Response to D’Costa and Verbin

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I am grateful to the Editors of *Ars Disputandi* for initiating this symposium and to Dr D’Costa and Dr Verbin for their stimulating interactions with *Realism and Christian Faith*. They make many interesting and valuable points; unfortunately, in the space available it is not possible to deal with all of them in the detail they deserve so I shall restrict myself to dealing with their main arguments. Since Verbin’s paper ‘But is it True?’ rehearses arguments made in more detail in her earlier review of the book for *Ars Disputandi*, I shall frequently take up points made in that review. There is one exception to this restriction: both Verbin (in her review) and D’Costa criticize my reading of Soskice, and since she is a main debating partner, I ought to reply to them. After that, I shall deal with their substantive criticisms—D’Costa’s argument that I ‘downplay the mediating role of the church’; Verbin’s criticisms of my dialectical fideism; and her argument that my project ‘dissolves into incoherence’.

### 1 Criticisms of my Argument against Janet Martin Soskice

I turn to Verbin’s criticism first. She says that ‘Moore is right to point to various disanalogies between science and theology. Unfortunately, he does not show the bearing of these on the particular analogies that Soskice, for example, uses for developing her conception of realism. Soskice does not argue that theology is a type of science. She argues that certain aspects of theology, e.g., the reliance on metaphoric language, resemble those of science, and that these can be used to develop a conception of religious realism that is able to shed light on the manner in which religious utterances can be true of false’ (3).

In my introduction to *Realism*, I note that a common strategy in defending realism about God entails the existence of analogies between the defence of realism in philosophy of science and in theology; for the sake of convenience, and since it is a term used by all its proponents, I refer to this strategy as ‘theological realism’. The argument of the chapter is thus against a set of methodological tendencies that are quite widespread in the debate between science and theology and which are either presupposed or explicitly advocated by many theologians working on the realism problem. None of the authors I debate with make all the moves I argue against in chapter 3 but all of them make some of them and Soskice...
is probably the most notable exponent of this type of argument. Having entered this caveat[^1] I seek to dismantle the analogies.

[^4] Although Soskice suggests that science and theology are members of ‘the whole realm of abstract theorising’ and that both scientists and theologians use ‘models to describe the unobservable or transcendent’[^3] Verbin is correct in her view that Soskice ‘does not argue that theology is a type of science’. However, I find puzzling Verbin’s claim that I do not show the bearing of my proposed disanalogies on the analogies Soskice’s argument either uses or logically depends upon. My discussion of ‘Data and Epistemology in Science and Theology’ is devoted principally to Soskice’s use of Kripke’s causal theory of reference and her fallibilist epistemology, both of which are crucial to her conception of realism in religion on analogy with science (see pp. 46–50). Her stance vis-à-vis empiricism and the relationship between science and theology is discussed on pp. 53f. The problems posed by the underdetermination of theory by evidence for those (such as Soskice) who would defend realism on analogy with philosophy of science are discussed on pp. 55–9.

[^5] Soskice summarises the key move in her argument as follows: ‘The suggestion is . . . that, having examined ways in which metaphorical language can be judged to be reality depicting apart from definitive knowledge in the case of science, we might find analogies for the admittedly very different task of reality depiction in theology[^4] What is it of which Soskice thinks we lack definitive knowledge? Unobservable reality. Soskice’s understanding of the role of metaphor in science and theology is intended to show that just as metaphor enables reference to be made to an unobservable reality in science, so there is an analogous way in which metaphorical religious language enables its users to refer to the unobservable entity whose mind-independent reality they seek to depict—God. There are two ways in which this argument might be tested and both involve scrutinising a proposed analogy. We might test the role of metaphor in the analogy between science and theology[^5] or we might examine the proposals concerning unobservability. My argument deals mainly with the latter. This leads us to ask, is God unobservable in the same way that, for example, a confined quark is? Is he unobservable at all? Is there sufficient analogy of unobservability between God and unobservable entities in science? On pp. 62–72, I argue that there is not. Indeed, the disanalogies are of sufficient magnitude and importance for us to conclude that, taken together with my earlier arguments, arguments from analogies with the philosophy of science are not strong enough to support theological realists’ case for realism about God.

[^6] Dr D’Costa argues that I impute to Soskice the view that ‘revelation is an assortment of images from creation applied to God’ (11). Against this, he interprets her as ‘arguing that the church’s images of Christ through history critically draws from the religious experience of Christ within the ecclesia (as king, rock . . . and so

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Two points may be made in response. First, in her admiring discussion of Ian Ramsey, Soskice seems to imply that the church’s images of God are drawn from creation; she cites ‘wind’ and its development into such locutions as ‘God is spirit’ as an example. I agree with D’Costa that Soskice bases her argument on an appeal to religious experience, but the argument in this section of Realism is (pace D’Costa, 3) that Soskice’s argument does seem to require that there be a common ontology between the creator who causes religious experiences and his (human) creatures who experience their effects and that this implies an analogy of being. My objection is not so much to appeals to an analogy of being as to basing them on a common ontology between a divine causal agent and creaturely beneficiaries: ‘there need not be anything intrinsically wrong [with an appeal to an analogy of being] so long as it is orientated by Christology’. That is where I differ from Soskice’s implicit view of analogy and her view of revelation. For – and this is my second point – again pace D’Costa (11), Soskice does not base her argument for realism on (doctrines of) the person and/or work of Christ or on experience of him nor does she base her account of revelation on Christology.

