Part IV

Metaphysics and religious language
This page intentionally left blank
15

REALISM AND ANTI-REALISM

Michael Scott

‘Realism’ and ‘anti-realism’ (or sometimes ‘non-realism’) are philosophical terms of art that have been used in a variety of ways to refer to opposing positions in numerous subjects of philosophical interest, including scientific theories, mathematics, ethics, aesthetics, time, the external world, and religion. The points of dispute between realists and anti-realists often differ according to the subject matter in question. For example, in the philosophy of science, the realism/anti-realism debate is often concerned with whether scientific theories give us true or approximately true descriptions of the observable and unobservable world; in the philosophy of mathematics it is often focused on the nature and existence of mathematical entities; in ethics, a central issue is whether ethical utterances express ethical beliefs or instead other non-cognitive attitudes of approval or disapproval. Even within the context of a particular philosophical field, the realism/anti-realism debate may cover a range of metaphysical, epistemological, and semantic matters: Do the posited entities exist? Do they exist independently of our mental states and our linguistic or social practices? Are we able to acquire knowledge of them? Do sentences apparently about those entities represent them? Do our utterances about them express beliefs?

There has been extensive debate, particularly during the 1990s, on whether a particular construal or realism should merit pole position, with some arguing that metaphysical issues are central (Devitt 1991) and others taking the philosophy of language as primary (Dummett 1993). There have also been attempts to provide an overarching framework that encompasses all of the main issues that arise in debates between realists and anti-realists (Wright 1992). However, while this work has done much to make clearer the points of disagreement between realists and anti-realists and the optimal way of formulating them, it has brought little unity into the characterization of different realism/anti-realism debates. The usage of ‘realism’ and ‘anti-realism’ has become sufficiently fragmented that it is not unusual (in fact, it is something of a requirement for philosophical clarity) for authors addressing the realism debate to introduce definitions of them. This is as true in the philosophy of religion as in other fields (Alston 1995), where a range of realism-relevant issues are in play: Do any religious facts obtain? Are religious facts (whether or not they obtain) independent of our mental states or linguistic and social practices? Do religious sentences represent religious facts, and are they made true by the world being as they represent it to be? Do religious utterances express non-cognitive attitudes as well as or instead of beliefs?

Since our current interest in the realism debate as it has developed within the philosophy of religion is principally focused on religious language, we can usefully narrow our focus somewhat
by considering questions about the correct interpretation of religious discourse. We can give a preliminary characterisation of religious realism as the theory that religious sentences and utterances address a real subject matter, with anti-realism opposing this view (in a variety of ways). By a religious sentence, I mean a sentence (unless otherwise indicated, an indicative sentence) that posits a religious entity such as God, or a religious property such as holiness. I take a religious utterance to be the production of a token religious sentence in speech, writing, or otherwise; utterances are not tied to verbal communication. The distinction between sentences and utterances and more generally between language and discourse is, as we will see, quite crucial to the realism/anti-realism debate. Some forms of anti-realism are theories about the language that is used in religious discourse, while others target the use to which religious language is put.

The first section will give an overview of three key points of difference that have characterized realism/anti-realism disputes about religious language. The following three sections will look at these differences in more detail.

Overview

If realists generally take religious discourse to address a real subject matter what, more specifically, does this involve? A useful way of characterizing the realist account is to say that it maintains that a ‘face-value approach’ provides a complete interpretation of religious sentences and utterances. There are three areas of interpretation that have been the focus of dispute: (a) The type of content that a given religious sentence possesses; (b) the truth conditions of religious sentences; and (c) the meaning of religious utterances. Taking these in turn, a face-value approach takes religious sentences to have representational content, and that content represents religious facts or properties. For example, the religious sentence

(1) God is omnipotent

should be interpreted as saying, or as having the ‘propositional’ or ‘semantic’ content, that God is omnipotent. The face-value reading of (1) is that it truth-conditionally depends on whether God is omnipotent. Finally, the face-value approach takes the utterance of (1) typically to be an assertion that expresses the belief of the speaker that God is omnipotent. More generally, in stating a religious sentence, a speaker is usually committed to the truth of what is being said.

