

Realism and the Christian faith

WILLIAM P. ALSTON

Syracuse University

1

My central thesis in this paper is that nonrealism, though rampant nowadays even among Christian theologians, is subversive of the Christian faith. But before I am in a position to argue for that, I must go through some preliminaries.

The term 'realism' is used variously. An enormous philosophical literature is piling up under that aegis, and any contribution thereto must begin by making clear the kind of realism and nonrealism (irrealism)¹ that is being discussed.

Traditionally realism is a metaphysical position. It is either the opposite of idealism, denying that everything that exists is either mental or essentially dependent on the mental; or it is the view that some type of entity *really* or *basically* or *irreducibly* exists, as with medieval realism about universals or contemporary realism about moral (evaluative) properties or about intentional psychological states. But in this paper I will be using the term in a somewhat different way, though one not unconnected with those metaphysical positions.

I will follow a recent fashion in taking the realism-irrealism contrast to concern the understanding (interpretation) of a certain body of discourse - scientific, moral, evaluative, observational, religious, aesthetic, or whatever.² The intuitive idea is that on a realist construal of a body of what looks like factual statements, they do indeed have that status, and as such each one is assessable as true or false depending on whether some stretch of reality, some fact, exists (obtains) and is what it is independently of our attempts to cognize it – independently of our beliefs, theories, conceptual schemes, and the like.³ We may set out realism in this sense as a conjunction of three claims concerning the putative statements, S's, in a certain body of discourse, D.

1. S's are genuine statements of fact, just what they appear to be, as contrasted with, e.g., expressions of feelings or attitudes, or bits of fictional narrative.

2. S's are true or false in a realist sense of these terms. A statement is true in the realist sense *iff* what it is about is as the statement says it to be. Otherwise it is false. The necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth of a statement are given by the content of the statement, what it is stating to be the case. To put this in another way, S's conform to what we may call the equivalence schema: *The statement that p is true iff p*. Any substitution instance of the schema obtained by replacing *p* with a declarative sentence that can be used to make one of the S's is true, and, indeed, necessarily, analytically true, by virtue of the meaning of 'true'. The statement that sugar is sweet is true if and only if sugar is sweet. The statement that John is honest is true if and only if John is honest. The statement that all dogs have fleas is true if and only if all dogs have fleas. You get the idea.

The realist conception of truth can be, and usually is, embraced as fully by metaphysical nonrealists as by realists - by those who deny the reality of abstract objects like properties and numbers as well as by those who accept this, by those who take physical objects to be reducible to patterns of sensory experience as well as by those who deny this. In other words, the usual run of departmental irrealists, including idealists, take it that their statements are made true or false by virtue of whether what they say to be the case actually is the case. The typical idealist or phenomenalist supposes that the claims he makes about the (mental or phenomenal) nature of the physical world are true if and only if that is the way the physical world is. Indeed, it may be felt that as I have formulated the realist conception of truth, no one in her right mind would reject it. Who could deny that the statement that gold is malleable is true if and only if gold is malleable? And yet those who construe the truth of a statement as consisting of some favorable epistemic status of the statement (being confirmed, rationally acceptable, justified, or whatever) are committed to denying this, whether they realize it or not. For they take something to be necessary for the truth of the proposition that gold is malleable other than gold's being malleable.

The realist conception of truth has usually been stated as some kind of *correspondence* theory. The statement that *p* is true *iff* there is an actually obtaining fact (the fact that *p*, naturally) which it 'matches', or with which it 'corresponds'. Working out a viable form of correspondence theory is a difficult task. If I were to enter onto that, I would never get to my central concern in this paper. Hence I will forego any such attempt, though from time to time I will avail myself of 'correspondence' language.

3. For any such true statement that *p*, the fact that *p* (the fact that renders the statement true) obtains and is what it is independently of our attempts to cognize it – our theories, conceptual schemes, and the like. Otherwise put, the range of facts that make the true statements of the class of S's true, hold and are what they are independently of our cognitive doings. This is the

metaphysical component of this brand of realism. It ascribes to a certain range of facts a sort of independence of human cognition that is characteristic of realist positions. Call this position *cognition-independent realism*.

Point 3 does not rule out all kinds of dependence on mind of the facts in question. It is compatible with Berkelyan and absolute idealism, for example, since neither of these views take facts about reality to be dependent for what they are on human cognition of the facts. However, it is not so tolerant as to be toothless. Cognition-independent realism about the physical world is incompatible with, *inter alia*, Kantian ‘transcendental idealism’ about the physical world, for that position takes the physical world to be structured by our cognitive activity. And, for a given domain, it rules out currently fashionable forms of conceptual-ontological relativism for that domain, and such far-out views as deconstructionism.

The view that consists of these three theses I shall call *alethic⁴ realism*, since the heart of the position is a realist conception of truth. Alethic realism (concerning putative statements, S's, of a body of discourse D) can be more crisply presented as a conjunction of the following three theses.

1. S's are genuine factual statements.
2. S's are true or false in the realist sense of those terms.
3. The facts that make true S's true hold and are what they are independently of human cognition.

Since alethic realism is a conjunction of three principles, one can be an alethic irrealist about a given domain of discourse by denying any one or more of the principles. Note that the principles are ‘nested’. A denial of any one of them carries with it a denial of its successors, and an acceptance to any one carries an acceptance of its predecessors. If we deny 1, then since we do not recognize any factual statements in the domain, it is not possible that a realist conception of truth is applicable (denial of 2), since that conception is defined for statements of fact. And if 2 is denied, then the question of the status of the facts in terms of which the statements are true or false in the realist sense cannot arise (denial of 3). By the same token, if we assert 3, we are committed to there being statements in the domain (1) that can be assessed for truth or falsity in terms of whether what they assert to obtain actually does obtain (2).

‘Emotivists’ about ethics are ethical nonrealists by denying 1. They take putative ethical statements to be expressions of feelings or attitudes. Coherence and pragmatist theorists of truth are, globally, alethically irrealist by denying 2 but not 1, for they hold that the truth of a statement consists in some epistemic status it has (being integrated in a coherent system, or ‘leading’ us fruitfully from one part of our experience to another) rather than in the actual obtaining of what the statement claims to be the case. Kant, as I just pointed out, is alethically irrealist about the physical world by

denying 3 (but not 1 or 2), for he holds that its constitution is determined by our cognition of it.⁵

My primary concern in this essay is with alethic realism and irrealism in the religious domain. Are what look like religious statements, including those that are about a putative supreme reality such as the Christian God, genuine statements that can be assessed as true or false in terms of whether they 'match' an objective reality that is what it is independent of our cognitive machinations? Or do they have some other status? Is their truth (or other positive status, in case 'truth' is not applicable) to be assessed in some other way?

