

## THEOLOGICAL REALISM

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We are gathered as a quite diverse group. Yet we sense that what unites us may be more important than what divides us. I propose that what unites us is "realism" in two senses.

First, we believe that we are speaking of a real God. For two centuries, now, this has become increasingly difficult, and increasingly rare, in academic and intellectual contexts. Down through the eighteenth century, the question of God's reality was assumed to be a metaphysical one. Either the word "God" referred to a reality independent of human thought, language, and belief, or else there was in fact no reference. If one adopted the latter position, one was an atheist. But atheism was rare in European society in those centuries. Although much about God could be known, many thought, only by revelation, the existence of God was evident to reason.

Hume showed that once one accepts the empiricist idea that knowledge of what is not our own experience comes to us only through the senses, there is no cognitive basis for affirming God's reality. Kant agreed that there is no way to the reality of God through theoretical reason. Still, through his analysis of practical reason, he justified positing the reality of God. Since then the emphasis has been on the *positing*, that is, on the human act that grounds affirmation of God, rather than on the reality of what is posited. Theology has become, largely, anthropology.

The linguistic turn in philosophy and other disciplines accentuated this move away from the metaphysical reality of God. "God" is recognized to be a bit of language. Such bits of language have their meaning in their relation to other bits of language, not by referring to any nonlinguistic entity. In this context, the question of the metaphysical reality of God, that is, of God's existence prior to, and apart from, human language cannot even arise.

The Kantian turn to the creativity of the human mind in shaping experience and the linguistic turn to the great importance of language in shaping how we understand ourselves and our world have both made great contributions to our understanding. But from my point of view as a realist, both grossly exaggerate. The world we live in is not in fact created by our minds. We are created by the world. Language does refer to that which is not language.

For our present discussion, the crucial issue is God. In my opinion one of the reasons, a very important reason, for the decline of the old-line churches, is vagueness about the reality of God. It is hard to worship and serve either something that we posit or a bit of language. We may provide all kinds of reasons to continue supporting the church that do not involve the reality of God, but these do not evoke the depths at which Christian faith in its fullness lives.

The most powerful response in the twentieth century was the appeal to revelation and faith. The Neo-reformation movement argued that the God of reason was never the God of Christian faith. That God is known only through God's self-revelation. This was largely identified with Jesus Christ, although, in a secondary sense, at least, the Jewish scriptures were also regarded as revelatory. There was no question but that, for those in this movement, what is revealed is real, although its reality remained obscure to reason.

Hume had made the point much earlier that belief in God must be a matter of faith disconnected from reason. In his writings, this seems cynical. Believing that for which there is, and can be, no rational justification whatsoever does not seem a wise or socially desirable thing in Hume's world. That it was taken up with great success as the rallying cry for the Christian faith in the twentieth century seems remarkable. It certainly helped the old-line churches to regain some of their lost vitality.

Nevertheless, there are inherent dangers in disconnecting religious beliefs from the rest of human understanding and knowledge. The conviction that these disconnected beliefs are true is difficult to maintain. One must appeal more and more to the supernatural. The whole secular educational system makes this more and more difficult. In fact, neo-orthodoxy faded as a real option for most people after the initial excitement subsided, including most members of old-line churches. Sadly, nothing has replaced it as a unifying ground for belief in God's reality.

Radical empiricism provides an alternative to Hume and Kant and all those who follow them. It argues that our relation to that which is not our immediate experience is not exhausted by sense data, or rather that our immediate experience includes relations that are nonsensory. Whitehead provides the most systematic account of these relations. In his account, a prehension is the way in which one actuality participates in the constitution of another actuality. Thus relations to a real world are inherent in every experience. That there is a real world is not something we have to derive from sense data. On the contrary, we can show that sense data arise out of more fundamental relations.

This analysis supports the independent reality of that which is other. Of course, it also shows that that reality is quite different from the appearances given us in our sense experience. It is a world of subjects, not a world of colors and sounds that is the primary reality. Whiteheadian realism is a very *critical* realism.

By itself radical empiricism, including its Whiteheadian formulation, does not assert the reality of God. It simply reopens the door to that discussion. Once the door is reopened, Whitehead and Hartshorne both find convincing reasons for affirming the reality of God. This is not the place to rehearse the arguments.

