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The Realist Hope: A Critique of Anti-Realist Approaches in Contemporary Philosophical Theology

By Christopher J. Insole


This vigorous and well-written book gathers together some of Insole’s already published work on topics related to the realism question in the context of a revision of his Oxford doctoral thesis in order to defend a version of religious realism focussed around William Alston’s minimal, alethic realism. The chapters deriving from the thesis have a clear and cumulative sense of argumentative direction, but the material drawn from other sources, though it clarifies the position Insole advocates and adds to the interest of the book by touching on, for example, political and ethical matters, is somewhat uneven and less well integrated. So although the book doesn’t have the precise focus and structure of a monograph it is one which those researching religious realism will find useful and provocative.

The book is organised around four criteria of religious realism, three adopted from Alston and a fourth of Insole’s own:

‘A there is an indispensable core of religious utterances that are fact-asserting, not merely expressive (from here on [Insole refers] to this core as “statements”),

‘B statements are made true by a non-epistemic state of affairs (the way the world is, rather than standards of “ideal justification”),

‘C what is the case is independent of human cognition,

‘D we can, in principle, have true beliefs about what is the case independent of human cognition’ (2).

A position is religiously anti-realist if it involves the denial of at least one of these; conversely, Insole argues, if none of A to D is denied, religious realism is ‘intact’ (3).

Insole proposes that these four criteria have a distinct advantage for characterizing the debate: they cast it in terms of what constitutes the truth of a religious statement rather than in terms of the existence or non-existence of metaphysical entities or of the justification of particular religious beliefs. The criteria also enable the author to obtain philosophical purchase against those he regards as the...
villains of religious non-realism—in particular, D. Z. Phillips, Gordon Kaufman and John Hick. Thus, in chapter 1–4, he argues against what he takes to be D. Z. Phillips’s expressivism and his (and Putnam’s) commitment to an epistemic conception of truth—that is, against Phillips’s denials of A and B. Chapter 5 takes up the case against global constructivists such as Nelson Goodman who deny C. Neither Hick nor Kaufman are global constructivists but they are influenced by constructivist motifs from Kant and deny D. Accordingly, Insole argues against Kant in chapter 6 and against Hick and Kaufman in chapters 7 and 8. Chapter 9 argues against some contemporary versions of apophaticism on the ground that they are no more exempt from the charge of projecting political structures onto the divine than those they were formulated to avoid, the only difference is that the political arrangements are not the same. Chapter 10 comprises material from book reviews and argues that although the authors he discusses affirm D against the broadly Kantian problem of how humans may speak of the transcendent, their resort to the concept of “gift” in doing so is mistaken because they use it to deploy a God of the philosophical gaps.

Up to this point, Insole has been concerned mainly to rebut arguments against A–D; in the two final chapters we are given a clearer idea of what “the realist hope” amounts to. It is the logical possibility of having true beliefs about God:

RH ‘With some p (I do not wish to be committed to “with any p”), where p is a truth about God, it is logically possible for us to believe p’ (172, italics removed).

Now if it were impossible for us to frame any truths about God in human language, the realist hope would be empty. In chapter 11 then, Insole defends his view against those who argue that, owing to the ontological difference between God and humans, we cannot offer a determinate meaning for terms predicately analogically of God. In place of this model (whose ‘bankrupt’ nature many—not only Thomists—would contest), Insole favours a predicate schema approach to analogical predication along the lines advocated by J.F. Ross. On this view, it is logically possible for us to use anthropomorphic language to formulate a p where p is a truth about God.

In the final chapter, Insole argues that if religious people adopt a realistic account of truth in ethics and about other people—as even religious anti-realists typically do—then a fortiori they should be religious realists. At the beginning of this chapter, Insole admits that his argument could appear to amount to the survival of realism only because of the implausibility of anti-realism. ‘I have certainly failed so far to say anything more positive and substantial about what a religious realism should look like, and how it might enrich, underpin or transform the lives of believers or society’ (188). So, what should religious realism look like? ‘Religious realism is the claim that truth is independent of our beliefs about truth, and that we can in principle hope to have true beliefs about God. Realism is not intrinsically concerned with the existence of “objects”, with natural theology or rational justification’ (188).
The difficulty with this version of religious realism is that it looks too implausibly minimalist when we examine it in the context of particular religious beliefs – an examination which, presumably, Insole would not baulk at since he is concerned to rebut anti-realist accounts of (Christian) religious practices (cf. 2–3). Take, for example, two purported religious truths:

C We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father . . . true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Father.