Before coming to this central issue, I should say a word about the realism-oriented issues concerning religion that I will not be discussing. Various kinds of metaphysical irrealism are prominent in religious thought. The straight denial of the existence of God is well known; it is called 'atheism'. And reductive accounts of the reality of what is called 'God' are rife in the twentieth century. In Julian Huxley's *Religion Without Revelation*⁶ he sets out a naturalistic version of the Trinity, according to which God the Father is interpreted as the forces of nonhuman nature, God the Holy Spirit as the ideals for which men are striving (at their best), and God the Son as human life itself which is, more or less, utilizing the forces of nature in the pursuit of those ideals. The unity of these three Persons in one God is interpreted as the essential unity of all these aspects of nature. Another naturalistic reduction is found in Henry Nelson Wieman's contribution to *Is There a God?*,⁷ where he defines God as 'that interaction between individuals, groups, and ages which generates and promotes the greatest possible mutuality of good' (p. 13). These reductive accounts of the nature of God are at least as far from more standard conceptions as a phenomenalist construal of physical objects is from the usual way of thinking of them, or a behavioristic interpretation of beliefs or intentions is from a common-sense way of conceiving them.

Because of the focus on *alethic* realism (nonrealism) I will not be dealing with these kinds of religious nonrealism. In the religious sphere as elsewhere, nonrealists of the sort just illustrated are typically alethic realists. An atheist like Bertrand Russell takes there to be an objective reality by reference to which our religious statements, as well as others, are true or false. It is precisely because, as he takes it, this reality contains no supreme personal deity that he is an atheist. Julian Huxley also thinks that there are determinate, objective facts concerning what there is and isn't. Again, because of his views as to what these facts are he thinks that if we are to find anything to relate to religiously it will have to be something of the naturalistic sort, rather than a personal deity.

I leave these issues to one side not because I feel that they are unimportant, but because they are relatively obvious and because they have been much discussed. Religious alethic nonrealism, by contrast, is a relatively recent phenomenon, and it has received much less attention.

2

I turn now to the task of distinguishing and illustrating forms of alethic religious irrealism.

1. *Expressivism-instrumentalism*. The most familiar form is an analogue of the non-cognitivism or emotivism in ethics that denies that what look to be statements of fact in ethics really have that status. Instead they are best construed as expressions of attitudes and emotions, or as commitments to a policy of action. This view denies thesis 1. of alethic realism and hence the others as well. I will use the term '*expressivism*' rather than the more usual terms just mentioned. An attractive version of this position is found in George Santayana, an author of whom it was said that he believes that there is no God and that the Virgin Mary is His mother. On Santayana's view, as expressed in his *Reason in Religion*,⁸ there are two components to a religious doctrine, or 'myth', as he prefers to say. There is (a) an evaluation of some sort, which is (b) expressed in the form of a picture or story. Thus the Christian myth of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ and His sacrificial and unmerited death on the cross to atone for our sins can be regarded as a symbol of the moral value of self-sacrifice. Instead of merely expressing a high evaluation of self-sacrifice by saying 'self-sacrifice is a noble thing', the Christian community expresses it vividly and poetically in a story of the doings of a supernatural personal being. Religion is poetry that intervenes in life. As this dictum indicates, there is more to the position than would be suggested by the term '*expressivism*'. Santayana thinks of religious myths not only as *expressing* attitudes and feelings, but also as *guiding* our lives, our responses to the world. This side of the matter can be captured by the term '*instrumentalism*', taken from the philosophy of science. An instrumentalist about science takes talk of unobservable theoretical entities like quarks and positrons not to be an attempt to report correctly an objective reality, but rather to be a useful 'fiction' that enables us to do a better job of predicting observable phenomena. The function for which religious beliefs are 'instrumental' is not predictive but rather 'life-orienting', but we may still use the term '*instrumentalism*' for the view that the beliefs are to be construed in terms of their performing this job. Hence I will use the term '*Expressivism-instrumentalism*' for this construal of religious belief. For a

more up to date version of the view that religious beliefs are stories told to illustrate moral convictions, see R. B. Braithwaite's *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief*.⁹

2. *Symbolisticism*. I take Paul Tillich as my protagonist. According to Tillich, it is misguided to ask whether religious doctrines tell it like it is with respect to God. Since God (the true God, Being-Itself) is beyond any conceptualization,¹⁰ it is hopeless to seek any correspondence between what we say about God and God. Instead our 'God-talk' is made up of *symbols* of God, which 'point to' His reality by 'participating' in His power and being.¹¹ Not only what are commonly recognized as symbols are to be so construed – the lamb, water, the shepherd, etc. Anything concrete or conceptualizable is a symbol, including Christ, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit. Speaking of God the Father is an appropriate way of symbolizing Being Itself because fatherhood is one of the 'places' in the world where we are 'grasped' by the power of Being, one of the aspects of the world that reveals or mediates Being to us. But any literal correspondence of our beliefs with the divine, such as is envisaged by alethic realism, is out of the question.

This position is obviously related to expressivism, but it differs in avoiding such a sharp break with the traditional idea that expressions of religious belief are statements of fact. Tillich keeps Being-Itself in the background as an objective referent for religious affirmations, even though the conceptual and cognitive inaccessibility of Being-Itself prevents us from assessing those affirmations as true or false of Being-Itself in a realist sense. Should we say that Tillich denies 2 and 3 but affirms 1, or does he jettison all three? To adequately document a reply would require much more space than I have here, but I incline to the latter, more radical interpretation. For Tillich a religious 'affirmation' is not really thought of as making a claim as to how reality is at some point (hence not really a factual statement), but as 'pointing to' some aspect of the world that effectively puts us in touch with Being-Itself.

3. *Hick's 'Kantianism'*. This is a more moderate nonrealism. Just as Kant took theoretical knowledge to be restricted to the *phenomenal* world, the system of the ways reality appears to our senses, and not to penetrate to that reality itself, so Hick considers the objects of worship in a given religious tradition to have phenomenal rather than noumenal reality. Like Kant he supposes there to be a noumenal reality, The Real, which appears to us in various ways, but, again like Kant, he denies that we can know anything substantive about it, except for the ways it appears to us, though he goes

beyond Kant in denying that any of our concepts can be applied to the Real. It 'transcends human conceptuality'.¹² As applied to religion the Kantian scheme becomes relativized. Instead of a single human schematism of the manifold of sensation by a unique set of categories, we have different interpretations of the Real as it appears to people in different religious traditions. As in Kant, this position is intermediate between hard nosed realism and radical nonrealism. The modes of appearance of the Real in a given religion are, to use Kant's terms, 'empirically real but transcendentally ideal'. They are objective vis-à-vis any particular individual, but their status is that of a mode of appearance rather than the independent reality of that which is appearing.