2 Criticisms of the Substance of the Argument

2.1 D’Costa and the Mediating Role of the Church

D’Costa’s purpose in drawing upon my discussion of Soskice is to show that ‘in being Christocentric we also necessarily have to be ecclesiocentric, without conflating the two, but equally, while realising that one is not epistemically or semantically possible without the other’ (11). D’Costa’s main point, developed throughout his critique, is that my project ‘undervalu[es] . . . the place of mediation regarding revelation’, more specifically, that it ‘plays down the mediating role of the church’ (8). I am very gratified that D’Costa thinks Realism ‘helps clear the ground for real intra-Christian exchange’, so I expect he won’t mind me reminding him that he acknowledges that I give the martyrs, sacraments and preaching a high place in my argument. This suggests that his concern is not so much that I downplay the church, as that I downplay its (current) Catholic instantiation and the view that it has a mediatorial role that is essential both ‘in the discernment of God’s true activity’ (9, cf. 11) and in ‘infallible . . . proclamation’ (12) of that activity.

D’Costa indicates in several different ways his view that I evade the question of authority my valuing of these elements of church life provokes. First, he thinks that in arguing that Lindbeck’s view of ‘grammar’ implies an infinite regress that can only be blocked if God himself, by his Word and Spirit, is the 6. Metaphor and Religious Language, p. 153–4; cf. 151–2.

7. As well as the reference D’Costa gives to my p. 140f, see also Metaphor and Religious Language, pp. 138–40.

8. Realism, p. 140.

9. Soskice does refer to the empty tomb but this only to provide an initiating event for a Kripkean causal chain of reference to God (Metaphor and Religious Language, p. 140).

Ars Disputandi 5 (2005), http://www.ArsDisputandi.org
grammar of our practices, I open my own argument to the same criticism: ‘dif-
ferent Christians give very varying accounts of who this God is and what He
authorises . . . There is no indubitable uncontested self-revelation [of God] even
within Christian communities precisely because the question of ecclesial authority
. . . has . . . been circumvented by Moore’ (10). Next, D’Costa suggests that my po-
sition is no different from D.Z. Phillips’s. Although (contra Verbin, 4) I argue that
Phillips can be taken to be a realist – a position which seems to me to have become
increasingly clear in his more recent writings such as The Problem of Evil and
the Problem of God – I criticize his position on the ground of the question (as
D’Costa puts it, 10): ‘are all Christian practices simply and uncritically endorsed
and what criteria are there whereby we can mount such criticisms of (Christian)
practices?’ D’Costa’s point is that if I base my argument for a Christocentric real-
ism on Christian practices and hold that martyrs show God’s mind-independent
reality, I need an appeal to authority if I am not to end up endorsing any and
all notionally Christian practices as in fact Christian. Thus he thinks that I have
no secure basis on which to claim either that Cupitt and the Sea of Faith are not
correctly regarded as legitimate developers of the Christian tradition or that other
practices are correctly regarded as Christian. So D’Costa is right to claim that ‘the
logic of [my] argument invites [his] intervention’ (12).

[9] I argue my positive case for Christian realism and my negative case
against Lindbeck, Phillips, and Cupitt on the basis of Scripture and the church’s
doctrinal deposit. In the sense that the church has settled an undisputed canon
of Scripture and agreed Creeds, I do accept that the church has a mediating role.
But this is not enough for D’Costa; he thinks that the church needs a Petrine
office if we are not to find ourselves in an ‘anything goes’ situation such as some
would claim exists in the Anglican Communion. D’Costa makes a good point here
and it is certainly clear that a good case can be made from Scripture that some
kind of Petrine office is ‘divinely sanctioned’ (10, emphasis removed). However,
what D’Costa seems to want is a Petrine office as it is currently exemplified by
the office of the Pope with all the array of infallible pronouncements (cf. 10) and,
presumably, directives from the Curia.

