of atheism. How, the critics exclaim, can one be both a priest and an atheist? This Element is an attempt to answer, if not quite that question, then ones we need to pose on the way to that question: how could God talk be understood, if not as an expression of belief in a transcendent being? Is there a difference between such alternative understandings on the one hand and atheism on the other? Could they be the basis of a religious or spiritual life? There are, it turns out, many different reinterpretations, and I shall focus on one in particular, a position that has come to be known in the philosophical literature as *religious fictionalism*. As I shall present it, this is the view that language about God (and related religious language) is best understood as concerning a fictional world, and that engaging in such language involves engaging in make-believe. The relative simplicity of this approach and its connection with a familiar

¹ *Inspector Morse: Ghost in the Machine*, Zenith Productions for Central Independent Television (1987).

phenomenon make it, I think, an attractive one. It avoids some of the problems facing other ‘non-realist’ interpretations of religious language. But it also faces problems of its own, and I shall be as explicit as I can about these. This is a short Element, and brevity requires focus. I have chosen to focus particularly on one important and influential source of non-realist approaches, including fictionalism, namely Richard Braithwaite’s 1955 lecture, ‘An Empiricist’s View of the Nature of Religious Belief’. Section 2 is a commentary on Braithwaite’s discussion, and Section 3 explores at some length the fictionalist aspect of Braithwaite’s view with reference to more recent literature on fictionalism, a view which has now made an appearance in several areas of philosophy.

Philosophy of religion, like many areas of the discipline, has a specialised vocabulary, including names for the various ‘isms’ or theories. While an over-proliferation of jargon is regrettable and to be resisted where possible, it is more helpful than otherwise to have pegs on which to hang distinctively different views so as to avoid any ambiguity. Adam needed names for the different creatures in the Garden of Eden, and we too need names to navigate this garden of the mind. So a certain amount of definition is the inevitable business of the first two sections. The point, however, is not merely to engage in what one might call intellectual botanising, or marking out an area of ‘logical space’, as philosophers like to put it. It is to enable us to track a position through the debate. To aid the reader, I have included at the end of this Element a glossary of the more specialist terms. And to relieve the monotony of repeated technical vocabulary, I introduce in Section 3 the fictional figures of Reginald and Fiona, who stand for two opposing views of religious language and practice.

My first attempt to articulate a fictionalist position, influenced by debates in the philosophy of science, appeared in *Arguing for Atheism* (1996). In successive papers, I have tried various ways of presenting it, and I have drawn on these in this Element, in particular ‘Playing the God Game: the Perils of Religious Fictionalism’, in Andrei Buckareff and Yujin Nagasawa, eds., *Alternative Conceptions of God* (Oxford University Press, 2016: 178–91). There is now a growing literature on the subject, and this seems the right time for a monograph-length treatment, if only, for the time being, a rather short one. I offer it in part as a contribution to, as well as a summary of the contemporary philosophical debate. But I hope it will also be of interest to those looking for a basis for a religious mode of existence which does not require conceptual commitments they feel unable to accept. By that, I emphatically do not mean that this Element is a ‘religion made easy’ primer. Religion should not be an easy thing to practice, but it is worth asking whether some of the objections raised against religion, even if they have some cogency, really are obstacles to the religious life.

The relevance of the Bishop of Banbury to the Morse episode mentioned above, incidentally, is that the Bishop is the Visitor of Courtenay College, Oxford (another fictional entity), whose role it is to choose a new Master of the College in the event that the Fellows are unable to decide. The retiring Master fears that in such an event the Visitor will foist ‘some incomprehensible modern theologian’ on the College. I shall just say that, in theology, one can be radical without being incomprehensible. That, at any rate, is my hope.

1 Religious Realism: the Natural View?

For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised:
 And if Christ be not raised, your faith is in vain.

1 Corinthians 15: 16–17

1.1 Defining Religious Realism

Religious fictionalism represents a radical departure from what is widely regarded as the natural, or at least the traditional view of religion, and in particular of *theistic* religion: religion for which the notion of God is central. That view is known as *realism*. Fictionalism is by no means the only alternative to realism, but it is arguably the best alternative. Like its ‘non-realist’ rivals, it arose as a religiously sympathetic attempt to avoid the challenges faced by the traditional view. It makes sense, then, to set the scene by describing that traditional view.

