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Religious non-realism: expanding an idea

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Abstract

In this study, I seek to rehabilitate the notion of 'religious non-realism', which is misunderstood in the philosophy of religion and significantly underdeveloped. I begin by widening the scope of the idea to encompass both propositional and non-propositional phenomena, and then focus on non-realist religious practice, expanding beyond what I call *discourse-centred* practices – focused on mobilizing substitutes for realist interpretations of religious discourse; expressivism and fictionalism suggest examples – to practices whose non-realism is discourse-independent. Once discourse-independent non-realist practices are acknowledged, a further distinction presents itself. Non-realist religious practice may be governed by a single idea – such as an expressivist or fictionalist idea – or it may integrate multiple such ideas. I call the former sort of non-realism *monist* and the latter *mixed*. Taken together, these distinctions reveal a range of structurally distinct forms of non-realist (and thus non-believing) religion, including mixed possibilities that have received no attention in the literature. By bringing the latter into view through concrete examples drawn primarily from Christianity, the study shows that the discussion of non-realist religious practice admits of a richer depiction, and one perhaps also more true to life, than philosophy of religion has so far supplied.

Keywords: religious non-realism; discourse-centred; discourse-independent; monist; mixed

Starting points

In recent years, philosophical attention to questions about non-believing forms of religiousness has been on the rise. Much discussion is focused on non-doxastic faith, which retains the realist character of its doxastic cousin. But some is directed to the still more radical possibility of a religiousness that is non-believing because it is *non-realist*. (What believers believe is reported by propositions they take in a realist way, but the religion of non-realists obviously has no truck with propositions taken in that way, and so it counts as non-believing.) My concern in the present study is with the non-believing religion of this second, non-realist sort. Because I have recently been preoccupied with issues in the philosophy of Christianity, my attention, when applying my points and supplying examples, will be focused specifically on Christian religious practice. But my main findings are perfectly general, and examples from other traditions might swiftly be found.

The current discussion of non-realism in the philosophy of religion largely concerns the viability of a *fictionalist* response to the discourse of religion (see, e.g., Joyce and Brock 2023; Le Poidevin 2019; Palmqvist 2023; Sauchelli 2018; Scott and Malcolm 2018). Sometimes, secondarily, one sees some gestures in the direction of the older Braithwaitean *expressivism*

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(Braithwaite 1955), which likewise concerns the discourse employed in religious contexts and how it should or may be interpreted. None of this is surprising. For on the standard assumption, religious non-realism is a proposition or claim that rejects and replaces a realist interpretation of religious *language*, and an emphasis on expressivism or fictionalism fits this assumption beautifully. But both the propositional interpretation of non-realism and the focus specifically on language are unduly limiting. In this study, I shall show just how limiting they are by displaying the attractions of an account that moves beyond propositions to practices in its interpretation of non-realism and by introducing two independent distinctions which make room for non-realist religious practices that have little or nothing to do with language or discourse.

In some contexts of the philosophy of religion in which discussions today are problematically narrow and confining, the problem can be chalked up to the influence of conservative theology. But here I think it is more likely that the cause is philosophical. Philosophers are understandably going to be interested in religious *claims*, which they can argue for or against. They will be interested in whether such claims or propositions, expressed in language, can contribute to insight in metaphysics or ethics or epistemology, and so, when concerned with religious practice, will naturally be drawn to practices in which discourse – as seen, for example, in creeds – is central. Thus they will naturally *still* be drawn to discourse-centred practices when discussion turns from realism to non-realism. Whether this diagnosis is correct or not, it's clear that, due to one factor or another, philosophers need to be provoked to notice and take into account an expanded understanding of religious non-realism. The latter is what ought to be offered to philosophers and non-philosophers interested in considering the widest range of non-believing forms of religiousness. In what follows, I seek to provide the needed provocation.

The status quo, and beyond

I will start with the status quo on realism and non-realism in the philosophy of religion and then begin to show – still in quite general terms – why and how we should move beyond it. (Non-realism must obviously be understood against a background of realism, and so there will be almost as much about the latter as about the former in this section and the next.) The term 'religious realism' is most widely used for the philosophical view that indicative sentences in the discourse of religion about transcendent objects such as God or the Tao or the Buddha-nature are to be read as *objectively fact-stating*: as saying something about reality as it is independently of our attitudes or conventions concerning religious objects. And religious non-realism is regarded as entailing the denial of this claim. I am borrowing here from Le Poidevin (2019), but plenty of other authors will be found to agree with this minimal account (see, e.g., Alston 1989, 6; Hick 1993, 4; Moore and Scott 2007, 1).