If these points sound plausible or even obvious that is precisely what the realist hopes for: the face-value approach aims to be the most straightforward way of interpreting the meaning of religious utterances and sentences. It is, moreover, a key point exploited by religious realists that their position provides the simplest and most intuitive reading of religious discourse consistent with linguistic evidence. Realists see the onus of argument to be on the anti-realist to explain why we should diverge from the face-value approach. However, there is a long-standing and still enduring tradition of anti-realist opposition to face-value readings that takes issue with their approach to (a), (b), or (c). Anti-realists find the face-value approach either incomplete or entirely wrong on at least one of these three issues; at their most sophisticated, anti-realists also provide explanations of why religious language has the surface appearance of representing religious facts, etc., even though it does not actually have this function.

We will consider the anti-realist opposition to each of these three aspects of the face-value interpretation in the following three sections. However, before embarking on this review we should distinguish revisionary from non-revisionary theories of religious language. Non-revisionary theories attempt to give the correct interpretation of religious sentences and utterances; they are
descriptive theories of the meaning of such sentences and utterances that (if successful) explain the available linguistic evidence. In contrast, revisionary theories tell us what speakers ought to mean when they use religious language. The face-value approach aims to be non-revisionary. But consider, for instance, followers of the Sea of Faith movement inspired by Don Cupitt’s work in the 1980s. They support the pursuit of the kinds of practices typically engaged in by religious believers – prayer, church going, attempting to meet various moral standards, etc. – as well as engagement with religious discourse, but without religious belief. Detractors judge this to be little more than atheism misleadingly presented as religious conviction (see Plantinga 2000). Proponents argue that one can legitimately gain access to the benefits of a religious life without being committed to superstitious beliefs (Cupitt 1984). Some practising members of the Anglican Communion number among the movement’s supporters. A participant in the Sea of Faith movement may appear to reject the realist view of (c), namely that religious utterances conventionally express the speaker’s religious beliefs. But someone sympathetic to the Sea of Faith movement is encouraging a revision to religious attitudes. Rather than expressing religious beliefs, religious communities should instead engage in religious practice and discourse but without commitments to ‘myths’ and supernatural entities. As such, we should expect an endorsement of the face-value approach to religious discourse.

Determining whether an author is putting forward a revisionary or non-revisionary theory can sometimes be difficult. But the distinction is a critical one. The merits of a revisionary theory will rest in part on the plausibility of the metaphysical considerations that motivate them (in the case of the Sea of Faith movement, that beliefs in supernatural beings are false, but engaging in religious practice is a good thing). In contrast, the merits of a non-revisionary theory will be largely assessed by linguistic evidence about the meaning of religious utterances. Our concern in this chapter is with non-revisionary theories.

**Religious language**

As described above, a face-value reading of a religious sentence such as (1) takes it to have the content that God is omnipotent. More generally, a religious sentence posits some religious fact or property. Accordingly, the face-value approach takes it that, in stating (1), a speaker standardly expresses the belief in that content. The sentence can, of course, be used differently to express attitudes other than belief or to express beliefs other than that God is omnipotent. For instance, it could be used by a speaker to express awe in addition to the belief that God is omnipotent, or used ironically to communicate the belief that God is not omnipotent. However, the face-value approach takes belief expression to be the conventional use of religious sentences. In this respect, the face-value interpretation of religious language does not diverge from our interpretation of other descriptive areas of language: the (indicative) sentences of the language report facts and are conventionally used to express beliefs. For many realists, this provides a complete account of religious language. There is, in general, nothing special about the content of religious sentences other than its distinctive subject matter.

Despite the plausibility and simplicity of the face-value account of content, there is a long-standing and still enduring tradition of opposition from within both the philosophy of religion and theology. I will use attitude theory as a general term for this opposition. Attitude theory usually has positive and negative components. On the negative side, the face-value interpretation of religious sentences as having a purely representational content and as religious utterances conventionally expressing just beliefs is rejected. On the positive side, attitude theorists usually emphasise the ‘non-cognitive’ meaning of religious utterances in expressing mental states other than belief such as stances, intentions, awe, devotion, plans, approval, and disapproval.
Contemporary discussion of attitude theory has not always done the position justice. The theory is often presented in its most radical (and, frankly, very implausible) form that religious sentences do not represent the world and that religious utterances do not express beliefs at all. Moreover, attitude theory is seen as a historically recent development motivated by non-religious, or even anti-religious, considerations that emerged primarily out of the now discredited verificationist theory of meaning developed by logical positivists in the 1920s and later popularized by A.J. Ayer (1946). Logical positivists argued that if the truth of a sentence could not be empirically verified, it should be deemed factually contentless or even meaningless. Religious sentences, along with metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic sentences, were all seen as empirically unverifiable and thereby lacking in descriptive content.