So what is it to be a ‘religious realist’? What is it being realist *about*? What is its motivation? What challenges does it face? What alternative views are there? These are the questions we will address in the first two sections.

Let’s begin by setting aside the everyday connotations of the term ‘realism’. In describing someone as a religious realist, we do not mean that they have a hard-headed, practical, no-nonsense, unsentimental view of religion (though the realist might not object to those epithets). The meaning that is relevant to this discussion has more in common, perhaps, with the description of an artistic style as realist: it is to do with what is being represented and the way in which it is represented.

In philosophical discussion, realism is often, and perhaps primarily, to do with a view of a particular language or discourse. Take a non-religious example. Chemists talk about ‘ions’ – the charged particles into which ionic compounds supposedly resolve themselves when put into solution. Take a sentence like ‘This solution contains sodium and chlorine ions.’ A realist about ion talk takes this sentence to have the intended function of saying something true about the world as it really is independently of whether anyone thinks it is that way. It is, as we will put it, intended to be *objectively fact-stating*. Further, the realist will deny that the facts underlying ion talk can equally well be conveyed by sentences which make

no mention of ions at all – for example, sentences about the directly observable behaviour of solutions. We will express this by saying that ion talk is *irreducible* to other kinds of talk. No doubt much of scientific theory concerns what there is in the world. And we might make this the primary issue. Ian Hacking, for example, characterises scientific realism in terms of existence: ‘*Scientific realism* says that the entities, states and processes described by correct theories really do exist’ (Hacking (1983): 21). But scientific theories also concern the *way* things are, so we might want to add to Hacking’s definition ‘and those entities, states and processes really are the way those correct scientific theories say they are.’ Note the important qualification ‘correct’: it is *not* part of scientific realism that our currently scientific theories are in fact correct. The realist allows that at least some of them may be false. But the important point is that they are capable of being true or false – they are *truth-apt*, to use the standard term – and that whether they are true or false will depend on the way the world really is. So, fundamentally, scientific realism is about the kinds of things scientific theories are, and since theories are part of language (even if what they are about is not), it is to do with our understanding of the language we use when we do science. A *non-realist* view about scientific theories will reject some aspect of the realist’s account of how scientific language functions. On one non-realist view, for example, explanations of phenomena in terms of ‘ions’ is just a useful model by which we can classify those phenomena and predict further phenomena.

Just to make one important clarification before we generalise to other kinds of discourse: the kinds of sentence that realists are interested in are *indicative* sentences, such as ‘The Earth orbits the Sun’, ‘There are an infinite number of prime numbers’, ‘Stealing is wrong’; the kinds of sentence, that is, that purport to describe things. From now on, we will call such sentences *statements*. Contrast these with non-indicative sentences, such as commands (‘Silence!’), wishes (‘Oh, to be in England!’) or expressions of feeling (‘How! How! How!’).

Generalising, we will say that *realism about a certain kind of discourse* (scientific, mathematical, moral, etc.) holds the following tenets concerning the statements of that discourse:

- (i) They are *truth-apt*: that is, capable of being true or false;
- (ii) They are *irreducible*: that is, they cannot be replaced by sentences which have a different subject-matter without loss of factual content;
- (iii) Their purpose is to be *objectively fact-stating*: they are intended as saying something about the world as it is, independently of our beliefs, attitudes or conventions about the subject matter of those statements.

The notion of ‘factual content’ should be explained. For the realist, the statements in question have factual content in the sense that there are facts

which would make them true or false. Those same facts cannot be conveyed by sentences about other things. The fact that an English sentence can be translated into (and so in a sense be replaced by one in) French, German, Greek, Japanese, etc., is quite irrelevant. English sentences about ions may be translated into German, but the German translations will still have the same subject matter, namely ions. In contrast, and to use a different example, if all talk about mental states could be replaced by statements about actual or possible behaviour (as a certain kind of behaviourism asserts), since it is really facts about behaviour which make true statements about mental states, then that *would* be a reduction of mental state talk.