Now even this minimum raises questions once one starts to probe it. Do philosophers who accept religious realism thus construed think that *all* indicative sentences in the discourse of religion are to be read in the realist way? Often there is a preoccupation with theistic religious traditions, and conservative versions of them to boot. Many realist philosophers might be prepared to grant, on considering, say, a liberal Unitarianism or recent arguments about religious fictionalism like Robin Le Poidevin's, that a different reading is not automatically to be viewed as non-religious. So what we might call a *strong* religious realism, which embraces the 'all', will not seem plausible for long (disputes about the nature of religion alone should inspire doubt about it). Correspondingly, a weak non-realism – the denial of strong realism – will win favour. Furthermore, the weaker alternative realist views, which apply the realist label only to some subset of religious claims, thus enabling their advocates to argue against any strong non-realist claim purporting to cover all religion, will have to be assessed on a case-by-case basis and are unlikely to inspire much

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in the way of general interest – if only because strong non-realism enjoys no more in the way of initial plausibility than strong realism.

But at this point it should be noted that, so far, we have blurred an important distinction between *descriptive* (or hermeneutical) and *prescriptive* (or revolutionary) versions of realism and non-realism as depicted above. This distinction, taken over from discussion of realism in certain other areas of philosophy, such as the philosophy of science and the philosophy of mathematics, is especially important when considering *non*-realist claims: are they thought to identify how the religious actually see themselves and their discourse or only how someone supposes it would be *good* or *proper* or *best* for these things to be seen? Both a strong descriptive non-realism and its strong prescriptive sibling will seem rather controversial (this is the right way to take my point at the end of the preceding paragraph) – the former hasn't even managed to get off the ground, given what everyone knows about the history of religion. And weaker versions are, again, likely to vary in interest and plausibility and to lack the ability to inspire any general debate – unless, perhaps, we're talking about a weaker version of prescriptive non-realism specifically aimed at showing that the general claim of strong prescriptive religious *realism* is false. A purely *permissive* brand of religious non-realism is also imaginable, in a variety of forms, and I suppose it too might generate a more general interest.

Suppose one sorted out all the issues raised or suggested in the preceding paragraphs on the status quo and found, as seems not unlikely, that some version of weak prescriptive non-realism or of permissive non-realism can be made plausible in a religious context. Would one have said everything that needs to be said about religious non-realism? I think not, for the two reasons suggested in the previous section: the focus on religious *discourse* and the assumption that religious realism and religious non-realism are no more than views or claims or *propositions* both mark the status quo as ripe for supersession.

But why are these two things problematic? My defence in the one case is connected to my defence in the other, and the connecting notion is that of religious *practice*. First let's notice its central importance in the present context. Practice must be paramount in the religious case, which is so different from science and mathematics, to which philosophers have too often looked when considering what to say about religion. Sure enough, theoretical claims of interest emerge from some forms of religion or religiousness too, but science and mathematics are *fundamentally* theoretical, whereas religion is fundamentally a matter of practice and, as we'll see, sometimes not theoretical at all. Thus we can't expect everything we need to know when formulating an approach to the latter to flow by analogy from our discussion of the former.

If this is so, then we should question what philosophers of religion are doing when they treat as fundamental the resolution of issues at the propositional level involving strong or weak religious realism and non-realism, understood as concerned with the interpretation of discourse, and only secondarily discuss religious practices, defining them as realist or non-realist on the basis of which interpretation is accepted in them. (Recent discussions of religious fictionalism, including Le Poidevin's, often proceed in just this way.) It would be rather easy for a prejudice in favour of theory that has little to do with religion to get in our way here. So I'm going to recommend a different approach. Indeed, given the fundamentality of religious practice, there's some reason to think that the approach just mentioned, which is the easiest to associate with the status quo, gets things backwards. Instead of beginning with philosophical debates and ending with religious practice, we should start with religious practice. More precisely, we should begin our *philosophical* discussion of these matters, not with the debate about various abstract propositions concerning discourse so tempting for philosophers, but by identifying what makes a religious *practice* realist or non-realist and seeing where this takes us. Perhaps it will turn out that this involves endorsing propositions about religious discourse (e.g., about the objective truth of

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some religious creed or about the appropriateness of treating it, say, in a fictionalist way); perhaps it won't.

After some reflection, so I suggest, we should say that it won't. Take realist practice. If guided by the behaviour of ordinary religious practitioners and sensitive to what they may be assumed to have assimilated, we will not require that our realist practitioner have given any thought to matters concerning realism as defined under the status quo, or have formulated any propositions relevant thereto. After all, they are thinking about their creeds, not about *how they are thinking about their creeds*. Even the child who thinks of God in the manner dictated by the usual religious parental instruction counts as a religious realist. Why? Because even though they have given no thought to the matter, they are treating indicative sentences about God in the relevant way, thinking about *God* objectively. (They also think about their parents and their pets objectively – all without any understanding of the word 'objective'.) I suggest therefore that we shouldn't build endorsement of a philosophical claim into our understanding of what makes a religious practice realist or non-realist but go with this notion of how religious sentences are 'treated' instead. If we were solely concerned to identify the behaviour appropriate to relevant philosophical discussion, we would no doubt wish to proceed differently, looking for content that explicitly addresses realism in some way. But here we're talking about religious practices, and we should not assume that everything from the one context will automatically transfer to the other; by doing so we will indeed only restrict our vision unduly, obscuring from view all manner of religious practices that are decidedly not realist but don't yield to that way of proceeding. (Examples are coming.)