[10] Unfortunately, I do not think that such a construal of authority in the
church is enough to secure catholic orthodoxy or to be a bulwark against falsehood
in the church. D’Costa himself offers a negative reason for this: ‘Arguing for papal
authority does not of course make things easier; indeed, they become far more
complicated and even more difficult to defend’ (10). He does not elaborate on this,
but one reason why papal authority might be difficult to defend is that the kind of
model D’Costa seems to envisage is hard to support from Scripture. Thus, I have
to differ from his judgement that I ought to accept his suggestion that ‘revelation . . .
actually does authorise a “divinely appointed office in the church to make the
rules”’ (10). I assume D’Costa has in mind Jesus’ statement to Peter: ‘I tell you,
you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and that gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven' (Matt. 16:18f). The question is, does this apply to Peter uniquely at a specific juncture in history, or may it legitimately be taken to apply also to bishops of Rome? Commentators divide, predictably enough, on lines of ecclesiastical allegiance, but in my view, it is only antecedent to the current exemplification of the Petrine office that one would find in these verses justification for the kind of papal office D'Costa thinks my argument requires and legitimates.

In chapter 1 I support the robust stance against the Sea of Faith adopted by some Anglican bishops; it is clear from Scripture that bishops do have a ministry of oversight in teaching and discipline in the church. However, I do not see that giving the Bishop of Rome a pre-eminent position will do any more than local bishops can already do to uphold Christian teaching, for their authority is in any case derived from Christ and the Holy Spirit. Thus, the question will go on being asked as to whether bishops are properly and fully exemplifying Christ and upholding the gospel of his cross and resurrection. And this question can be asked as much of the Pope as of any non-Catholic bishop. So, yes, with an ironic twinkle in one’s eye, one might say that there is a regress. It could even be called ‘infinite’: it leads to the unfathomable wisdom of him who is ‘the head over all things for the church’, ‘the head of every ruler and authority’ (Eph. 1:22, Col. 2:10). To atheists, the appearance might be given that the regress is negative in the sense that it ends nowhere; to Christians authority in the church comes from Christ, however, because all mortals are also sinners, the authority Christ bestows on the church will never indicate him fully. At best, by its attention to the gospel it will seek to remain faithful to it in its teaching and its structures, but falsehood cannot be ruled out. This applies to all our preaching and liturgical practices. Even the church’s dogmas must go on being tested against the gospel, otherwise we risk failing to expose our finite human judgements to the renewing judgement of God.

What then of D’Costa’s assertion that ‘semantically and epistemologically, without the Church there is no triune God’ (11)? It is true that there can be no articulated dogmas of Christ and of God without the church, but the dependency is strictly asymmetrical. If the church has a mediatorial role it too is conditioned by this asymmetry: in every aspect of its existence it depends on the triune God and the prior mediation of Christ. Unless Christ were ascended to the Father, unless the Spirit had been poured out, unless the Word had been preached, there would be no church. It is just such an asymmetry that my argument for God’s
being the grammar of faith is intended to preserve.

2.2 Verbin’s Argument against Dialectical Fideism

[13] In ‘But is it True?’ Verbin makes two criticisms of my proposal for a dialectical fideism: “it has little to offer those who are extra ecclesiam and little of substance to learn from them” (BiiT, 2; cf. 11-12). I am a bit unclear as to what Verbin’s criticism amounts to in respect to the claim that my dialectical fideism has little to offer to those who are not members of the church. For whilst in her essay “But is it True?” she admits that she is ‘highly sympathetic to Moore’s rejection of natural theology and apologetics’ (BiiT, 3; cf. BiiT, 33), in her earlier review she argues that ‘in the absence of a plausible philosophical argument that supports his commitment to the Christian God … an atheist philosopher, a struggling Christian, or a non-Christian, e.g., myself, is not likely to appreciate [Moore’s] negative outlook on philosophical conceptions of religious language that leave the question of God’s existence an open one’ (4). The difficulty here is to know what kind of philosophical argument other than one drawn from natural theology would meet the latter criticism, but if natural theology is rejected by Verbin, what form might such an argument take?

[14] If I admitted that I am not surprised that Verbin finds little in the book for those who are not members of the church, that might sound obtuse, but an author whose ‘deep concern is for the witness and well-being of the church’ and who writes ‘as a Christian theologian who is interested in and loves philosophy, but not as a philosopher of religion’ (p. 9) might be excused a degree of frustration with a critic who wishes that he had written from a different perspective, for a different audience, with a technical expertise he makes no claims to possess! In any case, contra Verbin, I do not claim that my overall argument or my proposal for a dialectical fideism has anything to offer a non-believer. So why might a non-Christian be interested in what a Christian has to say about how a believer might defend a realist account of that faith; why might it be of interest to someone extra ecclesiam? And conversely, why might a Christian be interested in an argument offered by someone who is not a member of one’s own faith community?