Here are some representative comments. According to Richard Swinburne (1977/1993: 88),

Some twentieth-century writers from R.B. Braithwaite to Wittgenstein and D.Z. Phillips have denied that theological ‘assertions’ ever make statements, claims about how things are. As an account of the actual use of such assertions by religious believers of the past two millennia, this is plainly false. The sentences of creeds do make statements.

J.L. Mackie (1982: 2), discussing attitude theory, says:

The main reason why it has been thought that religious language cannot be literally meaningful is that some philosophers—particularly the logical positivists—have embraced a strongly verificationist theory of meaning … But this theory of meaning is itself highly implausible.

Similar historical assessments are offered by Alston (2005), Wynn (1995), and others. Peter van Inwagen contends that disagreement with a face-value account of content is really an atheistic position masquerading as a religious one:

Not so long ago, as time is measured in the history of thought, anyone who said that it was a mistake to regard $x$ as F would have meant, and have been taken by everyone to mean, that $x$ was not F. … Not so long ago, everyone who said that nothing had the properties on the list ‘aseity, holiness, omnipotence, omniscience, providence, love, self-revelation’ would have proudly described himself as an atheist.

(2006: 156)

Plantinga (2000) offers a similar diagnosis.

Let’s begin with the points about the history and motivations of attitude theories. While R.B. Braithwaite (1970) is a leading attitude theorist influenced by logical positivism, opposition to the face-value account of content stretches back far before the twentieth century. For example, George Berkeley developed an attitude theory for central claims of Christian doctrine in his *Alciphron* (1732): he argued that claims about the Trinity, original sin, and grace do not express beliefs about these Christian mysteries, but instead evoke and express attitudes conducive to Christian faith.3 Even earlier, apophatic and mystical theologians – notable examples being Denys the Areopagite (late fifth to sixth centuries), Evagrius Ponticus (fourth century), and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (later fourteenth century) – saw the purpose of engaging in religious discourse to be achieving a (non-cognitive) union with God, rather than representing facts or expressing beliefs about God. Moreover, the motives of these and other opponents of the face-value approach are not at all atheistic or anti-religious. Far
from doubting Christian doctrine, Berkeley took his attitude theory to provide an effective response to scepticism about the intelligibility and truth of religious doctrine by explaining how it could play an important part in Christian faith without requiring the believer to have a clear understanding of the nature of the Trinity, original sin, etc. Berkeley also saw his account as providing a better explanation for the motivational, life-changing nature of Christian faith. The apophatic theologians were motivated primarily by doubts about the conceivability of God’s nature. Attitude theory provides an interpretation of religious discourse compatible with it facilitating a closer relationship with God, even if we are unable to conceive of God. And although R.B. Braithwaite was influenced by A.J. Ayer, who certainly had no sympathy for religious belief, Braithwaite’s own aim was to take what he saw as successful in the logical positivists’ arguments and show how religious language could satisfy the tough verificationist standards of meaning that they proposed and thereby not impede religious practice and attitudes.

Attitude theories also come in a variety of forms more plausible than the pure non-cognitivism that is often discussed. Even the most uncompromising attitude theorist should allow that in uttering a sentence such as

\[ (2) \text{ God will bless you for acting so generously} \]

the speaker expresses a belief that the person addressed has been generous. There is little mileage in an attitude theory that can find no role for belief expression. There are, however, two more promising options available to attitude theorists. One is to develop an account for religious language that parallels expressivist positions in ethics. On this view, religious sentences are conventionally used to express non-cognitive attitudes. However, they may also express beliefs provided that they do not have religious content, and the beliefs that they express are not religious beliefs. So the religious expressivist might interpret (2) as expressing the non-religious belief that the addressee has acted generously, and also a non-cognitive attitude of approval towards the generous agent. This analysis can be written as

\[ (3) \text{ H! (your acting generously)} \]

where H! stands for an attitude of approval and the bracketed comment the content. However, for sentences such as

\[ (4) \text{ God loves us} \]

the resulting expressivist interpretation lacks a complete propositional content. The religious expressivist will interpret sentences like (4) as being expressive only of non-cognitive attitudes.