Let us turn to realism about religious discourse. We will struggle to find an all-encompassing definition of ‘religious’ discourse, so let us focus on the kinds of discourse around which the realism debate has tended to centre. First, we have discourse about God characterised as a transcendent being. That is, at least, a being not constrained or bound by the conditions which constrain our lives, and perhaps more than that, one whose existence and nature are beyond investigation by science. Such discourse might include such statements as ‘God created the world’; ‘God is the ground of moral value’; ‘God loves us and has a plan for the human race’, and so on. Then we have discourse about our own nature, purpose and destiny which, though not explicitly referring to God, might nevertheless be closely connected with it. In this category we encounter such sentences as ‘We have souls which survive our bodily death’; ‘The purpose of life on Earth is to prepare us for Heaven.’

Let’s say, then, that we have identified a particular religious discourse composed of statements such as these. Realism about this discourse can be defined by applying the above tenets to religious statements: (i) they are truth-apt; (ii) the religious component is irreducible: they cannot be replaced, without loss of factual content, by non-religious discourse; and (iii) their purpose is to be objectively fact-stating: they are intended as saying something about the world as it is independently of our beliefs, attitudes or conventions concerning religious objects. And, if true, then any religious entities posited by those sentences, such as God, really exist.

Tenets (i)–(iii) all concern the way in which religious statements are to be understood. They imply nothing about whether those sentences are in fact true or false. Suppose the statements in question are about God. The traditional believer will not only take a realist view of them but also take them to be actually *true*. The traditional atheist will similarly take a realist view of them but in addition hold that they are *false*. The traditional agnostic will also be a realist but will neither assent to nor dissent from them. Some writers propose adding a further success condition to the characterisation of realism. Andrew Eshleman,

for example, includes the following: ‘At least some religious propositions successfully refer to and/or describe a non-natural transcendent entity’ (Eshleman (2016): 165). I follow Peter Byrne (2003), however, in adopting a more neutral conception, based on the intended function of the language rather than its success in that function, as I want to emphasise the common ground between traditional believers, atheists and agnostics.

A *non-realist* about religious discourse then, is one who denies one or more of (i)–(iii), and since it is possible to deny just one or two of them, as well as all three, we can define the different varieties of non-realism in terms of which tenets they deny and which, if any, they accept.

I said above that (i)–(iii) concern the way in which religious statements are to be understood. But there is an ambiguity about this which we should banish before proceeding. There are two quite different questions we might ask about statements of a certain kind: (1) How, as a matter of fact, are they understood by those who use them? (2) How *should* they be understood, if they are to play the kind of role we want them to (e.g., to sustain a religious life)? Answers to the first are *descriptive*, describing actual practices and understandings. Answers to the second are *prescriptive*, enjoining us to use and understand the statements in a certain way. In this Element we will mainly be concerned with the prescriptive issue, but at points I will draw attention to the distinction between the two issues.

It will also be helpful, in what follows, to distinguish between the *realist about religious discourse*, which encompasses the theist, atheist and (traditional) agnostic, and the narrower category of the *religious realist*. The latter I will take to be someone who not only takes a realist line with respect to a given religious discourse, but who also bases their active engagement with the religion in question on that realist view. The traditional believer will go one step further: their active engagement with religion involves the attitude of *belief* towards what they take to be expressed by religious discourse. They may even insist that belief is the mark of genuine religious engagement. We will describe the view that belief is the proper attitude towards the content of religious discourse as *doxastic religious realism*, or ‘doxasticism’ for short (from the Greek *δόξα* = belief or opinion). This further qualification might seem to be redundant, but an idea which has received increasing attention in recent years is that something less than full belief in the truth of, but still representing a positive response towards religious propositions can be the basis of active religious engagement. This positive attitude might be described as ‘commitment’ or ‘acceptance’ (see, e.g., Pojman (1986) and Howard-Snyder (2013)). The resulting view we will call *non-doxastic religious realism*, or ‘non-doxasticism’ for short. This epistemically more modest view we will encounter again later in the discussion.

1.2 Motivating Realism (1): the Argument from Historical Intention

Why be a realist about religious discourse? One argument is historical. The originators of the discourse intended a realist view of their utterances and writings. We have inherited that discourse, and we simply misuse it if we don't similarly take a realist view. To take a non-religious example, consider the local newspaper. The sane reader of this paper will assume that its contributors intend to give accurate accounts of salient events in the locality: elections to the Parish Council, closure of the public library, proposals to build a bypass, the results of sporting fixtures, notices of forthcoming village galas and 'fun days', and dances at the village hall with Jim on the organ. Heavily figurative language and cynical attempts to manipulate the reading public by propaganda and wild fantasy will be at a minimum. The texts of the various articles were clearly written in a realist spirit, and to interpret them in any other way would defeat their purpose of providing useful and modestly interesting information.