[15] One reason might be that it offers a challenge to one’s own perspective and an opportunity to broaden one’s horizons by considering an argument on its own terms rather than on those which one is already disposed to accept. Verbin does not think that this is my approach. She asserts that ‘Moore . . . refuses to acknowledge that his fideist “Christian realism”, with its ontological commitment to the existence of the Christian God as he is conceived of in the church, and its Christocentric conception of rationality, must be over-confident, conservative and secluded from its surrounding culture’ (11). Before coming to Verbin’s main point, is my fideism over-confident and conservative? That is for others to judge, but Verbin provides no evidence to support her view. For my part, I’d have thought that ‘it certainly was and is no good undertaking to reverse the sequence whereby event precedes institution, which is also established by the entire Bible.’ (Karl Barth, ‘The Humanity of God’ in The Humanity of God (London: Collins, 1961), p. 61; see also pp. 39, 53, 62).
that a position which acknowledges that God acts in the world to challenge the consensus position so as to reform and renew the world would be less conservative than, say, a hard naturalism. ‘Over-confident’? It is widely acknowledged that to a non-believer, a Christian must appear arrogant—but then too, has not ‘the fool . . . said in his heart “There is no God”’ (Pss. 14:1, 53:1)? And of one’s stance before God? I had hoped that my references to the dangers of self-idolatry facing a theologian and to eschatological verification would show that even if we have confidence in Christ, a Christian should certainly not be presumptuous.

On her main point, Verbin seems to be suggesting that were I rational I would see that I should acknowledge myself to be a poor, benighted fideist, immured in a wistful conservatism born of false confidence. (Oh, the delights of deontological epistemologies!) But when she quotes me later in the same paragraph, she herself suggests the reason why I don’t: because I believe that God is at work in the culture in which the church is immersed and the church needs to heed this work. One might think that S ought to accept q (for example, evidentialism), but if he has good reasons for accepting p (for example, a dialectical fideism) and not accepting q, S’s position has not been refuted by merely accusing S of refusing to acknowledge q. The way to show that S ought to acknowledge q is to show that his reasons for not holding it are bad reasons, that there are good reasons for holding q, and that S’s reasons for holding p are also bad. Until such an argument is presented and if S thinks he has good reasons for not holding q and good reasons for holding p instead, why shouldn’t S ‘refuse to acknowledge’ q?

The second aspect of Verbin’s criticism of my dialectical fideism is that ‘it has little of substance to learn from’ those who are outside the church (BiIT, 2), that it is ‘secluded from its surrounding culture’ (11). More fully: ‘Moore’s predominant conception of “Christian realism” renders . . . obscure . . . such statements [as, for example, that God is at work outside the walls of the church and that the church needs to listen for and learn from his witness to himself there]. After all, what truths about God’s nature or will could a non-believer or a non-Christian be able to teach a Christian realist . . . ?’ (12) Well, to take just one of my non-Christian debating partners as an example, I hope that my reading of Derrida has helped me understand something of the nature of idolatry (pp. 139–42); of how God’s judgement and grace can be said to take effect (pp. 151–54); how Austinian speech act theory might have weaknesses and how Derrida’s discussion of them helps us understand how God’s promises work (pp. 209–13, 234–35); and how his critique of logocentrism requires Christians to clarify and perhaps modify their understanding of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son (pp. 210–12).

Finally, Verbin rehearses a variation on a familiar criticism of fideistic positions. She asks, ‘How can a Christian realist who defines rationality in terms of the “Christ event” converse with a non-Christian whose very conceptions of

14. See, for example, pp. 39, 122, 142, 148, 198, 214ff, 238f.
15. Others include Hilary Putnam, John Searle, George Steiner, Ludwig Wittgenstein.

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rationality and reason are different?’ (12) How? Easily. Or perhaps Verbin and I are not conversing rationally with each other through these pages? To say that A and B have different conceptions of reason need not be to say that they can’t agree on modus ponens—and in my view, it isn’t. On p. 125, I draw attention to Plantinga’s apparent concession that atheists and believers ‘have different conceptions of reason’. If Verbin were correct, no atheists would have been able to debate with Plantinga—but of course, they have. For Verbin’s question to have force against me she would need to show that I repudiate the use of rational powers by human beings, but this is a position I reject (p. 134f!)

2.3 Verbin’s Argument that Realism and Christian Faith Dissolves into Incoherence

Verbin’s most serious criticisms in both her review and in ‘But is it True?’ are presented in a very interesting proposal to the effect that my argument dissolves into ‘incoherence’ (14). This is put most fully and lucidly in the review where she attempts to show that the incoherence arises because my argument ‘shifts between two different conceptions of “Christian realism”’ (6) and that these two conceptions can be correlated with two inconsistent views of God’s relationship to religious practices. Verbin’s argument is subtle and complex so a good deal of unpicking is required to show why it is mistaken. To start with, let’s turn to the first conception of realism attributed to me. This, we are told ‘involves a commitment to God as the condition for the possibility of religious meaning, knowledge and truth, a conception that is compatible with a denial of religious meaning, knowledge and truth, with the possibility of fundamental error in Christians’ conceptions of God’s nature and will (idolatry, blasphemy etc.) Such a realism . . . is committed to the proposition that if there is religious meaning, knowledge and truth within the Christian community, it is made possible by means of God’ (6).