A second and more moderate option for attitude theorists is to agree with the face-value approach that religious sentences represent religious facts, but argue that religious sentences are conventionally used to express both non-cognitive attitudes and beliefs. This has the advantage of retaining the plausibility of the face-value interpretation while also explaining the motivational effects of religious belief noted by Berkeley. To see how this might be developed, the following example from Simon Blackburn (1984: 169) is useful:

\[
\text{ If I say that someone is a Kraut, or blotto, I may express an attitude of contempt towards Germans, or of wry amusement at drunkenness, but I also say something true or false about their nationality or sobriety … You should not use those terms unless
}
you also sympathize with those attitudes. But in each case it would be wrong to infer that no description is given from the fact that an attitude is also expressed.

Saying that someone is blotto is both descriptive and expressive: it expresses both belief in the fact that the person is drunk and a non-cognitive attitude of amusement about the person’s condition. The moderate attitude theorist is making a comparable point about religious language: it is similar to other areas of descriptive language insofar as its sentences represent facts and are used to express beliefs in those facts, but it is different insofar as it conventionally expresses non-cognitive attitudes.

Attitude theorists face a range of challenges, although the difficulties in developing moderate attitude theory look less formidable than those facing religious expressivism. A case in point is with how to explain the complex and disciplined syntactical and semantic features of religious language. For example, religious sentences can be negated and a religious sentence and its negation cannot be true. On the face-value approach we can explain why, for example, (1) and the negation of (1) are inconsistent: they represent inconsistent facts. And we can similarly explain why one shouldn’t both believe (1) and the negation of (1): they are beliefs with inconsistent content and cannot both be true. In contrast, non-cognitive states do not seem to be inconsistent. I may have contrary desires, such as the desire to eat lots of food and the desire to remain slim, and I may have conflicting plans or stances or intentions but while it may be impossible to satisfy all of these non-cognitive states, it is not inconsistent to have them. If expressivism is correct, therefore, why shouldn’t we agree with both (1) and not-(1)? Doing so would not result in any failing in logical consistency. This does not, however, present the same problem for moderate attitude theory. Since religious sentences express both beliefs and non-cognitive attitudes, the same explanation of linguistic discipline is available to moderate attitude theory as to the realist.

A difficulty for all versions of attitude theory is to provide a positive account of the non-cognitive attitudes expressed by using religious sentences. Finding a positive account looks like a more difficult task for religion than the equivalent task in ethics. Since ethical sentences are characterized by distinctive predicates – good, bad, right, wrong, etc. – that seem to have a positive or negative evaluation built into them, ethical expressivists have a ready-made positive account about the attitudes expressed: ethical sentences are conventionally used to express approval or disapproval of the action or event to which the ethical predicate in question is assigned. The corresponding analysis is also straightforward. The sentence

\[
\text{(5) It is wrong to lie}
\]

can be interpreted as

\[
\text{(6) } B! \text{ (lying)}
\]

where ‘B!’ expresses disapproval (or boo!) towards lying.

In contrast, religious predicates do not neatly divide into two classes that can be linked to the expression of approval and disapproval. Many religious sentences do not involve any clearly normative predicate – (1) is a case in point. Some religious sentences do not appear to use religious predicates at all: ‘God created the world’, for instance. So an outstanding requirement on religious attitude theory is to provide a plausible positive account of the non-cognitive states that religious sentences are used to express.
Religious truth

If religious sentences have truth-apt content, what makes them true? A face-value reading suggests that we should take the truth conditions of a religious sentence to be what the sentence appears to say. The truth condition for (1), for instance, should just be that God is omnipotent. However, according to religious reductionists the truth conditions for religious sentences should be given by some other class of non-religious sentences. Although we may appear to be talking about God when using religious discourse, we are in fact talking about some other non-religious subject.