M There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his Prophet.

(I take it that, being core claims of Christians and Muslims respectively, C and M would be acceptable examples of ‘particular theological truth claims about God’ for although in a passage from p. 189 quoted below, Insole seems to be permissive about what truth claims about God he would allow, in RH he seems to wish to be more restrictive.) On standard interpretations offered by Christians and Muslims of their own and of the others’ creedral statements, it is acknowledged that C and M are held to express a truth about God but they are also held to irreconcilably contradict each other. One of them can express a truth about God but not both. So, assuming that one of C and M is a truth about God, the realist hope is intact: it remains logically possible to believe it. On Insole’s view, this is a virtue of his proposal for it allows for an appropriate tentativeness to religious belief. However, this will not be of much use to the religious seeker who wants to make an informed commitment to either C or M. For alethic accounts of realism, truth is independent of our cognitive activity, so once our seeker sets out on the road of satisfying her desire to establish epistemically which of C and M is true, truth goes epistemic and she loses realism. On Insole’s account, the seeker seems to be left with a dilemma: either accept anti-realism, or accept that the quest comes to an end at the logical possibility of believing either C or M but not both.

Insole is reluctant to allow his account of religious realism to be theologically specified or constrained. (Theological claims and positions are often described as ‘gratuitous’ or ‘idiosyncratic’.) As he puts it, ‘an objection to a particular theology (which happens to be realist) is not an objection to realism, or an assault on realism’ (191). Thus, if C should turn out to be false it would not follow that religious realism is to be rejected or, more specifically, that it is not logically possible that M expresses a truth about God. Though C cannot be a candidate for the realist hope, M can be. And if neither C nor M, then some other set of truths about God can be the object of the realist hope.

My difficulty with this account of religious realism is that it is religiously unsatisfying. It allows that an enormous number of statements about God could be true and therefore candidates for belief but, on pain of going anti-realist, it cannot allow that we be justified in believing that any particular religious belief is true. Insole is sanguine about this: ‘a conclusion that we can in principle use our language to speak the truth about God does not entail or preclude any particular
theological truth claim about God’ (189). This might be acceptable where the realist hope is construed as a strictly philosophical doctrine, but when examined from the point of view of religious beliefs as they are typically encountered in lived religions, say Christianity or Islam, it looks inadequate. A Christian realist or a Muslim realist stakes her hope on their particular beliefs, C or M, being true. Religious believers do not restrict their creedal statements to the logical possibility of believing that \( p \) or their hopes to the in principle hunch that these statements convey true beliefs. It is hard to imagine anyone being willing to accept martyrdom for a logical possibility of holding a belief or an in principle hope of having a true belief.

But as a theologian looking for more from Insole on the relationship between his realist hope and the nature of commitment to a particular set of religious beliefs, I am asking for more than he aims to deliver. As Insole acknowledges, the realism he defends ‘could be adopted by an atheist’ (3). To recall, the book is concerned only to establish that ‘where \( p \) is a truth about God, it is logically possible for us to believe \( p \)’. Pace Insole’s attack on anti-realist accounts of Christian religious practices (as found in Cupitt, Phillips, and Kaufman), he does not take it as part of his brief to defend a realist construal of any particular religious beliefs for that would be to take him into questions of the existence and the characteristics of a divine “object” – whether Jesus Christ is ‘eternally begotten of the Father’; whether there is ‘no God but Allah’. But ‘[r]ealism is not intrinsically concerned with the existence of “objects”’; ‘[t]here is always something cheap and suspicious about this characterization of the realist’ (188, 196). This is why the realism he regards ‘as essential to religious practice is to be dissociated from gratuitous commitments to natural theology, the certainty/justification of religious beliefs, or particular political/theological agendas’ (3) – commitments which would, presumably, include those expressed by C and M.