With that reflection as background, let's venture a view as to what makes a religious practice realist or non-realist. Start on the realist side. Here, a good deal from the context of philosophical debate will transfer, even if not all. A religious practice is properly called *realist*, so I suggest, if and only if the practice includes treating indicative sentences about transcendent objects such as God or the Tao or the Buddha-nature as objectively fact-stating: as saying something about reality as it is independently of our attitudes or conventions concerning religious objects.

This has an interesting consequence for non-realist religious practice, where we now end up with something rather *different* from what philosophical debate might have led us to expect. If a realist religious practice is understood as above, then it must be that a religious practice is *non*-realist just in case the practice does *not* include treating indicative sentences about transcendent things as objectively fact-stating. This condition clearly is satisfied by those who explicitly think of such sentences in a *contrary* manner, say, as fictionalists do. But not only by them. Even practitioners who have not given these matters any thought at all will satisfy it. Because of the differences between religious practice and philosophy, we must beware of employing too small a net here. What we'll see, as our discussion continues, is that this simple point allows for a considerably wider range of non-realist religious practices than has yet been identified, including some that have little or nothing to do with discourse.

So much (so far) for my first suggestion from before: that more waits to be said about religious non-realism than we will find if we rest content with the status quo, because of the latter's overly narrow focus on religious discourse. Now, following on from what we've seen or what's been suggested about the fundamental role of religious practice, and its consequences, I can – much more briefly – defend my other suggestion: that we are also held back by the assumption that religious realism and religious non-realism are no more than views or claims or propositions. Notice first that we may indeed, as suggested at the end of the preceding paragraph, call those whose religious practice is realist *realists*. (This will now seem the most ordinary and natural of *linguistic* practices.) Likewise, we should

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call those whose practice is non-realist *non-realists*. Moreover, the religious realist and non-realist are properly said to be evincing religious real*ism* and religious non-real*ism*. Given that, as we've seen, one can be a religious realist or non-realist without endorsing or indeed forming any view about either religious realism or religious non-realism as they are defined under the status quo, it follows that the proper understanding of religious realism and religious non-realism is going to be *broader* than assumed under the status quo. And indeed, given that we're emphasizing practice, it will seem most natural to proceed, when thinking about non-realism, not as in mathematics or science, but rather as in the nearer terrain of social and political philosophy, which is itself practically oriented and has its own 'isms' but treats them as embracing a range of phenomena *including* propositions. Consider in particular 'capitalism' and 'colonialism', 'nationalism', and 'secularism'. These terms function as umbrella labels covering not just a proposition or view or doctrine but a whole complex of things – beliefs, practices, institutions, social structures, and so on. I will not be spreading my umbrella as widely here, but it's clear that by analogy with what's happening in this *other* subfield of philosophy, our terms should at least cover practices and so must be tied to more than just the propositions beloved of philosophers. Where propositions *are* intended, we might speak of *propositional* realism or non-realism. For non-realism as it shows up in practice, we might use the contrasting modifier 'orientational'.

For my purposes, questions about propositional realism and non-realism need not be further addressed. So I set them aside. Our focus has shifted from propositional non-realism to orientational non-realism. As we saw a moment ago, to speak of the latter is simply to take note of an *absence*: the absence of the corresponding *realist* features. Once this basic point is assimilated, the domain of orientational religious non-realism – I will sacrifice the first modifier here in what follows – is considerably enlarged, extending far beyond practices centred on discourse, as we will now see.[1]

A first distinction on practice: discourse-centred vs. discourse-independent non-realism

Discourse-centred non-realism (the familiar terrain)

It will be immediately evident that my purely negative characterization of non-realism in religious practice – *not* thinking in the realist way – covers quite a range of possibilities, including even the stance of the religious practitioner who is simply unsure what to think about the status of the indicative sentences they are using.[2] I can't talk about all of them, certainly not in any detail, but I hope to get clear about some main ones. Though we will soon be moving past it, we may begin with the approach that is suggested by current and past discussion in the literature. Here, two figures stand out.

One is R. B. Braithwaite (1955), whose approach is known as *expressivism*, though what he thinks of religious indicative sentences as expressing is not emotional attitudes, as one might expect when considering someone influenced by verificationism, but *behavioural commitments*. In his view, religious sentences – doctrinal sentences and the sentences of religious stories – are used to express these commitments. The other figure is, again, Robin Le Poidevin (2019), who in his recent work has some illuminating things to say about Braithwaite and indeed makes use of some Braithwaitean ideas but is himself exploring a fictionalist approach to religious language. Other fictionalist discussions have since appeared. But the short Le Poidevin work, quite stimulating and a model of clarity, is still the best place to start.