We must also note that Hick applies the notion of 'mythical truth' to religious beliefs, distinguishing this from 'literal truth'. 'A statement or set of statements about X is mythologically true if it is not literally true but nevertheless tends to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude to X. Mythological truth is practical ...'.¹³ Thus, as far as specific Christian beliefs are concerned (and those of other religions), the assessment for truth-value is not in terms of realist truth, but in terms of whether the content of the beliefs 'evokes an appropriate dispositional attitude'. When all the dust has settled, Hick is closer to Santayana's *expressivism-instrumentalism* than at first appeared. Though it would not be correct to say that he denies that what look like religious statements really are such, and though he does not deny that a realist conception of truth applies to them, still he thinks that the most important dimension of evaluation for religious beliefs concerns a different kind (conception) of truth.

However Hick's position is so rich that the last sentence is at best one side of the picture. There is also a strain, perhaps a stronger strain, of Kantian 'empirical realism'. If we think of the gods as having phenomenal reality in the way Kant thinks of the physical world, we could take beliefs about them to be true or false depending on whether the phenomenal reality they are about is as they take it to be. This gives us the first two components of alethic realism. Only the third is missing - that what a belief must correspond with in order to be true is independent of our thought and experience. Thus there is a tension between two Hicks - the Kantian *empirical realist-transcendental idealist*, and the *semi-expressivist-instrumentalist*. The former denies only principle 3 of alethic realism, while the latter denies 2 and 3 (or at least severely modifies 2).

4. The Harvard theologian, Gordon Kaufman, presents an interesting case. In his book, *God The Problem*,¹⁴ he sounds very much like Hick. He distinguishes the 'real referent' of 'God' from the 'available referent', which he identifies with an 'imaginative construct' (pp. 85-86). Like Hick, he takes

the real referent to be epistemically inaccessible and not literally characterizable (pp. 85, 95). The main difference is that whereas Hick places considerable stress on the idea that the Real is that which we experience and relate to, Kaufman stresses rather the role of the available referent as the object of religious responses. It is the principal object of theology (pp. 87–88). It functions as an ordering principle for life (pp. 97–98). It is a focus of devotion and orientation. The real referent appears only as an I-know-not-what in the background that is somehow the ultimate ground of all this.

In Kaufman's later books, *The Theological Imagination*¹⁵ and *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*,¹⁶ the real referent tends to drop out altogether. Its place is taken by 'mystery', which is explicitly said not to be 'descriptive of some object of theological awareness or knowledge', but rather an intellectual bafflement in the face of ultimate questions.¹⁷ There is no longer any suggestion that our talk, experience, and activity *vis-à-vis* the available referent mediates a grasp of a transcendent real referent. God is now solely *within* an 'imaginative construct' or conceptual scheme. '...the image/concept of God does not function simply as referring to some being which is grasped and understood just in terms of itself; on the contrary, it functions as the principal focal point of an overall world-picture, and it is in terms of that interpretive frame that it must be understood'.¹⁸ Living in relation to God *is* living in the world-view that has God as its focus.¹⁹ There is no need to posit a particular existent being, God.²⁰ The question of the existence of God is a question of the viability and appropriateness of an orientation, a true or valid understanding of *human existence*.²¹ Indeed in the latest book Kaufman makes it quite explicit that the only realities he recognizes are within the world of nature. 'We should, in our attempt to construct conceptions and pictures of humanity, the world, and God, try to speak only in terms of *this world*, of the realities of *this life*...'.²² We must avoid 'reifying' our imaginative constructions of God.

We come to see that our religious symbolism is not valid in its own right, but only to the extent that it represents, and thus reinforces, those cosmic and historical tendencies and forces which are moving us toward further humanization, toward a more humane and ecologically sustainable order.²³

Shades of Wieman! This deviates from a straight naturalistic reconstruction of theology only by virtue of retaining more or less traditional conceptions of, and stories about, God, construed now, – à la Santayana, as poetic renderings of this-worldly realities. Thus Kaufman, more unambiguously than Hick, winds up with an expressivist view of traditional theistic talk of God and explicitly disavows any application of a realist conception of truth to that talk. And, like Hick and Santayana, he combines expressivism with a kind of instrumentalism. Indeed in *God the Problem*, (p. 108), he explicitly

analogizes his position to instrumentalism in science. Like Hick he stress the usefulness of our conceptions of, and beliefs about, God in orienting us in the world, providing guidance for life, and providing a focus for devotion and commitment.²⁴ And both make the point that the question of whether to accept a particular imaginative construct or ‘persona’ is a *practical* question.²⁵ Thus the latter day Kaufman gives us a pure expressivism-instrumentalism, forthrightly denying all three components of alethic realism.

3

So far I have only expounded some (by no means all) forms of religious irrealism. It remains to see what reasons can be offered for one or another of these positions. But first I want to consider what hangs on the realism issue for Christianity. What difference(s) does it make for the Christian life whether we take our beliefs to be subject to assessment as true or false in terms of correspondence with an objective reality or lack thereof? Is something fundamental in the Christian life lost if we abandon realism?

My answer is going to be an unequivocal YES, but I will need to give separate treatment to different positions. The situation is clearest with respect to symbolisticism and expressivism-instrumentalism. Let’s start with the latter. The basic point is that it is fundamental to traditional Christian understanding that we interact with God in various ways, both here and hereafter. This interaction can be initiated from either side. From the divine side God is portrayed as active in human history, shaping the destiny of people and peoples in accordance with His master plan for His creation – selecting the Hebrews for a special mission and destiny, communicating His will to us through them, rescuing them from bondage in Egypt, seeking to influence them through the prophets, becoming incarnate in order to release us from sin and death and initiate a new covenant, guiding the church through its history, and so on. From our side we enter into dialogue with God in prayer, and we respond, or not, to His actions and messages. Thus God is taken to be a real presence in the world, a supreme personal being with whom we can enter into personal relationships, a being Who, to understate it, enjoys a reality in His own right, independently of us and our cognitive doings. All this is what expressivism-instrumentalism denies. A mental or imaginative construct does not have this status. We cannot genuinely interact with an imaginative construct. We can’t even suppose that we do, unless we are psychotic. We can, as Kaufman and others point out, *use* such a construct for regulative or inspirational purposes, but then the doing is all our own. The construct doesn’t do anything. In this construal we have totally lost divine-human interaction, and with it the heart and soul of the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Another point, less central to the Christian life but still fundamental, concerns the status of God as the source of being for all other than Himself. This too is a function that can hardly be performed by an imaginative construct or by a way in which the Real appears to us. Such items don't have what it takes to be *causa sui* and the source of being for all else. You and I have more creative power than an imaginative construct or a system of appearances, and we know how far we are from God!