The case of religious documents is perhaps not quite so straightforward. This covers sacred texts, reflections on those texts, statements of doctrine, liturgical texts and so on. These constitute a varied array, and discerning the intentions of the people that wrote them is not always an easy task. Different texts may perform different functions. Some, such as liturgical texts, are plainly instructions and not intended as making assertions. But among the documents that appear to describe things as being a certain way, some look as if they were simply telling fictional stories with a moral point: the parables of Jesus, for example. Nevertheless, for at least some religions, we can identify what look like statements of core doctrine, such as the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion in the Book of Common Prayer. Some are the outcome of deliberations of various councils set up precisely to codify and regularise doctrine, and explicitly set aside certain heretical variants that had become rife. Looking at the tone of such statements – for example, the threat of excommunication aimed at those who persist in their heretical beliefs – it is a pretty inescapable conclusion that these statements of doctrine were intended to convey truths in as explicit and unambiguous form as possible. Why else would there be dire warnings of the consequences of denying them? Why, indeed, would those warnings be put into dramatic and indeed, in some cases, violent effect? Anything other than a realist interpretation would obscure their true purpose.

If we suppose that the originators of these core religious statements, the ones taken to be definitive of the religion in question, had access to the truth – perhaps they were divinely inspired – then we have a further reason to interpret them realistically: they provide us with access to the truth, too. Atheists will deny this, and agnostics will remain neutral, but they will still see the force of

the argument from historical intention, as it allows them to state their own views on whether or not these texts provide access to the truth.

Still, it might be argued, even if we accept a realist interpretation of such statements in their original context, it remains an open question whether the continued use of this kind of discourse should similarly be given a realist gloss. Why should we not reinterpret the discourse, provide it with an alternative meaning, in such a way as to meet contemporary needs? Recall the distinction between, on the one hand, a *descriptive* account of the way in which a discourse has in fact been used in a particular age and society, and, on the other, a *prescriptive* account of how the discourse should be used in our current context. Perhaps, realistically construed, these religious writings are no longer texts for our times. But reconstrued, they may yet have an important function – a moral and spiritual function – to serve. As we shall see, that is precisely the kind of move non-realists will appeal to.

In reply, the realist may point to the importance of continuity with the past. One of the benefits of a religion is the contribution it makes to social cohesiveness. Membership in a society involves practices and traditions based on consciousness of a shared past. In the case of religion, the realist may argue, what remains from the past is not mere forms of words and ritualised behaviour (attending church, kneeling, singing, fasting and so on), but a grasp of how those forms of words are to be understood and the way in which they inform that behaviour. To put it bluntly: our forebears were realists about religion; we have inherited their religious culture, so we too should be realists. Put like that, the argument looks a bit too quick, but the realist can reinforce it with another.

1.3 Motivating Realism (2): the Argument from the Efficacy of Belief

Defenders of religion point to its benefits: it helps us lead better lives. Immersion in a religion will (it is often suggested) bring about a moral transformation; it helps us to get in focus what really matters in life; and it reorients us to the world in such a way that we feel less alienated, and so happier. What religion is recommended on the basis that it will turn us into miserable moral pygmies?

But this potential transformation, argues the religious realist, requires the right attitude. As the doxastic religious realist would put it, only if we *believe* the core assertions of religion will we see clearly how we ought to be, what our purpose is, and what our destinies are. A view of religion as just so much imagery and arbitrary ritual will be quite impotent. (The non-doxasticist will say something very similar but will substitute their favoured attitude for ‘believe’.)

Take as an example the assertion ‘God is love.’ The power of this statement, understood as the realist understands it, can hardly be

overestimated. If the creator of all things embodies the ideal of love, then the world is not fundamentally either indifferent or hostile, for we are loved by this being, and there are the strongest possible grounds for hope that, in some sense, good will prevail. If, on the other hand, the statement is merely symbolic of our own ideals, no such inferences can be made. Further, the realist understanding of ‘God is love’ has practical implications for the way we should conduct our lives in that it places love among the things of paramount importance. We might think this true quite independently of any religious underpinning, but the religious realist story (if true) gives it an absolute authority it would otherwise lack.