Fictionalists like Le Poidevin propose an alternative semantics for indicative sentences belonging to religious discourse, one completely different from the realist semantics many of us, including many of the religious themselves, are likely to regard as evidently correct

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(Le Poidevin 2019, 7-8). 'When engaging in religious language and practice', Le Poidevin says, the fictionalist sees herself as engaging in a fairly complex exercise 'of make-believe' (Le Poidevin 2019, 32). Religious propositions are true if and only if they are true in the *fiction* that the make-believers have in mind. Truth-conditions are definable by the fiction. 'Apparently denoting terms' refer to 'fictional characters and situations' (Le Poidevin 2016, 178). '[T]o utter religious statements is not [to] assert them, but to pretend to assert them' (Le Poidevin 2019, 32). Does anything religious remain in a practice when all these alterations have been made?

Le Poidevin considers but rejects the idea that fictionalism is bereft of a proper religious *seriousness*. 'It is not', he elsewhere says, 'that the fictionalist intends simply to put on a display of piety in order to win certain distinctly secular goods, such as a place for their children at a religious school'. Instead, they may hope, for example, to 'bring latent moral ideals into sharper focus': ideals such as 'love for others, displacement of the self from the centre of one's projects' and 'the subordination of short-term goals to long-term ones' (Le Poidevin 2016, 180, 182). He also makes a motivational point, which is importantly tied to the emotions. As he puts it: by treating religious language as they do, the fictionalist 'wishes to enter into what she takes to be the religious imagination to the extent that she becomes affectively engaged, and so more inclined to lead the kind of life she has independent reason for leading' (Le Poidevin 2019, 35).

Leaning on his non-realist predecessor Braithwaite, Le Poidevin suggests an answer to the criticism that he has reduced religion to morality by saying that religion, unlike just any moral impulse, aims to change not only one's external behaviour but also one's inner attitudes, and in so doing is uniquely bound up with 'narratives, stories, and parables' (Le Poidevin 2019, 20). Going beyond Braithwaite, he also argues that to make sense of non-realist meaning we need to do better than expressivism: we need to give a role to the *details* of such stories and also the doctrines behind them, continuing to see individual seeming propositions as really propositional and so as either true or false – even if only as true or false in the fiction.

These are stimulating ideas. But what we should still notice, on the basis of this brief exposition of Braithwaite and Le Poidevin, is that when these writers imagine a non-realist religious practice, the new interpretation of religious discourse always dominates. In fictionalist and expressivist religious practices as understood under the status quo, *how the practitioner relates to the discourse of religion determines the structure of their practice*. The central job of the non-realist practitioner is to find something else – something not realist – for religious discourse to do and then act on their discovery. Perhaps we should not be surprised that this is how things have gone in the discussion of religious non-realism. The realist practices that non-realism aims to supplant, or at any rate to use as a starting point for thinking about alternative ways of being religious, tend to make *their* interpretation of some religious discourse structurally dominant – think of creedal examples of Christian practice. Thus when the philosophical fictionalist or expressivist or someone else comes along with a different idea about the interpretation of religious discourse, it's natural for them to imagine the new picture *also* dominating, structurally, any religious practices associated with it.

Call what is exhibited by any non-realist religious practice in which we see this parallel *discourse-centred non-realism*. Certainly it represents one way of living non-realism religiously. But it is not the only one.

Discourse-independent non-realism (the neglected terrain)

In fact – as already suggested by my purely negative characterization of religious non-realism above – it is a mistake to assume that non-realists must reinterpret religious

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discourse at all. Now one need not go this far to reach discourse-independent non-realism; so long as we do not think that what you do with religious discourse is what *makes* you a non-realist in religious practice, you may count as practising in a discourse-independent manner even if religious discourse continues to have a role in your practice. We can state the contrast clearly in this way: while in discourse-centred non-realist practice a religious discourse and one's approach to it (whether fictionalist, expressivist, or something else) determines the structure of the practice and is its organizing centre, in discourse-independent non-realist practice no discourse plays such a structurally dominant role, even if fictional or expressive or other elements from some approach to discourse happen to be present. So a discourse-independent practice need not be *devoid* of religious discourse. Again, we need not go that far. But by going that far we will be able to take note of perhaps the purest and most interesting form of discourse-independent non-realism. And that is what I hope to do with the following two examples, drawn from the Christian tradition.