The story is similar with Tillichian symbolisticism. The contrast with the Christian tradition is not so painfully obvious as with Kaufman, because Tillich's talk of Being-Itself often sounds like Aquinas, who also thinks of God as *ipsum esse subsistens*. But there is still a sharp contrast because of the difference between Thomistic analogy and Tillichian symbolism. Though Thomas' God is so different from creatures (primarily because of simplicity) that no term can be predicated univocally of God and creature, the analogical relation between the divine and creaturely senses of some terms is such as to render it possible to make statements about God that are true in a realist sense. God has *knowledge* and *will*, and *acts* in senses that imply that He is available as an agent for personal interaction with human beings. But with Tillich, Being-Itself is in no way personal, in no way an agent that acts and enters into interaction with other persons. All talk of a supreme personal being with whom we have personal relationships is *symbolic* in Tillich's special sense. Such talk has no claim to being a correct delineation of an independent objective reality. And so, once again, there is nothing for us to interact with in the way the Christian tradition thinks of our interaction with God. On the other hand, Tillich's Being-Itself might seem to qualify as an ultimate source of being, but at best it would do so in a way *toto caelo* different from the Christian God. That follows just from the point that Being-Itself is not subsumable under human concepts, including *creation*.

Hick's Kantian approach presents a less stark contrast. It holds out the possibility of a more independent status for the Trinity than that of an imaginative construct. If the Christian God is 'empirically real', even though 'transcendentally ideal', He is *as real* as the physical world on a Kantian reading. We can interact with Him as genuinely as we can with trees, horses, and houses. And it may be claimed, with some show of reason, that this gives us all we need. Whether it does depends on what our needs are. In my judgment Hick's interpretation falls significantly short of traditional Christian understanding just because the latter is firmly committed to regarding God as an ultimate supreme reality, rather than as a system of ways in which ultimate reality appears to us. The Kantian story is less of a jolt to commonsense realist construals of the physical world just because less hangs on the metaphysical status of the physical world. So long as the pattern of our sense experiences is what it is, we can, perhaps, adjust to the

metaphysical downgrading of trees and houses to systems of phenomena. But I can't see that Christianity, or other theistic religions, can adjust to an analogous downgrading of God without being radically transformed. God cannot be *causa sui*, that on which everything else depends for its being, the One who exercises providence over the whole creation. And that makes all the difference.

Thus all these forms of anti-realism are widely at variance with the traditional Christian understanding of our religious situation. This will not come as startling news to their protagonists. True, they claim continuity with the Christian tradition. But though Tillich, Kaufman, and Hick consider themselves to be Christian theologians, they understand this as a matter of trying to understand the Christian faith from within the Christian community. They do not take themselves to be bound to certain traditional understandings of the faith. And all of them set themselves against various aspects of the tradition.

4

How disturbed should a Christian believer feel about the fact that religious irrealism is destructive of the traditional Christian understanding of God and His relations to us? That depends on the strength of the reasons for the position. To that issue I now turn. I will concentrate on my opponents' reasons for their rejection of alethic realism, which they all share, rather than their reasons for what they put in its place, where there are significant differences between them. But in the case of Hick the rationale for rejecting alethic realism cannot be sharply separated from his reasons for his own position.

4.1

Traditionally the most common reasons for rejecting a realist construal of religious belief have consisted in metaphysical reasons for taking such beliefs to be false as so construed. On a materialist or naturalist metaphysics, all beliefs about supernatural beings are false. This result is, of course, quite compatible with alethic realism about religious belief. We just dismiss supernaturalistic religious belief as false and pass on. But if one is still motivated to hang on to traditional religious belief or talk, the only option is to give it a nonrealist interpretation. This move is what we find classically exemplified in Santayana, who was a materialist of sorts (a rather soft sort), and we find echoes in Kaufman and many other contemporaries.

Since this support for religious irrealism is drawn from materialist or naturalist metaphysics, its strength is proportional to that of those metaphysical

positions. I cannot go into that in this paper. Suffice it to say that, so far as I can see, no significant case has been made for the negative component of these positions – their rejection of anything other than the world of nature. They do have reasons (the cogency of which is a matter of dispute) for the basically material character of the physical universe, including life and mind. But when it comes to denying a transcendent divine reality, I can't see that they have anything significant to say. At most, they can pose a challenge to the supernaturalist to justify her position. I believe that the challenge can be answered, but that lies far beyond the bounds of this paper.

4.2

There are epistemological, as well as metaphysical, reasons for rejecting religious realism. These consist in allegations of one or another low epistemic status for religious belief (realistically construed) – that it is groundless or not sufficiently grounded, that it is unjustified, irrational, or lacking sufficient evidence or reasons. A currently popular line of this sort is that 'there is no scientific proof of theistic belief'. To this the theist can promptly agree but add 'So what?'. What bearing does this have on the justifiability, rationality, or truth of Christian belief? Why isn't this just one of the many cases in which inquiries in one domain fail to throw any light on the questions of a different domain? Historical research does not tell us what the ultimate physical particles are. What goes on in a chemical laboratory does not reveal the causes of schizophrenia. Shooting particles through a linear accelerator does not tell us how best to organize the economy. And so on. To each his/her own. We shouldn't expect the shoemaker to produce a computer, and vice versa (virtual reality notwithstanding). Why should anyone suppose that it is a black mark against a religious belief system that it is not established by science?