Reductionist strategies have been a major topic of debate in philosophy. Two notable cases are behaviourism and phenomenalism. Behaviourism, in its ‘analytical’ or ‘logical’ form, takes the truth of sentences about a person’s mental states to be determined by facts about that person’s behaviour and dispositions. Phenomenalism is the view that the truth conditions for sentences about the external world should be given by sentences about our actual or possible experiences. For example, the truth of ‘There is a chair in the next room’ might be determined by the truth of the conditional ‘Were one to go into the next room, one would see a chair’, thereby reducing a sentence about the external world to a sentence about what one would perceive under certain circumstances. Reductionism is usually motivated by metaphysical or epistemological worries about the apparent subject matter of the discourse (metaphysical objections to dualism in the case of behaviourism and scepticism about the external world in the case of phenomenalism). Many religious reductionists aim to give an analysis of religious language that makes its content compatible with a monistic (materialist) metaphysics or naturalism. For a naturalist wishing to preserve religious discourse, or at least to avoid outright atheism, a truth-conditional reductionism that reduces sentences about God to sentences about nature as a whole (which would be a reductive form of pantheism) or to sentences about parts of nature, presents an interesting option.

A version of the monistic-pantheistic reduction is suggested by Spinoza. One of the most influential defenders of pantheism, Spinoza also suggested ways of interpreting sentences about God in terms of facts about nature. For example, he writes:

By God’s direction I mean the fixed and immutable order of Nature, or chain of natural events … the universal laws of Nature according to which all things happen and are determined are nothing but God’s eternal decrees, which always involve eternal truth and necessity. So it is the same thing whether we say that all things happen according to Nature’s laws or that they are regulated by God’s decree and direction.

(2002: 417)

Since all human actions are, according to Spinoza, the product of the predetermined order of nature, then we can – following the reductive strategy – say that nobody acts except by the will of God. Similarly, since anything that we can achieve is the product either of our own actions and/or of external conditions, all such achievements can be understood as the result of divine providence.

Naturalistic reductions were defended by several British and American writers on religion in the early twentieth century. Julian Huxley suggested that talk of God could be understood as a way of talking about forces operating in nature or about aspects of nature that we do not understand. He also gave naturalistic interpretations of other Christian concepts such as the Holy Ghost and the son of God: ‘God the Father is a personification of the forces of non-human Nature; God the Holy Ghost represents all ideals; and God the Son personifies human nature at its highest … and the unity of the three persons as “One God” represents the fact that all these
aspects of reality are inextricably connected’ (Huxley 1927/1957: 37). Henry Wieman, a significant figure in the American ‘religious empiricism’ tradition (Frankenberry 2005) identified God with natural processes in the universe that yield or facilitate ethically or socially desirable results. For example, he suggests that God is ‘that interaction between individuals, groups, and ages which generates and promotes the greatest possible mutuality of good’ (Wieman 1932: 15), or God is ‘that interaction which sustains and magnifies personality … the process of progressive integration’ (ibid. 351). He adds that God – conceived of as an ‘interaction’ – can be the proper object of love and of prayer: ‘Can men pray to an interaction? Yes, that is what they always pray to, under any concept of God. Can men love an interaction? Yes, that is what they always love’ (ibid. 17). At around the same period, Wittgenstein also supported a reductionist analysis but he favoured a reduction to mental states. In ‘A Lecture on Ethics’ from 1929, Wittgenstein (1993: 42) distinguishes two states, a ‘wonder at the existence of the world’ and ‘the experience of feeling absolutely safe’. He then comments:

[T]he first of [these experiences] is, I believe, exactly what people were referring to when they said that God had created the world; and the experience of absolute safety has been described by saying that we feel safe in the hands of God. A third experience of the same kind is that of feeling guilty and again this was described by the phrase that God disapproves of our conduct.

More recently, Gordon Kaufman (2007: 12), a leading figure in the development of modern liberal theology, has argued that ‘God’ is the name given to the ‘pervasive mystery’ that gives life meaning. The claim that God is ‘absolute’ or ‘ineffable’, Kaufman contends, expresses the fact that God is a profound mystery. And the claims that God is ‘real’ or ‘exists’ should be understood as expressing the belief that underpinning this ‘pervasive mystery’ are natural forces that promote and facilitate ethical, aesthetic, and social human flourishing: ‘Speech about the Christian God as “real” or “existent” expresses symbolically this conviction that free and loving persons-in-community have a substantial metaphysical foundation, that there are cosmic forces working toward this sort of humanization’ (Kaufman 1981: 49).