Suppose, first, that a group of people who do not regard any indicative sentences about transcendent objects as objectively fact-stating are nevertheless united in making a certain profound love, a self-giving and healing love, basic to their identity and mission in the world. This love they see exhibited with startling clarity in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. So they imagine themselves making 'Jesus-style love' their fundamental value. (Perhaps they weave into their practice spiritual insights from other, non-Christian religious traditions where possible secondarily.) Now they've taken something from historical Christianity as their basic reference point for beneficially organizing thought and behaviour and finding their place in the wider scheme of things. Indeed, we may suppose that the members of this group were once part of a more traditional, realist Christian community, and thus feel themselves to be doing so with full authenticity and in furtherance of what has always been central to their religious life. It certainly looks as though we already have something that deserves to be called a *religious* practice, rather than just a secular ethical practice inspired by Jesus or Christian culture. But we can fill this out by noting that, for this group, making Jesus-style love fundamental to who they are involves explicitly imitating the *way* of Jesus, as presented by the Gospels and/or revealed by critical scholarship, and interacting religiously with other communities that identify themselves as Christian and follow a similar path. That is, they see themselves as adopting patterns of behaviour from the form of life, a life lived lovingly, attributed to Jesus – thus seeking to become like him. They live simply, so as to share what they possess as widely as possible; baptize would-be disciples; regularly practice something like traditional Christian communion as a peace meal; emphasize nonhierarchical leadership and consensual decision-making; practice mutual accountability, peacemaking, and mutual aid, as well as telling the truth; and they witness in word and in their lifestyle to the transformative power of the love of Jesus. (Here I have adapted for my non-realist group some of the practices proposed by a Christian realist writer: Murray (2024), 223. It is not hard to do.) Notice that we need not fit what's going on in this imitative Christian practice into a fictionalist or expressivist or any similarly discourse-centred mould in order to see it as non-realist in my practice-based sense. This Christian practice – *their* practice – includes no reinterpretation of Christian discourse about transcendent things. Christian doctrines and transcendence-infused stories have no place in it at all.

A second example: suppose that some community similarly linked through the past life of its members to historical Christianity comes to focus on cultivating what we might call *the Christian personality or character*, though without regarding any indicative sentences about transcendent objects as objectively fact-stating. The central *figure* of Christianity, they say, can be spiritually transformative even if not conceived as a transcendent being. Their practice they base not just on what they take to be known of the historical Jesus (drawn from the

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Christian tradition or from critical biblical scholarship) but also on Christ configurations as found or represented throughout the history of Western culture. Christianity now sprawls across centuries and millennia, so there are rather a lot of them to choose from. Consider the figure, perhaps quite divorced from the historical Jesus, who emerges from Christian creeds and doctrines as well as the various Christ figures found in Christian art and those that might be centred on other historical personages closely associated in the religious imagination with Jesus of Nazareth – say, Francis of Assisi. There is a distinctive character associated with these things (though descriptions of it may vary somewhat); that it has been made available to the Western imagination is arguably a uniquely *Christian* contribution. Many would regard it as an admirable character, with components of, for example, gentleness, simplicity, humility, love of enemy and stranger and evil-doer, variously emphasized, depending on one's vantage point. And it is a character that is capable of being valued and taken as a model of psychic integration by members of our second group in a manner quite independent of any emphasis on a realist *or* non-realist reading of Christian discourse. (For example, even if the loving Christ is partially rooted in Christian doctrines, cultivating the *character* thus derived doesn't require using the associated language, in a fictionalist or expressive or any other non-realist mode.) The emphasis in the practice or practices suggested here is rather on forming the Christian character – whichever version is chosen – with behaviour appropriate thereto. Such an aspirational practice, certainly if basic to one's identity and mission in the world, seems to count as religious and as Christian and as non-realist but is also *discourse-independent*.

Now the practices featuring in my examples may initially not seem very Christian, and so some readers may be inclined to withhold the label 'religious'. But it is important to remember that Christianity is no one thing. Rather, it is a multiplicity of strands held together culturally and ideologically, some of them even today not that far removed from my examples. Nor should we form our judgements on such matters purely on the basis of what Christianity has been so far. What we see here may be *incipient* Christianities – Christianities of the future. For humanity is still at an early stage of development, and Christianity's cultural career may have only begun. Were such practices at some point in the future to emerge from traditional Christianity and provide a lifeway for their practitioners, we would have every reason to count them as both Christian and religious.

It might, of course, be, in either of the two examples I have briefly described, that practitioners will at some point or even regularly be inclined to use Christian language about transcendent things in a non-realist way, say, language about how in Jesus we see reflected the glory of God or about how something of the nature of God, visible in Christ, can be imparted to us. And so it may seem that they will end up including a non-realist reinterpretation of Christian religious language after all. Even if such Christian linguistic specifics are avoided, so it may be said, we should expect other indicative sentences about transcendent things – for example, something about a divine spirit in their midst – to appear and be given a non-realist reading, say, a fictionalist reading. And so a discourse-centred non-realism again appears to show through.

I can see how such things *might* occur in the context of the non-realist practices I have described. But why *must* they do so? If they do, this is a purely contingent fact; other configurations are easily imaginable. Our followers of the loving way of Jesus will of course have things to say about Jesus and about love, but these things need not have transcendent content and will be taken quite literally. Likewise, our community cultivating the Christian personality or character will have things to say about gentleness, simplicity, humility, love of enemy and stranger and evil-doer, and also about various figures from Christian history exemplifying such traits, including the historical Jesus, but will intend what they say to be taken quite literally and need not give to it any transcendent content. In any case, even if what the critic suggests comes to pass, all we have is the *blending* of the characteristics I

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have described with an *element* extracted from the discourse-centred approach (more on this possibility below). We do not have discourse-centred non-realism as defined above and seen in the literature. So my first main point about non-realist religious practice is just that it *need not* be discourse-centred. The literature's focus has been too narrow.[3]