Among my current targets we find Kaufman laying a great deal of stress on epistemic considerations. Especially in *God the Problem*, where he distinguishes the 'real referent' of 'God' from the 'available referent', he frequently denies that the real referent can be *directly* experienced or known (pp. 84, 85, 88, 97, 113). The knowledge of God, he says, cannot arise just out of experience. Theistic concepts must be brought to the experience (pp. 239–40). This point is echoed in Hick's *An Interpretation of Religion*, (p. 178) and is developed at length in his *Faith and Knowledge*,²⁶ in which he holds that all experience, including religious experience, essentially involves interpretation. However, in taking this point to support his irrealism, Kaufman is making the (unfortunately rather common) assumption that our thought and talk can be held responsible to correspondence with an

independent reality only if we have direct, unmediated cognitive access to that reality.²⁷ I see no merit whatever in this. Why suppose that the susceptibility of beliefs or statements to realist truth or falsity requires that I be *directly* aware of what they are about? Even if some kind of knowledge is required for this – and I shall shortly be denying that – why isn’t indirect knowledge good enough? Indeed, why isn’t justified belief good enough, even if it falls short of knowledge? So long as the relevant facts fall under my cognizance, *however this is brought about*, I will be in a position to determine whether a given belief or statement fits those facts.

Another epistemological theme in Kaufman has to do with certainty. Nothing, he says, can be definitely or uncontroversially established or verified concerning the real referent, a transcendent, independently existing deity.²⁸ But this has as little bearing on the issue of realism as the denial of direct knowledge. Suppose that none of our religious beliefs are infallible, subject to no possible doubt, immune to refutation or reasoned rejection, known with self-certifying certainty, or guaranteed by a divine imprimatur. How does that tell against the idea that their truth or falsity depends on how well they match up against independently existing reality? Why should only immutable certainties be subject to such an assessment? Why can’t much shakier beliefs, even beliefs with no significant grounding at all, possess a realist truth value? Once we raise the question it becomes apparent that the strength of the epistemic status of a belief has no implications at all for whether it can be given a realist construal.

If we probe further into this attempt to move from epistemic assessment to an irrealist conclusion, we will find that in Kaufman and others who think in this way it rests on a massive confusion of truth status and epistemic status. For example:

Traditional concepts of religious truth and its dissemination appear to have grown up in the context of fundamentally authoritarian relationships, in which the truth that is saving was something known to a teacher or prophet or guru, and he or she, then, communicated it to, or passed it over to others who received and accepted it. This sort of unidirectional relationship or movement characterizes much traditional religious thinking and practice with respect to truth – consider the special authority given to sacred texts . . . In all these instances . . . religious truth appears to be understood on the model of property; it is a kind of possession owned by one party and thus not directly available to others. . . .

In the traditions heir to ancient Israel the authoritarian tendencies of this property-model of truth were enhanced even further by the belief that the saving truth known to and available within the tradition had been revealed by God; it was, thus, absolute and infallible, simply to be accepted by the faithful, never criticized or doubted.²⁹

If ‘truth’ were replaced by ‘knowledge’ (with a few compensating verbal changes) this passage would make sense. It is knowledge that can be said to be an exclusive possession, passed over to others, guaranteed by God to be absolute, infallible, and indubitable. None of this makes sense as applied to truth. The truth of a belief or statement simply depends on whether what the belief or statement is about is as it is said (believed) to be; and this cannot be anyone’s possession, or be infallible or indubitable, or anything else of the sort. The failure to distinguish truth from epistemic statuses has had a long run in the last 200 years, and is still spawning views according to which truth *is* some epistemic status.³⁰ And this encourages the idea that if the beliefs in a certain domain cannot attain a certain kind of positive epistemic status, they are not possible candidates for truth either.

Thus far I have been going along with the idea that (the real) God is cognitively inaccessible to us to one or another degree, and arguing that this is irrelevant to the question of whether beliefs about God are true or, more generally, possess a realist truth value. But now I want to take exception to the idea, at least in the extreme form that would render God totally cognitively inaccessible to us, and that would deny any significant epistemic justification or rationality for religious beliefs. Part of the issue here hangs on the extreme doctrine of divine transcendence espoused by Tillich, Hick, Kaufman, and many others. I will go into that shortly. But there are other influences at work as well. Some of our irrealists – notably Tillich and Kaufman – feel themselves warranted in ignoring the main traditional supports for religious belief. They take Hume and Kant to have discredited natural theology, and modern Biblical criticism to have discredited claims to a divine revelation of truths vouched for by divine authority. With these traditional supports undermined we are left with only religious experience, and this is considered too amorphous, ambiguous, and question begging to hold up the edifice. These convictions have attained the status of dogma among twentieth century liberal and revisionist theologians. I myself do not agree with any part of the dogma. Natural theology has been refuted only in certain maximally ambitious forms. More moderate and more sophisticated forms have appeared lately, forms that neither Hume nor Kant had an opportunity to consider.³¹ The historical criticism of, e.g., the Gospels that purport to show them to be historically unreliable is, in my view, based on a series of highly subjective intuitive judgments that are questionable, to say the least.³² I have recently defended the thesis that the experience of God can provide justification for certain kinds of beliefs about God.³³ However these are vast issues, and there is not time to go into them here. I will have to content myself with registering my view that this cognitive deficiency claim is exceedingly shaky.

And, of course, even if Christian beliefs, realistically interpreted, are shown to be without adequate grounds, that only shows that they must be

held, if at all, at least partly on faith, that it is a matter of believing what we do not 'see' to be true. And that is no big news for the Christian tradition; quite the contrary. Hence it would certainly not be recognized by the tradition as a reason for radically changing the interpretation of those beliefs.

4.3

A theological reason for religious irrealism bulks large in twentieth century defenses of the position, viz., divine transcendence. To understand this we will first have to distinguish different senses of 'transcendent'. There is metaphysical transcendence, the most basic concept of which is distinctness; God is not identical with the natural world or any part thereof. We can distinguish more or less extreme forms of divine metaphysical transcendence. In the extreme, Aristotelian version God is not only distinct from creation, but totally disconnected from it, engaging in no commerce with it in any way. In a less extreme form, which is characteristic of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, God's transcendence is not incompatible with a kind of immanence – being present and active in His creation, exercising providence over it at every moment and engaging in personal interaction with His personal creatures. In both forms divine transcendence consists not only in God's being non-identical with any part of creation, but also in His being totally independent of creation for His existence and His essential nature.