Verbin has got the wrong end of the stick here. Yes, my argument is, as she implies, a transcendental one, but the conception she attributes to me is in fact held by Hebblethwaite and Markham and which I reject (see pp. 15–18). As I say on p. 15, ‘Both [Hebblethwaite’s and Markham’s] versions [of the transcendental argument for realism] are different in substance from my own for they are arguments “from truth to God” and claim that it is a condition of our being able to make truthful statements that there is a God.’ By contrast, my own argument concerns what we must say about ontology, semantics, and epistemology granted that the God who reveals himself in the exodus, and in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the ens realissimum. In other words, my transcendental argument runs in completely the opposite direction from that

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17. For the latter suggestion, see paragraphs 8 and 14. The argument is presented in less detail in ‘But is it True?’, paragraphs 4–8.
18. See, for example, p. 138.
which Verbin suggests. I am interested in this question: granted that God reveals himself in Jesus Christ and thereby shows that human language is a fit medium for speech about God, what must we say about the semantics of religious language, if our speaking is indeed to be about God and not an idol (pp. 10f, 18–19)? Since the greater proportion of chapter 1 concerns the correct construal of this question, astute readers of the book will have noticed that, in my view, one of the problems with contemporary theology and philosophy of religion lies with just the conception Verbin attributes to me.

The second conception Verbin attributes to me is that “Christian realism” involves a commitment to God as the realized condition for the possibility of religious meaning, knowledge and truth, within the Christian community, as in fact guaranteeing the meaning, knowledge and truth of various utterances made about God within the Christian community’ (6). Since this, very roughly, is my view, it is not surprising that she finds this ‘the predominant’ conception (9). So, saying that I shift ‘between two different conceptions of “Christian realism”’ (6) is true only if to reject one conception (the first) in favour of another (the second) is to shift between two different conceptions. Verbin has mistakenly attributed to me a view which I explicitly reject and then tried to show that it is inconsistent with the one I do hold. It’s not surprising she finds the views incompatible!

The charge of incoherence goes deeper, for Verbin links these two incompatible conceptions of realism with what she suggests are two incompatible accounts of Christian practices proposed by me. Obviously, she is mistaken to imply (8) that the two conceptions of realism are compatible with one but not both of my accounts of practices, but this leaves the question as to whether the two understandings of practices are incompatible. What are they?

Moore states [and for reasons which will emerge, I have put in square brackets the earlier section of this paragraph which Verbin does not quote]:

As we shall see more fully later, religious practices are apt to mislead, and the language embedded in them to be deceptive, when the humans engaging in them disobey God and allow the practices to become ends in themselves or means to humanly devised ends (such as shoring up human prestige and power relations). Jesus revealed the Father because to do his will was his meat and drink; the Father and the empowering Spirit were the grammar, the warp and woof of Jesus’ practices and that was why he could say, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9, cf. 4:34). However, he could not step outside his skin or his cultural context to prove this; it was a matter of trusting and obeying for him then just as it is for us now.] The importance of remembering that practices of faith are governed by God’s direct presence lies principally in that they thus honour him but also in the fact that they can turn against their practitioners in much the same way as did the practices of Jesus’ day. So when I say that that God himself is the grammar of faith I mean that it is he who regulates our practices (including theological ones), teaches us their point, and thereby keeps our
language in good order: God enables us to show his independent reality because he shows himself through the practices of faith.

Either practices of faith can ‘turn against their practitioners’, in which case, their being governed or regulated by God simply means that they are susceptible to God’s judgement, whether positive or negative, which entails that God does not necessarily ‘keep our language in good order’ or, God keeps Christian discourse in good order, and it is impossible that ‘practices of faith . . . can turn against their practitioners’ (7–8, quoting from p. 110).

Verbin’s suggestion that I hold two incompatible accounts of practices would be correct if she had correctly presented my views. To rebut her argument, it is necessary to analyse the fairly dense short paragraph after the quotation. As I read her, she is attributing to me the views that

(A) practices of faith can turn against their practitioners.
(B) This is exemplified by the fact that in God’s judging human practices, God ‘does not necessarily’ keep our language in good order. And
(C) if God does keep our language in order, then practices of faith cannot be turned against their practitioners.