A second distinction: monist vs. mixed non-realism

Monist non-realism

My second distinction is also one not yet observed: a distinction between non-realist religious practices that have a single ruling idea and non-realist practices that blend together a number of different guiding ideas. Call the former sort of religious non-realism *monist* and the latter *mixed*. While discourse-centred non-realism will typically be monist, it need not be: perhaps more than one approach to the interpretation of the discourse is combined in the practice. (Note here that there is a difference between the non-realist treatment of discourse dominating a practice and it doing so in just one way, e.g., just in the fictionalist way.) And while discourse-independent non-realism will typically be mixed, it need not be: an aspirational idea, for example, of the sort found in the second of my two examples of this form could govern everything the non-realist Christian does. (I will have more to say about the independence of these distinctions and the associated potential for 'cross-cutting' below.)

Let's consider the monist version of religious non-realism a bit more closely. As just suggested, the aspirational idea, as I have called it, of one of the Christian examples of discourse-independent religious non-realism sketched above is there treated as *by itself* providing the entire structure of the relevant practices. So this is an example of non-realist monism. (Discourse-independent non-realism, as I have said, need not be mixed.) But discourse-centred non-realism of the sort that dominates current discussion also offers clear examples. Consider expressivism and fictionalism. Each typically tries to provide the 'whole story' of the non-realist religious practices at issue in expressivist or fictionalist accounts. And indeed it is quite natural, even if not inevitable, for the discourse-centred approach to operate in this way.

Let me now add an important clarification: though I have suggested that it is a mistake to regard discourse-centred versions of religious non-realism as the only kind, and though as we have just seen discourse-centred approaches will tend to be monist, I am not suggesting that monism is a flaw. It is just a structural feature of some non-realist religious practices – one they may possess without displaying anything problematic that might be associated with my arguments in this study.

Mixed non-realism (the overlooked option)

Nevertheless, the mixed option is, in this case, the one that scholarship thus far has largely ignored. There are several reasons to think that, in the circumstances, we owe it some special attention. For one thing, getting a decent typology for religious non-realism requires that we do so.[4] And the rich diversity that a little probing will expose in this area is of interest for its own sake. Moreover, that we can have more than one guiding idea is relevant to the *viability* of non-realist religious practices – an important issue at a time when proper discussion of religious non-realism has just begun and the climate seems to favour realism. The notion, which many seem to accept, that some one organizing idea must do the whole job by itself puts a lot of pressure on that one idea. Suppose we are thinking about a fictionalist idea. Then unless an entire, rich religious practice can be spun out of it alone, we will not think much of fictionalism's relevance to religion. Whereas if fictionalism only needs

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to take care of one aspect of a practice, which will have the support of others, we may think differently.

So let us briefly bring the mixed option into view. (Later on, after considering the variety of non-realist practices my two distinctions allow, I will have more to say about it.) What we have here, as already suggested, is the notion of a practice that *integrates* multiple governing ideas. One can imagine, for example, the aspirational idea being combined with the imitative idea to produce a blend of the two. Now if we suppose that our Christian non-realists bring the imitative idea into their community's religious activities *in order to aid the pursuit of their aspirational goals*, we may still have a monist version of non-realism – one in which everything is unified under the aspirational idea. But it doesn't have to happen this way. There is no reason why just one idea must govern all. We might have a blend of the imitative and aspirational ideas in which neither dominates.

Does this mean that a mixed form of Christian non-realism must lack coherence, and so end up objectionable for this reason? No, it doesn't. The assumption behind this thought is that coherence must be afforded to a practice by some specific and distinctive organizing idea, under which everything is unified. But this assumption seems false. Even where there is no specific and distinguishing organizational idea, there may still be a more general notion, *shared* by *all* forms of Christian practice, under which everything in the practice is unified and brought into coherence, such as that of 'being a good Christian'. Perhaps in some contexts of the practice, being a good Christian seems to call for explicitly imitating Jesus and in other contexts using some Christ figure as a model of psychic integration.

I have said that the mixed option is *largely* ignored, and it may be worth noting a couple of places where it is already anticipated in the literature. Here is Natalja Deng:

> Religious stories, religious rituals, participation in religious ceremonies and community life—all these are replete with opportunities for imaginative immersion and emotional engagement. There can be no generally applicable description of how this will look, for the simple reason that it is as open-ended and full of possibilities as is the religious imagination itself, which has produced a rich variety of religious ideas and practices in different times and places. Similarly, there is no limit to how often or how deeply a naturalist can delve into religion. (Deng 2023, 191)

In Deng, the suggestion of mixed possibilities is real but oblique. In Le Poidevin it is more explicit, though he restricts his discussion to discourse-centred non-realism, which he appears to regard as the only kind. He says that after a fictionalist analysis has been applied to secure a non-realist understanding of the *meaning* of religious indicative sentences less problematic than Braithwaite's, Braithwaite's idea of using religious sentences to express behavioural commitments may be brought in secondarily. After all, a 'statement can have more than one function' (Le Poidevin 2019, 26).