The understanding of God whose reality they affirm is quite different from that of much of the Christian tradition. Both Whitehead and Hartshorne thought that their understanding of God is closer to what is embodied in and affirmed by Jesus than is the dominant tradition. Those of us who call ourselves process theologians agree with them.

We find that their view also fits with the actual experience of many believers. It cuts through intellectual puzzles that trouble them. It gives sensible guidance for life.

In short it is realistic in a second sense. Although it challenges the dominant models of thought of the modern era, it does so in ways that fit the actual evidence of the sciences. Although it challenges the dominant inherited theology, it does so in ways that release the most convincing features of the Christian faith from immersion in incredible and damaging ideas.

There are many Christian communities that have not gone through this tortuous history. We may say that, in many ways, they are fortunate. But they have also had problems. The reality of God, taken for granted in these communities, is asserted in ways that create intellectual puzzles and conflict with life experience. The doctrines affirmed are sometimes discordant with what the serious reader finds in the Bible. Hence, apart from concern about the dominant philosophical context, the issue of realism, in the second sense, arises here also. Are the doctrines of traditional theism realistic?

What is striking is that reflection coming out of life experience and Biblical study in communities that have taken for granted the reality of God converge so far with the ideas of God that come from those who have wrestled with, and proposed alternatives to, the dominant philosophical views. We know that some in the conservative evangelical community have used this convergence to discredit those who have been engaged in fresh thinking. Understandably, therefore, some emphasize the remaining differences. That emphasis may be needed.

In any case, tensions continue. Conservative evangelicals may remain suspicious of some of the styles of biblical criticism that inform the approach to scripture of old-line Christians. Old-line Christians may feel that conservative evangelicals are slow to rethink some of their social and ethical views in light of the primacy of God's love. Conservative evangelicals may think that old-line Christians are too concerned about philosophical grounding and about shaping Christian beliefs in light of that grounding. Old-line Christians may think that conservative evangelicals do not fully appreciate the importance of the philosophical tradition in undercutting belief in God's reality among thoughtful people in the modern world.

Nevertheless, our meeting together here suggests to me that these tensions and mutual suspicions are not determinative. They are topics for discussion. I hope and believe that what we share as Christian believers will prove stronger than the divergences that reflect the different paths through which our communities have come to this point. In my opinion, the inherited lines of division may give way to new ones that more usefully point to the issues of the twenty-first century rather than to those of the nineteenth.

Conservative evangelicals who interpret revelation in terms of the love embodied in and taught by Jesus Christ will not be too different from Christians in old-line churches

who also understand God in terms of this same love. Both will strive to express that love in relation to other people and, indeed, to all other creatures.

While old-line believers have convinced themselves that the theology they have developed under the influence of radical empiricism and specifically Whitehead and Hartshorne is responsibly biblical, we have known that are interpretation is deeply affected by our philosophy. Hence, in many circles it is suspect, and we are often ourselves unsure as to the extent to which we may be involved in eisegesis. It is a source of profound reassurance when we find that others, not specially influenced by this philosophy, find in the Bible much of what we have found. Their work greatly enriches and strengthens ours.

On the other side, we believe that it is also important to relate our Christian faith to the natural and social sciences, to other religious communities, to the critical political and global issues of our time. We do not see that conservative evangelical friends have dealt as much with these issues as have we. We think that some of the work we have done along these lines may enrich those with whom we increasingly share the kernel of our faith.

There are other ways in which I hope for mutual enrichment. Old-line believers have too often, in recent decades, treated their faith as but one commitment among others. I hope that relating in this larger community will lead us to recover the wholeheartedness that has been better embodied by conservative evangelicals. On the other side, conservative evangelicals may join with old-line believers in a fuller repentance for the crimes committed in the past, and even today, in the name of Christ.

I do not mean in all this to minimize the importance of differences or to discourage debate. A healthy community includes diversity, and differences among those who are part of the same community often generate the most intense debates. I mean only to express my appreciation that we have defined ourselves, under the leadership of Tom Oord, as a single community, at least as a single community of discourse, inclusive of differences. Since our shared commitment to a real God of love is in fact a challenge to much of the tradition as well as to the intellectual and cultural leadership of our world, let us work in complementary ways to make that challenge effective.