(I ignore her attempt to link (A+B) and C with the two accounts of realism she attributes to me: I have already shown that I do not hold these.) Verbin’s suggestion is that (A+B) is inconsistent with C—which, obviously, it is. I cannot without contradiction simultaneously assert that practices can and cannot be turned against practitioners. However, this is not what I am saying. There are two problems with Verbin’s argument, the first of which is that I cannot see that the either/or she imposes on me is validly inferred from the passage quoted. This becomes more obvious when we turn to the second problem. This is that Verbin has failed to quote the directly preceding lines (which I included in square brackets) even though the sense of what she does quote depends on them: human obedience to God is central (on my account of) to how God relates to religious practices. As the full quotation makes clear, my view is that if practices are pursued disobediently and treated as ends in themselves, they are apt to ‘mislead . . . and the language embedded in them to be deceptive’. In this case, God allows practices to turn against practitioners (for example – and following 1 Cor. 11 – the eucharist becomes an occasion of God’s judgement (pp. 114–21)), and in that process he keeps our language in order. The last clause here is vital. My argument in chapter 5 is that in judging our disobedience and will to autonomy, and thereby turning practices against practitioners, God teaches us their true meaning and thereby keeps our practices and the language embedded in them in good order. Thus, read faithfully to what I actually say, (A+B) is consistent with C.

Why should we not then say, as Verbin apparently thinks I should, that God judges his people by ceasing to keep their language and the practices in which they are embedded in good order? Because it is apparent from the biblical texts I discuss that God does not do this. In both the Old Testament and in the New

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Testament, God sustains the life of his people even when they are disobedient. Since God has yoked his own reputation to his people, to deny this would be to deny that God will remain faithful to himself: it would mean that God is not as he reveals himself to Moses. Of his grace God sees to it that his people remain faithful to himself, even when reduced to the last remnant of his obedient people dying upon a cross. Precisely in the judgement already enacted in Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection (which reveals in history God’s eternal resolve to be for his people) God has proleptically vindicated himself, thwarted all our attempts at religious autonomy, and so made it possible for his judgement upon our practices to be the occasion of his keeping them in order. (An approximate analogy: if used to stab someone to death, scissors don’t cease to have the function of cutting paper by means of their distinctive cutting action. In telling the murderer that he has abused scissors, showing him how they are meant to be used and sending him to prison, a judge might (for the sake of the analogy, but not implausibly) be said to be turning the murderer’s misuse of the scissors against him, teaching him their true use, and seeking to ensure that he doesn’t abuse scissors in future)

It should be clear now why my argument is for a Christocentric realism and why to ignore this is to obscure the linchpin of the whole argument. Unfortunately, this mistake is endemic to Verbin’s argument, as is clear from a further and related criticism: “Thus emerges a different conception of “Christian realism” . . . which construes God as the ultimate judge of Christian practices, and as the condition of their possible, but not necessarily actual, meaning and truth” (13). Now in my discussion of St Paul’s theology of the Lord’s Supper and of God’s being the grammar of eucharistic practices, I argue that

[i]t is possible to try to construct a counter-meaning for the ritual, but this does not eradicate the meaning the Lord gave it . . . So, since the Supper is an occasion of the Lord’s presence with his people in judgement and grace, the eucharistic meal and food retain the character Christ gave them as . . . a medium of his presence, and this even when they are part of forgetful practices which implicitly or explicitly declare autonomy from the act of God which they memorialize. The eucharist should therefore be regarded as ineradicably the sacramental enactment of God’s judgement and grace and as incapable of losing its meaning because God grants it through his gracious presence. Thus, rather than saying that practices commanded by God can lose their meaning, it would be more accurate to say that in spurning the divinely granted meaning the abusers turn the practices against themselves, and thereby perhaps reinforce their sense that they are meaningless, worthless, and even corrupting unless and until they give them some other meaning of their own devising (pp. 116–7).

19. In addition to the detailed argument from 1 Cor. 11, from the Jewish canon, I discuss Dt. 6:20–25.
20. See the discussion of the meaning of the divine name revealed to Moses in Ex. 3, pp. 23–27, 167ff, 203ff; on God’s seeing to it that religious practices do not suffer demise, see pp. 89–92.
21. The analogy is approximate because God’s action in Christ for his people does ensure that human disobedience will not have the last word.
I am aware that in trying to accommodate a Wittgensteinian understanding of ‘grammar’ to what seem to me to be the unique demands of the biblical text I am making some bold moves. Perhaps they cannot be made in the way that I try to, in which case I welcome criticism of what I attempt in chapter 5. But, as the quotation above and the argument in the previous paragraph of this response goes some way to illustrating, I don’t think that Verbin has accurately grasped my thinking. My view, as expressed in the last sentence of the passage quoted – and which I believe is St Paul’s also – is that the meaning of Christian practices is granted to them by God: what God intends them to mean is their ‘actual’ meaning and they cannot lose that. By contrast, it seems that Paul envisages the possibility of their appearing to those who abuse those practices that they are meaningless. Pace Verbin, since this view is not inconsistent with what I argue elsewhere, she has not succeeded in showing that I hold ‘a different conception of Christian realism’.