The independence of the distinctions, and cross-cutting

I return now to the relations between the two distinctions and the further insights an examination of this topic permits. The main point is that they are quite *independent*: discourse-centred ≠ monist, and discourse-independent ≠ mixed. Indeed, once the two distinctions are in place, it becomes clear that they cross-cut one another, generating a range of practice possibilities, most of which are receiving no attention in the literature. Non-realist religious practice may be discourse-centred or discourse-independent, and it may be

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monist or mixed. Taken together, these distinctions yield a number of distinct possibilities when it comes to the identity and structure of a non-realist religious practice:

Discourse-centred + Monist
For example: practices in which a single strategy with respect to the (re)interpretation of religious discourse, either expressivist or fictionalist, dominates.
Discourse-independent + Monist
For example: purely aspirational forms of religious practice, which operate without any (re)interpretation of religious discourse.
Discourse-centred + Mixed
For example: practices in which religious discourse is treated differently in different contexts, sometimes just fictionally, sometimes fictionally and expressively.
Discourse-independent + Mixed
For example: practices that integrate two or three guiding ideas, without any (re)interpretation of religious discourse.

Of these four, the last is (potentially) the richest and the most interesting, as well as the most thoroughly overlooked. It will be my focus in the next section.

Bringing mixed, discourse-independent religious non-realism more fully into view

In order to substantiate the claim just made, I wish here to sketch a rich, plausible form of mixed non-realist religious – specifically Christian – practice. Though it contains some of the features of a discourse-centred practice, which are among those blended, it is not itself discourse-centred. It has its eye on a much further horizon.

As we saw before, Le Poidevin already recognizes the basic idea behind my notion of 'mixed' non-realism, suggesting that Braithwaite's idea might be combined with his own. The one amendment he proposes is that Braithwaite's idea should be applied in a more discriminating fashion (to particular sentences) rather than in his own holistic way, which, according to Le Poidevin, is part of what makes the former's approach problematic. Let us take this as a starting point, assuming that in the practice I am sketching, which will as before be a Christian practice, a certain segment of religious discourse, say about the love of God and the Kingdom of God and Jesus as the 'Anointed One' sent to inaugurate a correspondingly radical transformation of earthly things into a heavenly register, has its place, even if it is not the be-all and end-all, and that our non-realist gives to it a fictionalist reading, which in certain contexts is supplemented with expressivism. One can imagine, for example, that when faced with an especially obstreperous passenger on the bus who is 'getting up in their face', the Christian non-realist thinks or says aloud 'God is love', using this expression at least in part to express their resolve to respond in a Christian manner.

But this is only a beginning. Le Poidevin recognizes that there can be more than one kind of expressivism: he distinguishes 'emotive expressivism' from Braithwaite's own kind, which he dubs 'conative expressivism' (Le Poidevin 2019, 21). So let us consider how the former might enter the mix in certain contexts (as with the conative element, it need not be in all contexts). A simple example would be the expression of emotions involving relief and joy, after successfully saving the life of a stranger or being oneself rescued from danger, by means of the words 'Thanks be to God!' But other, more complex examples can easily be constructed. Suppose our non-realist Christian is at a meeting of her community, singing in a choir. The lyric of the song – suppose it to be a Bach chorale – includes references to transcendent things, and our singer, whose religious emotions were raised to a place of

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psychological transcendence by previous events of the meeting, finds singing its words an excellent way to express what she is feeling.

And now notice an interesting consequence of making our non-realist practice discourse-independent: actions *other* than those involving the use of words from some religious discourse may *also* serve to illustrate emotive expressivism; there is no need to restrict ourselves to the use of discourse, as Braithwaite and Le Poidevin must do. Consider, for example, what goes on in a typical Quaker meeting of a certain sort, where sitting in silence is made to serve religious purposes. If our non-realist, perhaps after the Bach chorale, sits in silence for a while in a similar fashion out of reverence for the moment, this action, which in no way involves discourse, may express her religious emotions just as well as the singing, and be properly given an emotionally expressivist interpretation.

An attribute which unites such emotions is their connection to our deepest and most formative beliefs about value. Arguably all emotions involve beliefs about value, but here we see beliefs about such things as the dreadfulness of human suffering, the ultimacy of love, and the grandeur of human potential achieved. Correspondingly, we have *axiologically deep* emotions. The more powerful such emotions are and the more fundamental to one's entire way of living, which here is a Christian way of living, the more right we have to call that way of living religious. The significance of my argument about expressivism's emotional dimension should not be underestimated.