Yet despite this, at times I got the impression that the author found it hard to avoid allowing metaphysical claims about, and commitments to, religious “objects” into his argument. Thus, in arguing against epistemic conceptions of truth, he states that ‘[w]hether or not you believe in God is a serious matter’ (65–6). That belief ‘in’ God is here to be construed in terms of a fiduciary relationship to an “object” rather than to a belief about God is borne out by the further claim that ‘[t]he practice of the Christian religion presupposes an ontologically transcendent being God, who is what God is independently of any of our most noble epistemic pursuits’ (66): for such a realist Christianity, its practice is nothing if it is not trust in an independently existing deity.

Insole’s willingness to entertain the role of commitment becomes more apparent when he argues that Grace Jantzen is inconsistent in downplaying the significance of the religious realism/anti-realism dispute. Insole suggests that though she unwittingly adopts a realist hope construal of feminist values, if her argument against patriarchy is to be made, these need to be construed in a way analogous to religious realism: an anti-realist understanding of those values will not yield the desired ethical perspective. Insole asks, Why should we care about the oppression of women? His reply is significant: ‘because it is wrong, and it is realistically true.
that it is wrong, to perpetuate and be complicit in injustice, because it is true, regardless of what epistemic practice I belong to, that people should be treated with respect, dignity and justice’ (194, Insole’s emphasis).

Notice the nature of the appeal here. It is not to its being logically possible to believe that ‘it is true that people should be treated with respect, etc.’ Rather, an assertion seems to be being made: that is, it is ‘true that people should be treated with respect, etc.’ The difficulty is obvious (if I have understood Insole correctly): in this instance at least, the realist hope extends beyond the kind of fallibilism that Insole advocates in religious contexts (e.g. 188, 192, 199). An ethical assertion is being made and its truth appealed to. Thus it appears that in the case of ethics, for Insole the realist hope reaches as far as (an implied) knowledge that certain ethical beliefs are in fact true and others (which suggest a very different ethical stance towards women) are false. But, on analogy with what I argued in the religious case, Insole’s account of the realist hope should permit us to can conceive of there being ethical beliefs that contradict those which in this case we hold to be true—beliefs (endorsed by some religious extremists) that deny to women the treatment Western liberals and/or Christians believe they are entitled to. If I have read Insole correctly, we are led to the following questions. If in the religious case we should adopt our beliefs with a tentativeness appropriate to its being no more than possible that they are true, why not in the moral one? Whence the strength of Insole’s moral assertions?

We come back to the question of the nature of commitment to a set of beliefs. Can one live ethically with the kind of tentative commitment to ethical realism which Insole appears to think is required in the religious realm? If one can, then we need a different argument for equal treatment of women from that which Insole offers; if one cannot, what is it about religious realism that prevents it being construed along the lines implied by Insole’s ethical realism?

In fact, and as we saw four paragraphs above, Insole implies that religious beliefs do involve a high degree of commitment. Religious realism is, as Insole argues in his final chapter, analogous to healthy relationships with other people: the former involves faith, courage and love, the latter mutual vulnerability and trust. Anti-realism destroys both. Insole’s apparent slip in his depiction of ethical realism gives us a sense of his willingness to risk commitment greater than his argument seems to me to permit—a commitment that is exemplified both in relationships with other human beings and with God. The kind of commitment that generates vulnerability and trust in a personal relationship involves, pace Insole, more than ‘the realist claim that there are some truths about other people that are true independently of our beliefs and cognitive activity, and which we could in principle get to have true beliefs about’ (196). It involves my conviction that it is true that s/he shares my interests, has my best interests at heart, is not devious and manipulative, and so on. (And if not my conviction that these things are true, my willingness to discover whether my belief that these things are true is justified.) It involves my commitment to the truth of my beliefs, not just to the logical possibility that I may believe them or that I can in principle hope to have true beliefs about the other person. Such commitments and convictions takes us
beyond the realist hope as Insole construes it, but, I have tried to argue and as Insole seems sometimes to intimate, not beyond the practice of ethics, of personal relationships, or of religion.