Take another example: ‘Our souls are immortal.’ If this is literally true, then we do not have to fear death, or at least should not be dismayed by the prospect of it, since it is no more than the end of a certain phase of our existence. And it puts our bodily lives in the context of something much wider so that life on Earth may be seen simply as a preparation for that further, perhaps purer, existence. Not that all this is strictly implied by the bare statement ‘our souls are immortal’, but it can be part of an elaboration of a view of death that cannot but change the way we view our lives and, perhaps, live them.

In sum, to take religious discourse more or less at face value *and* to believe it true is to enjoy benefits not available to non-believers. Putting this argument for realism together with the previous argument from historical intention we have the following line of thought. We might value our religious inheritance simply as an interesting and instructive historical artefact, viewing it as we might view the remains of a Viking settlement, a Roman mosaic or a medieval text: something to be preserved, aesthetically appreciated and studied for what it might tell us of a past civilisation. If this is how we view it (and no doubt many visitors to cathedrals approach them in just this spirit), then we are under no obligation to treat that religious inheritance in the same way as the people whose religion it was, just as our view of historical remains will not be that of the people whose villages, homes, possessions or legal texts they were. But if we want actively to engage in that religious inheritance, to make it ours as those past peoples made it theirs, then we cannot divorce the outward forms of that religion from the fundamental beliefs animating them. That our forebears intended their core religious discourse in a realist sense is a reason for us, who value our inheritance as a living thing, to use it in the same way. Otherwise, we are merely playacting, like the members of a historical re-enactment society.

These considerations, note, do not provide an argument for religious truth but rather for the thesis that a successful religion must be based on *belief* in its truth.

Having sketched some considerations in favour of realism, we now turn to a series of challenges.

1.4 Challenging Realism

A challenge to religious belief is not invariably – in fact, perhaps it is relatively rarely – posed as a challenge specifically to the realist outlook. There have been plenty of challenges to religious belief. Here is just a selection: the arguments for the existence of God are either fallacious or based on demonstratively false premises; the existence of intense and gratuitous suffering is conclusive proof against an all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving being; religious doctrines are, if not irredeemably obscure, at best pre-scientific hypotheses about natural phenomena which have long been superseded by wholly natural explanations; religion represents not social progress but social immaturity, and correspondingly, religious belief is not a source of moral growth but rather of moral and emotional infantilism. (Representative, if somewhat polemical, defences of these objections can be found in Dawkins (2006) and Hitchens (2007).) But all these objections to religion are based on a realist assumption: they assume that a realist understanding of religious discourse is the appropriate one. Precisely because of this, however, non-realists may see in these objections reasons to favour a view of religion which avoids these problems precisely by rejecting the assumption on which they are based, and thus as paving the way for an acceptance of religion on a radically different basis.

So let us recast these objections in a slightly more considered way, making it clear whether the challenge they pose is to a wider view, namely realism about religious discourse, or to a more narrowly defined one, namely religious realism, or more narrowly still, namely doxastic religious realism. In what follows, I will assume that we are focusing here specifically on theistic religion.

First, there is the *problem of warrant*. If the sentences of religious discourse make assertions about the world, what is the warrant for thinking them true? There are the traditional arguments for the existence of God, and these have been reworked in quite sophisticated ways in modern times. But they are, to say the least, controversial. And, what is perhaps more to the point, religious believers often resist the idea that their belief should depend on the success of these arguments. Their faith was not the outcome of careful analysis of those arguments, and it is unshaken by attempts to demonstrate that they fail. Nor are they prepared to cite other evidence which unambiguously points to the existence of a transcendent being. Shouldn't this be rather puzzling? In other contexts, the holding of beliefs without adequate evidential warrant would be regarded as a sign of irrationality. Imagine someone forming a firm belief in some historical or scientific hypothesis – that we gained our ancient technological knowledge from benevolent visiting aliens, for example – without having correspondingly firm evidence to ground that belief: wouldn't they be justly