So the Christian practice I am sketching already has fictionalist and both conative and emotive expressivist elements, with the latter illustrating, in part, how this practice is discourse-independent. Let me say more now about how naturally its discourse-independence may be further developed. First of all, notice how the imitative or aspirational strand of our previous Christian examples might be brought in and made pervasive. Second, I want to add what I will call a *memorializing* element. What I have in mind here is that our non-realist desires to honour all those, among their forebears in the Christian tradition, who have struggled mightily and honourably to get things right, intellectually and religiously. Many, indeed most, of these forebears will have been religious realists. So one way of doing so is by using their language, though under the new fictionalist understanding. This, like the expression of a behavioural commitment or an axiological emotion in other contexts (or perhaps, sometimes, in the same context), can be one of the functions of religious statements. But it is not through the use of religious discourse alone that memorializing may be achieved. Even in a practice in which such discourse plays no role, we might see it. For simply by carrying on the tradition – *their* tradition – in the ways that they do this, our non-realists may see themselves as honouring the memory of their honourable forebears.

A closely related element may now be added. Call it *vindicatory*. By means of the actions of a Christian lifeway one may also be accommodating a desire to help bring from this tradition – so woefully inadequate but in some respects so impressive, too – something decidedly worthwhile and more widely fruitful. Christianity may ultimately be *vindicated*, despite its evident flaws, if enough non-realists work within it producing enough results of these kinds. Here we have a *future-oriented* element for our mixed non-realism. It is only in the future that we might see this hope realized. But that is no problem, given that, although our thinking is often misleadingly led in other directions, we may so far have crested no more than the beginning stages of Christianity's career in human history.

Human religion in general may be at only an early stage of its development. If that is so, then we should look to be doing the things that are most *appropriate* to an early stage, and these include working much more diligently than we would, were we to believe Christianity and other religious traditions old and on the way out, to make a go of things religiously. Here we have a reason for Christian non-realists to see themselves, not as making some last-ditch

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effort to squeeze the remaining juice from a worn-out tradition, but as *reimagining* Christian practice in multifarious ways, in hopes of turning themselves and many more of us into worthy followers of Jesus, and thus securing for the tradition a record that will one day thrill rather than disappoint.

Why the expanded taxonomy matters

Our discussion of practices discourse-centred and discourse-independent, monist and mixed, has considerably expanded the taxonomy of religious non-realisms worth taking seriously by philosophers. And with this expansion, set within the expansion that turned a propositional reading of 'religious realism' and 'religious non-realism' into a broader reading capable of *accommodating* practices near the beginning of this study, come some important consequences. Some have already been touched upon. Three stand out.

First, I would mention the robust challenge we see to the dominance of considerations about language in contemporary discussions of non-believing religiousness. The popular discussion of non-doxastic faith features this in its emphasis on faith that religious propositions, expressed by religious language, are true. And the nascent discussion of religious non-realism – for example, in its fictionalist incarnation – would take us down the same road, as we have seen. If my arguments are correct, we should not follow this impulse, so natural for philosophers. The roads worth travelling here diverge.

Second, by following these many roads we will see how the discussion of non-believing religiousness multiplies the options available to religious seekers, and thus has the potential to widen the scope of religion enormously. There are ever so many forms religion might take in the future, even if we restrict ourselves, in our thinking, to traditions such as Christianity well known to us today.

And third, we should feel, precisely in such thoughts about future possibilities, a nudge to take much more seriously than thinkers generally have the *developmentalist* picture of human religion suggested above. The thought that our experience today is but the experience of early-stage humanity makes the plurality and hybridity we have found it necessary to emphasize especially intelligible.

All in all, we may go forward on the assumption that the picture of religious non-realism suggested in the literature is far from complete. By expanding this idea, we enlarge both philosophical understanding and religious possibility.

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Notes

1. The Le Poidevin discussion begins by referring to a 'kind' of religious discourse, and the parallel move would have us referring to a *religious* kind of practice, and so to religion in general. But Le Poidevin, apparently moved by considerations concerning the difficulty of defining 'religion' and the great diversity of religious practices, very quickly shifts to talk of 'particular' religious discourses (Le Poidevin 2019, p. 5), and thereafter speaks of realism and non-realism in relation to particular discourses. I likewise, and for the same reasons, am avoiding 'kind' talk here and mean what I have to say to be applied to particular practices and practitioners.

2. Should their stance be regarded as *neutral* between realism and non-realism, rather than as evincing non-realism? No. For to suppose otherwise is to slip back to the focus on *propositional* realism and non-realism. Were our non-realists to enter philosophical discussion over the relevant claims, they might indeed count as neutral or agnostic *there*. But here we are talking about the non-realist *orientation*, and orientational non-realism doesn't require taking a stance on propositional non-realism.

3. Notice that this may seem an advantage for anyone considering non-realism as an option from within, say, Christianity: having always read Christian sentences in a realist way, they may find it rather difficult to imagine treating them in the radically different way sponsored by forms of non-realism such as expressivism or fictionalism.

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4. Why not also distinguish, as types, practices with a *particular number* of organizing ideas, say, two or three? One thought is that the distinction here between one and more than one seems more fundamental than the distinctions between one and two, one and three, etc. But set that aside. The central point is that no reasons for greater specificity suggest themselves. Distinctions need to earn their philosophical keep, and I see nothing to suggest that the more specific distinctions would do so. Having said that, it is always open to others to provide such reasons and enlarge the typology.

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