Verbin presses her argument to its conclusion when she argues (in moves similar to those we have already examined) that ‘in wishing to have it both ways, Moore’s conception of “Christian realism” dissolves into incoherence’ (14). She states the argument as follows: ‘either practices of faith can “turn against their practitioners”, or God “keeps our language in good order”; either “theology is rational because it follows the rationality of God’s work…” (p. 129) or “Theology is a practice as much at risk of falling into disrepair as any other” (p. 111)’. (14). The argument appears to be that I hold two mutually inconsistent pairs of disjunctions: either

(D) ‘practices of faith can “turn against their practitioners”’

or

(E) ‘God “keeps our language in good order”’;

either

(F) “theology is rational because it follows the rationality of God’s work…”

or

(G) “theology is a practice as much at risk of falling into disrepair as any other”.

Verbin holds that the argument of Realism and Christian Faith is incoherent because I want simultaneouly to assert both pairs of disjunctions.

I have already shown that (D+E) is not, on my account, incompatible. The biblical witness shows that it is perfectly (theologically) possible for a practice to have been given by God, to have a meaning which is ineradicable because he gives it, for humans to perform the practice in a way which ignores his command, and for him to act in judgement by turning it against them so as to bring humans back into line with his will. As I argued above in relation to Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, this is the principal way he keeps our language in good order.

Nor do I see why (F+G) is incompatible. To say that a practice is rational is to say nothing about whether it can fall into disrepair. Mathematics

22. The quotation at the beginning of this paragraph is another occasion where Verbin attributes to me the version of the transcendental argument for realism which I reject.

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is rational but a brilliant undergraduate mathematician’s abilities can fall into disrepair unless she continues to use them after leaving university. If certain mathematical skills ceased to be taught, the fields which depended on them might fall into a state of disrepair; in such a situation corrective measures would be entirely appropriate. Theology is a rational discipline because it is possible for those who practice it to use logic in following the intrinsic rationality of God’s saving and revealing work among his people. If theologians cease to follow that intrinsic rationality, then even if it is pursued with the greatest mastery of logic, theology will have fallen into a state of disrepair.

[28] What then of Verbin’s conclusion that my argument is incoherent? In re-considering my own argument and seeking to meet her own, I do not think that her case has been proved. Verbin’s position depends on attributing to me positions I do not hold, on inaccurate reporting or misinterpretation of those I do, and on flawed reasoning.

[29] There are some final points to be made in reply to Verbin and they takes us to issues central to the wider debate about realism. She argues that the two incompatible views of practices are themselves compatible with two different conceptions of realism (8). The view of practices according to which God does keep practices in good order is compatible with a view of realism according to which God guarantees the meaning and truth of religious utterances because he is ‘the realized condition for the possibility of religious meaning, knowledge and truth’ (6). This, as I have said, is a reasonably accurate statement of the Christocentric realism defended in the book. Verbin rightly points out that this view is incompatible with a view of religious practices according to which God judges practices in such a way that he ‘does not necessarily “keep our language in good order”’ (6, emphasis added) and with a corresponding view of realism according to which God is the condition of possibility for religious meaning, knowledge, and truth. She is also correct in her view that this account of realism is ‘compatible . . . with the possibility of fundamental error in Christians’ conceptions of God’s nature and will (idolatry, blasphemy etc.)’ (6).

[30] The philosophically and theologically important point here is that the latter position is that taken by the theological realists – such as Hebblethwaite, Markham, and Soskice – against whom I argue. [23] If it is to be defended it requires arguments from natural theology to prove that God does exist. It also implies a fallibilism the cost of which both I and Michael Durrant (whose philosophical position is significantly different from my own) find “unacceptable” for it requires that “Christ might have been mistaken as to God’s nature; an untenable position for any Christian theist to entertain” (p. 148). [24] Whether it is possible to uphold the arguments of natural theology whilst not falling into the trap of fallibilism is a question which would be well worth pursuing by Christians whose views on natural theology are different from my own.

23. I detect similar arguments being used by Rahner and Steiner in their accounts of meaning; see pp. 148–60.
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[31] Verbin also might be inclined to take this latter position. (Though as I noted earlier, given her sympathy for my rejection of natural theology and apologetics, it is not easy to see how she would argue for it.) She seems to advocate that it is neither ‘inconceivable that everything that is said about [God] is, at best, false and, at worst, nonsense’ nor that God ‘does not show himself where we (whoever we are: whether Jews, Christians or Muslims) suppose him to show himself’ (BiT, 5). Well, clearly neither possibility is inconceivable; they are logically possible. But can one remain a Jew, Christian, or Muslim whilst adopting this as one’s final position? I don’t know, but in my own case, I cannot. If that means not relinquishing ‘reflective distance from the professing community’; if it means refusing to ‘put aside the question of God’s existence’; and if both those require ‘not [going] beyond a confession of faith’ (BiT, 9, 10), and being a theologian rather than a philosopher, I am content to plead guilty. There are some issues on which neutrality can be the most dangerous position.