I explain the nature of metaphysical transcendence only to distinguish it from what we may call conceptual transcendence, with which we are presently concerned. The basic idea here is otherness (*difference* from creatures). In the strongest form of the doctrine otherness is so extreme as to render it impossible that any of our concepts can strictly apply to God. To be sure, if conceptual transcendence is to be taken seriously, it has to be properly qualified. If absolutely none of our concepts were applicable to God, we would have no way of referring to God in order to say of Him even that He is transcendent.³⁴ Tillich makes an exception for the concept of *being-itself*, so that he can refer to God as 'being-itself' (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1., pp. 264–265). Hick distinguishes between substantial properties, such as 'being good', 'being powerful', 'having knowledge', and purely formal and logically generated properties such as 'being a referent of a term' and 'being such that our substantial concepts do not apply' (*An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 239). His contention then is that 'our substantial concepts do not apply to the Ultimate'. And the negative theology that is so prominent in Christian mystical circles recognizes that negative concepts apply to God, concepts such as 'not finite', 'not dependent on anything else for its existence', and 'not ignorant of anything'. We may think of the strongest doctrine of conceptual transcendence, then, as holding that no positive substantial concepts apply to God. (For concision I will generally

leave 'substantial' to be tacitly understood, and speak only of 'positive concepts'.) It must be recognized that the boundaries of this category are by no means obvious. Just what does it take to be a 'substantial concept'? And one may well suspect that any apparently positive concept can be expressed in negative terms and vice versa. The last example of a negative concept, 'not ignorant of anything', looks to be equivalent to an apparently positive concept, 'omniscient'. But for purposes of this discussion I will assume that these difficulties can be overcome.

All my authors plump for divine conceptual transcendence. We have already seen Tillich do so. For Kaufman the real referent remains 'a mere limiting idea with no content. It stands for the fact that God transcends our knowledge in modes and ways of which we can never be aware and of which we have no inkling. The religious significance of the unspecifiability of the real referent for 'God' is precisely this sense of an unfathomable depth of mystery and meaning' (*God the Problem*, p. 85). Hick too, as we have seen, stresses the inapplicability of our concepts to the Real.³⁵

All these thinkers seem to take conceptual transcendence as a reason for their irrealism, though sometimes the connection is not made fully explicit. And this is a very strong reason; it really does entail the falsity of Christian alethic realism. If God is so radically different from anything else that none of our positive concepts can strictly apply to Him, then we cannot take seriously the idea that our beliefs and assertions that are (putatively) about God depend for their truth or falsity on whether He is as we believe or say Him to be. For, on this view, it is impossible that He should be as we believe or say Him to be, if we should be so foolish as to construe our utterances about God as making realist truth claims.³⁶

But when we ask for our irrealists' reasons for embracing so extreme a doctrine of conceptual transcendence, we find a mixed bag. I must confess to having found no reasons worthy of the name offered by Kaufman. In *God the Problem*, where he was distinguishing the real referent of 'God' from the available referent, he seems to just lay it down that the former is beyond our conceptual grasp. Hick, on the other hand, appeals to the Kantian distinction between noumena and phenomena, as we will see in the next section. As for Tillich, the doctrine is supposed to flow from his ontology, according to which the truly Ultimate is Being-Itself, that by participation in which everything that is, is, but which cannot itself be identified with any particular being, and hence cannot fall under any of our concepts, which are suited to be applied to beings, not to Being-Itself (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1., pp. 261–265). Even if we are prepared to swallow this ontology, we are faced with the question of why we should suppose that God, the object of religious worship, is to be identified with Tillich's Being-Itself. Tillich's answer, to put it briefly, is that what he calls 'ultimate commitment', which

he takes to be the central religious response, is properly directed only to that which is metaphysically ultimate.³⁷ If we direct our ultimate commitment to anything less ultimate than Being-Itself, we have fallen into idolatry.³⁸ However, I am afraid that most Christian, and other theistic, believers will not be impressed by the idea that it is *idolatrous* to worship a personal being Who is infinite in knowledge, power, and goodness, and Who is the source of existence of all other than Himself.

Thus, leaving Hick for later consideration, I judge that Tillich and Kaufman have not done an effective job of recommending extreme conceptual transcendence. Perhaps they think that they are simply reflecting a prominent strain in the Christian tradition. But though divine otherness (of some significant sort) has deep roots in the Christian tradition,³⁹ there is little basis in that tradition for the extreme version that is found in our authors and other twentieth century theology. In the main streams of the tradition a (milder) doctrine of conceptual transcendence has always been conjoined with a compensating emphasis on conceptual immanence - God sharing to some extent His perfections with His creatures. To go back to Aquinas, the radical otherness of God by virtue of His simplicity, infinity, and absolute perfection is balanced by the insistence that all creaturely perfections are found, albeit in a more perfect mode, in God. Hence we can use terms for creaturely perfections, in an analogical fashion, to make genuine statements about God that have genuine (realist) truth values.⁴⁰ I can't see any overriding reasons within the Christian revelation, and within Christian thought and experience, for attributing a transcendence to God so radical as to rule out the possibility of using any human concepts to make realistically true statements about Him, and to rule out the possibility of knowing some of them to be true. I fear that much of twentieth century theology is affected by what we might call 'transcendentitis'. If I may be permitted a bit of arm-chair diagnosis, I suspect that this affliction has some not completely respectable roots, such as a desire to escape the burden (which can seem intolerable) of trying to determine whether various statements about God are true, and an obsessive fear of being mistaken, or being shown to be in error, or being branded as irrational or out of tune with the times. If God is so transcendent as to provide a guarantee that no statement can be (realistically) true of Him, we run no such risks. Of that whereof we cannot speak, we are in no danger of error.

4.4

As already indicated, Hick has a distinctively different rationale for his irrealism. It is tied up with his Kantian approach. His full dress argument for irrealism is based on the phenomenon of persistent religious diversity.

There is a plurality of well established religious traditions, the basic convictions of which contradict each other at certain points, though there are also areas of agreement. There are three ways of accounting for this phenomenon.

1. *Naturalism*. There is no single account of 'the Real' because religious beliefs are not at all under the control of an objective reality, but are rather projections of human desires, fears, imaginative constructions, and the like.
2. *Exclusivism*. Our own religious tradition has it (basically) right about ultimate reality and the others have it wrong.
3. *Kantianism*. The different religious traditions constitute different ways of experiencing and relating oneself to the one supreme reality. Each of these is phenomenally real, though none can claim to be literally true of the Real as it is in itself.

The argument for preferring (3) hangs on Hick's epistemology of religious experience, in which it is reasonable for one to accept what one's experience seems to reveal about the Real. That rules out (1), which rejects all religious belief systems. But it also rules out (2), for this epistemology provides no basis for preferring one response to the Real to another. If *our* religious beliefs have a claim to acceptance on this basis, then so do the beliefs of each of the other contenders. This leaves (3) in possession of the field.⁴¹

But again this is all epistemology. Even if we agree with Hick that there are no rational considerations that show one religion to have the truth about the Real, or to be more likely to do so, it doesn't follow that none of the beliefs of the various religions can *be true* of the Real, in the sense of representing the Real as it is. It only follows that we cannot make a rational determination of which of those beliefs, if any, have that status. (Though one can still have *faith* that one's own religion is true, or mostly true, in a realist sense.) Once again, epistemic status has been illegitimately conflated with truth status.⁴² To take the further step of denying the possibility of realist truth concerning the Real to all religious beliefs, Hick must appeal to the thesis that none of our beliefs *can* correctly represent the way the Real is in itself. And so extreme conceptual transcendence is crucial for his argument too.

What is Hick's argument for conceptual transcendence? The only one I can find is based on the noumenon-phenomenon distinction.

It follows from this distinction between the Real as it is in itself and as it is thought and experienced through our religious concepts that we cannot apply to the Real *an sich* the characteristics encountered in its *personae* and *impersonae*... None of the concrete descriptions that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the ground of the realm. (*An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 246)

But why suppose that the concepts we form from our experience of the Real *cannot* be true of the Real as it is in itself? This looks to be just a dogmatic statement of the position rather than a reason for it. Perhaps the following will advance the argument.

It is within the phenomenal or experienceable realm that language has developed and it is to this that it literally applies. Indeed the system of concepts embodied in human language has contributed reciprocally to the formation of the human perceived world. It is as much constructed as given. But our language can have no purchase on a postulated noumenal reality which is not even partly formed by human concepts. (*An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 350)

The crucial claim here is that our concepts can have no application to a reality that is in no way *formed* by human conceptual activity. If X is what it is regardless of the way our cognitive apparatus works, then that apparatus can tell us nothing of what X is like. But again this is just a (fuller) statement of the Kantian position and a rejection of realism. We are still given no reason for preferring the former to the latter. According to the realist, human cognition is capable of grasping the ways things are in themselves. (How often it succeeds in doing this is another matter.) What we are thinking or talking about does not have to be tailor made for our minds in order for us to be able to wrap those minds around it. We don't, as Kant and Hick suggest, have to be 'present at the creation' in order to find out what the creation is like. Hick has nothing to say against this except to reiterate the Kantian position. Kant, on the other hand, had some elaborate arguments in favor of his position on the physical world.⁴³ But we hear none of this from Hick, who, along with practically all other twentieth century philosophers, either rejects or ignores those arguments. In the end, Hick does no better than Kaufman or Tillich by way of providing rational support for extreme conceptual transcendence and hence no better in supporting religious irrealism.

5

I take the last section to have shown that reasons offered by irrealists to support their position and to dispose of realism are, to underestimate it, less than convincing. But not only do irrealists fail to provide sufficient reasons for their position. That position is saddled with severe internal stresses. I will look briefly at a few of these.

(1) First, and most important, any form of irrealism is crashingly implausible as an account of the way in which religious beliefs and affirmations are meant (understood) by almost all believers. This follows from the considerations of section iii, where I showed that religious irrealism strikes at

fundamental convictions of Christianity and other theistic religions, particularly concerning divine-human interaction.

(2) Suppose that irrealism is conceived not as an attempt to bring out how religious belief is in fact (generally) understood, but as a proposal for a reinterpretation. Then the above criticism does not apply. But the religious form of life that would result from the reinterpretation would seem to be viable only for a tiny intellectual elite at most. Surely it would be deeply unsatisfying to practically all religious believers and seekers to be told that the only thing available is a set of make-believes that they can pretend to be real so as to regulate, orient, and guide their lives in certain ways.⁴⁴ Wouldn't the religious seeker respond that he already has plenty of that line of goods? What he is looking for is a supreme reality that really exists and to which he can relate himself in ways that will lead to ultimate fulfillment.

(3) Focusing now on those irrealists who acknowledge an independent but ineffable ultimate reality (Tillich, Hick, early Kaufman), the instability of the position is evinced by the way in which they constantly, in spite of themselves, fall back into purporting to speak non-symbolically or non-mythically about that which, according to the official position, can only be spoken of symbolically or mythically. Tillich leads the pack in the number of times he is caught with his fingers in the jam pot. In his *Systematic Theology* (Vol. 1.), he not infrequently sets out to tell us, in terms of his ontology, what religious symbols really *mean*, what is being said about the Ultimate when we use one or another symbol. Thus we get statements like these.

Divine will and intellect are symbols for dynamics in all its manifestations and for form as the meaningful structure of being-itself (p. 274).

If we call God the 'living God' we assert that He is the eternal process in which separation is posited and overcome by reunion (p. 268).

It certainly sounds as if Tillich purports to be telling us here in non-symbolic, ontological language what aspect of Ultimate Reality a certain symbol is symbolizing. At least there is no doubt that the explication is formulated in terms of his ontology. And if Tillich were simply equating one symbol with another, how would that constitute telling us what a certain symbol really means? Thus, when push comes to shove Tillich revokes his ban on non-symbolic speech about the Ultimate and makes what looks for all the world like realist truth claims about it.

(4) As a final example of internal problems with religious irrealism, let's consider Hick's notion of mythological truth, which he presents as the substitute for realist truth when dealing with concrete religious beliefs.

I define a myth as a story or statement which is not literally true but which tends to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude to its subject-matter. Thus the truth of a myth is practical truthfulness: a true myth is

one which rightly relates us to a reality about which we cannot speak in non-mythological terms.⁴⁵

But what is it for human attitudes, behaviours, patterns of life to be appropriate or inappropriate within this ultimate situation? It is for the *persona* or *impersona* in relation to which we live to be an authentic manifestation of the Real and for our practical response to be appropriate to that manifestation.

And what is it for the response to be appropriate?

To the extent that a *persona* or *impersona* is in soteriological alignment with the Real, an appropriate response to that deity or absolute is an appropriate response to the Real.⁴⁶ (*An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 248)

There are two large problems with this. First, Hick never tells us what it takes for a phenomenal manifestation of the Real to be an *authentic* manifestation. Indeed he could do so only on the basis of some characterization of the Real, which his position proscribes. Second, for the same reason we can have no basis for the supposition that what Hick takes to be salvation or fulfillment is ‘appropriate’ to the Real. Thus the conceptual inaccessibility of the Real rules out any rationale for a criterion of ‘mythological truth’.