3 Response to Verbin’s ‘But is it True?’

[32] The bulk of Verbin’s article sets out her own view of how one might develop an account of realism whilst maintaining the kind of ‘reflective distance from the professing community’ she stipulates that a philosopher or theologian ‘must’ adopt (BiT, 9). As was noted above, for Verbin, employing such a reflective distance also involves ‘put[ting] aside the question of God’s existence’ (BiT, 10). She suggests that theistic realism is a form of ‘fundamentalism’ which she defines as the practice of interpreting any terms of the biblical narrative to do with ‘characters, events or facts’ as referential, where reference is construed on evidentialist lines such as obtain in history or science (BiT, 18, 20, cf. 16, 19, 21). But we must ask whether such a construal of the debate is genuinely to ‘put aside the question of God’s existence’? It looks to me more like begging the question against realism by attaching it to an exceptionally naive way of reading the Bible. Plenty of Christian communities distinguish between the referentiality of the Book of Jonah and the narrative sections of the gospels, between the kinds of truth that are attributed to the creation narratives, to the resurrection narratives, to parables, and to the existence of Pontius Pilate. The problem is that Verbin’s distinction between history and fiction is far too un-nuanced to capture the subtleties of the range of genres present in the Bible and the varieties of accounts of the ways in which they may be said to refer. Moreover, no defence of theistic realism known to me employs such a crass approach to the referentiality of first-order theistic discourse as Verbin’s argument against that position requires and she herself provides no evidence of the existence of such an approach to back up her characterisation of theistic realism’s understanding of the reference of biblical terms. In other words, Verbin seems to presume against theistic realism by identifying it with an approach that no thoughtful believer would wish to (or does actually – ?) hold.

[33] This raises the further question as to whether Verbin is consistent with her own prescription for how a philosopher or theologian should maintain reflective distance. In paragraph 9 of ‘But is it True?’, she says that ‘[t]he philosopher
or theologian who wishes to shed light on the nature of the believer’s commitment
to the reality of God, must take account of the manner in which God is spoken
of and to, *within the communities that take Him to be present and active in
them* (BiiT, 8, emphasis added). Whilst she ‘gestures’ at ‘fundamentalist’ and
‘non-fundamentalist’ communities and distinguishes between them on the basis
of whether they construe their foundational narratives as referential, Verbin refers
to only one (real?) community that takes God ‘to be present and active within’ it
and that is one which follows her own ‘non-fundamentalist’ way of reading the
Bible.\(^{25}\) To the extent that she has not paid attention to any actual ‘fundamen-
talist’ communities’ reading practices, to the extent that she has imposed upon
them a view of how any such community does read the Bible, and to the extent
that she has thereby failed to heed her own stipulation about good philosophical
or theological practice, we may suspend judgement about whether her argument
sheds light on ‘what it is for a believer to be a realist about God’.

\[34\] By contrast, her own proposal for ‘a conception of realism’ requires
that we read the Bible as ‘subversive fiction’ (BiIT, 34, 26ff). This account ap-
parently does involve reference to God (see, e.g., BiIT, 32, 33) but what this
amounts to and how it involves ‘put[ting] aside the question of God’s existence’
rather than presuming against it is not spelt out beyond our being told that “non-
fundamentalists” do not seek empirical evidence to support the existence of the
characters or events that are represented in their canonical narratives’ (BiIT, 21).
What it *might* amount to is for us to infer from being told that ‘one can only wait
on the story’ and from the sentence that ‘[w]hile “truth” and “falsity” have an ap-
lication for the “non-fundamentalist”, they clearly have a different one than they
do in history or science’ (BiIT, 34). It will be interesting to see how Verbin spells
out the details of this conception in subsequent work, not least because many will
be wondering how she will distinguish her proposal for a conception of realism
from Don Cupitt’s constructivism in *What is a Story?* ‘It is extraordinary’, Cupitt
writes, ‘that one should need to say such a thing, but is it not obvious that the very
prominence of fictional narrative in our religious tradition – and still more the
fact that we often cannot tell for sure, and it doesn’t matter at all anyway, whether
a particular biblical book is fiction or not – shows that religion is a communal
human imaginative construction, and shows it so clearly that the only question is
why people should ever have supposed otherwise?’\(^{26}\) On the basis of what Verbin
has presented, I find it hard to see why a realist believer whose view of biblical nar-
rative and the possibility of its being referential is more nuanced than hers should
take her reassurances concerning the applicability of ‘truth’ and ‘falsity’ to her
own “fictionalist” position as being sufficient for them to regard it as amounting
to realism.

\[^{25}\text{See BiIT paragraphs 32f.}\]
\[^{26}\text{London: SCM, p. 125.}\]