6

In this paper I have surveyed several ways of being nonrealist about Christian (or, more generally, religious) belief. I have pointed out some ways in which a nonrealist interpretation radically deviates from the traditional Christian understanding of its faith. I have sought in vain for any convincing arguments the irrealists have against alethic realism and in favor of their positions. And I have pointed out internal difficulties in their positions. I conclude that traditional Christian believers have little to fear from the swarm of irrealisms we find in the intellectual world today. They are but paper dragons.

Notes

1. I will use the terms ‘nonrealism’ and ‘irrealism’ interchangeably.
2. The prime source for this way of thinking of realism is Michael Dummett. ‘Realism I characterize as the belief that statements of the disputed class possess an objective truth-value, independently of our means of knowing it; they are true or false in virtue of a reality existing independently of us’ (*Truth and Other Enigmas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978, p. 146). For other examples see Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) and Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). The present conception of realism is not exactly the same as that of any of these thinkers.

3. I am putting this in terms of a body of *discourse*, in terms of putative *statements*. I could instead focus on systems of *beliefs*. And I do mean my discussions to be transferable to questions about the correct understanding of religious beliefs. For various reasons it will facilitate matters to set out the canonical formulations in linguistic terms, but I will allow myself the liberty of oscillating freely between speaking of religious beliefs and speaking of the linguistic expressions of such beliefs in statements.
4. From the Greek *aletheia* – truth.
5. We will find various combinations of these denials in the religious irrealists I will be discussing.
6. New York: New American Library, 1958.
7. With D. C. Macintosh and M. C. Otto (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Co., 1932).
8. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905.
9. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955.
10. *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (London: Nisbet & co., 1953), pp. 264–65. 'The Religious Symbol', in *Religious Experience and Truth*, ed. Sidney Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1961), p. 316.
11. See 'Theology and Symbolism', in *Religious Symbolism*, ed. F. Ernest Johnson (New York: Harper & Bros., 1955) and 'Religious Symbols and Our Knowledge of God', *Christian Scholar*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 1955, as well as 'The Religious Symbol'.
12. *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 266. See also pp. 239, 246, 350.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 348.
14. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972.
15. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981.
16. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.
17. *In Face of Mystery*, pp. 60–61.
18. *The Theological Imagination*, p. 37.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 53. In *Face of Mystery*, p. 8.
21. *The Theological Imagination*, pp. 35–46. *In Face of Mystery*, pp. 56–59, 314–16.
22. *In Face of Mystery*, p. 326.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 334.
24. *God the Problem*, pp. 97–98. *The Theological Imagination*, p. 32. *In Face of Mystery*, pp. 307, ff.
25. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, pp. 248, 348, 351–53. Kaufman, *God the Problem*, pp. 99–107, 242 ff. *The Theological Imagination*, pp. 46–51. *In Face of Mystery*, pp. 15–16.
26. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957.
27. For an influential presentation of this line see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).
28. *God the Problem*, pp. 85, 88, 96, 99; *In Face of Mystery*, pp. 60–63, 65–66.
29. *In Face of Mystery*, p. 65.
30. See, for example, Dummett, 'What is a Theory of Meaning?' II, in *Truth and Meaning*, ed. Gareth Evans & John McDowell (London: Oxford University Press, 1976); Frege: *Philosophy of Language* (London: Duckworth, 1973), Ch. 13; Hilary Putnam 'Realism and Reason' in *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), Ch. 3; *Realism With a Human Face* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), Chs. 1, 2.

31. See, for example Charles Hartshorne, *Man's Vision of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1941); Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); Alvin Plantinga *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), Ch. 10.
32. For discussion of this see Eleonore Stump and Thomas P. Flint, eds., *Hermes and Athena: Biblical Exegesis and Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).
33. William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991)
34. It might be claimed that we can refer to God by virtue of an experience of God, and that this does not require the use of concepts. I myself have stressed experiential reference to God (*Divine Nature and Human Language*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989, Ch. 5), but it seems clear that our ordinary ways of referring to God are shot through with concepts.
35. The distinction between metaphysical and conceptual transcendence is underlined by the fact that both Tillich and Hick stress metaphysical *immanence* - Tillich in his stress on the *participation* of all beings in Being-Itself, and Hick in his stress on the *appearance* of the Real to us in various ways.
36. Why not say instead that extreme conceptual transcendence implies that all positive statements about God are (realistically) false, not that alethic realism does not apply to religious utterances. The former response is, of course, possible. But if it is *in principle* impossible for any positive statement to be true of God in a realist sense of 'true', that can reasonably be taken as a basis for looking for some other, non-realist construal of God-talk. To be sure, just as with the metaphysical reasons for irrealism discussed in section A., one can combine these responses as follows. 'If we were to take putative statements about God as properly treated in terms of alethic realism, they would all be false. Therefore, let us seek some other way of construing them.'
37. *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1957), Ch. 1.
38. *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 97; *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1., pp. 16, 240; "Theology and Symbolism", pp. 114–15; "Religious Symbols and our Knowledge of God", p. 193.
39. For example, though we do not find philosophical or theological developments of the idea in the Bible, we do find statements that are naturally read as tending in this direction. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts' (Isaiah 55:9). 'The Almighty we cannot find; his power is beyond our ken' (Job 37:23).
40. Aquinas was not concerned to combat any analogues of contemporary irrealism, and as a result he does not use those terms in stating his position. But the bearing of his position on the issue of this paper is clear.
41. *An Interpretation of Religion*, pp. 234–36.
42. Note that in criticizing Hick's argument in this way, I have, in effect, pointed to an alternative that was omitted from his trichotomy, viz., (4) some religious beliefs may be true of the Real, even though we can't tell which, if any, are.
43. Kant, of course, was not a 'Kantian' about religion.
44. Hick himself, in discussing whole hog nonrealists like Braithwaite and Phillips, charges that their religious message is bad news rather than good news for almost all people (*An Interpretation of Religion*, pp. 205–208).
45. Note that this statement presupposes that we do act, and have dispositions to act, toward the Real, a presupposition that Hick explicitly embraces. 'For we exist inescapably in relation to the Real, and in all that we do and undergo we are inevitably having to do with it in and through our neighbors and our world' (*An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 248).

46. For a persona to be in 'soteriological alignment' with the Real is for it to be the case that by taking that persona as a center of devotion, commitment, and orientation one is enabled to attain fulfillment and salvation, which, for Hick, means moving from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.

Address for correspondence: Prof. William P. Alston, Department of Philosophy, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244-1170, USA
Phone: (315) 443 5815; Fax: (315) 443 5675