A major obstacle to any religious reductionism as a theory of religious language is that it is highly revisionary. Consider the kind of naturalist reduction proposed by Huxley and others whereby the name ‘God’ refers to a class of naturalistic processes. The interpretation of some religious sentences will be fairly straightforward. For instance, the truth-condition for

(7) God exists

can be given by

(8) Such-and-such natural processes exist

where such-and-such stands for the evolutionary or physical or other natural processes that the reductionist takes to be scientifically respectable. Reductionists will thereby be able to endorse (7) and (8). Reductionists also have an account of how to interpret sentences about divine action. For instance, the truth-condition for

(9) God sustains us

can be given by

212
Such-and-such natural processes sustain us.

However, many sentences that ascribe properties to God look more troublesome. Consider, for example,

God is omniscient.

What truth-conditions should the reductionist give for (11)? Interpreting this as saying that such-and-such natural processes are omniscient would evidently render the sentence false. Similarly, many sentences about God’s properties that are widely agreed-upon by religious believers – that God is just, merciful, loving, etc. – will be false on the reductionist interpretation. In addition, reductionists do not offer any interpretation of a variety of religious claims that are not about God, such as ‘Jesus is risen’, ‘There will be a Last Judgment’, etc. Without a reductionist analysis, and given their incompatibility with naturalism, the reductionist will have to find these sentences false. In general, it seems that reductionism will result in an error theory for a wide range of religious sentences. This makes religious reductionism difficult to motivate. Why attempt to preserve religious discourse if so much of it is in error? It seems that a better approach would be to eliminate religious discourse in favour of talk about the naturalistic subject that the reductionist takes to be metaphysically and epistemologically respectable.

There is a different line of anti-realist resistance to the face-value reading of the truth conditions of religious sentences. Rather than follow the reductionist strategy of replacing religious truth conditions with non-religious ones, minimalists propose an anti-realist reading of what constitutes religious truth. Wittgenstein’s later (and post-reductionist) work is particularly influential on this variety of anti-realism; Hilary Putnam and Dewi Phillips are leading proponents. There are two central ideas to minimalism. First, religious discourse is understood as a language game or collection of language games with its own internal standards of truth, justification, and reference. These standards are identified by looking at the practices of those who engage in the discourse. So whereas empirical evidence may be a critical standard of justification operative in scientific discourse, evidence from a sacred text or the word of a religious authority may constitute satisfactory standards of justification in religious discourse. Second, there are no essential cross-discourse standards of truth (hence it is to be understood ‘minimally’). Instead, the key notions of truth, reference, and justification are taken to be constituted (at least in part) by features specific to the discourse in question. Commenting on reference (but the point could equally be made about the concept of truth in religious language), Putnam (1992: 168) writes:

The use of religious language is both like and unlike ordinary cases of reference: but to ask whether it is ‘really’ reference or ‘not really’ reference is to be in a muddle. There is no essence of reference. … In short, Wittgenstein is telling you what isn’t the way to understand religious language. The way to understand religious language isn’t to try to apply some metaphysical classification of possible forms of discourse.

Instead, we need to consider the ‘life we lead with our concepts’ to determine the content of reference, truth, etc. in each discourse. According to Phillips (1995: 138),

By all means say that ‘God’ functions as a referring expression, that ‘God’ refers to a sort of object, that God’s reality is a matter of fact, and so on. But please remember that, as yet, no conceptual or grammatical clarification has taken place. We have all the work still to do since we shall now have to show, in the religious context what speaking of
‘reference’, ‘object’, ‘existence’, and so on amounts to, how it differs, in obvious ways, from other uses of these terms.

As Phillips indicates, the minimalist allows that religious claims are true, religious expressions refer, etc., but proposes that what counts as a true sentence or referring expression depends on standards that are local to the discourse in question. For realists, this seems an unacceptable relativisation of truth: if God created the world, then this should be a scientific truth just as much as a religious truth.

Most critical discussion of minimalism focuses on its supposed fideistic implications: the minimalist, in effect, partitions religious discourse from other regions of discourse, immunizing it to criticism on non-religious grounds (see Nielsen 2000). However, perhaps a more pressing difficulty for minimalism as a plausible theory of religious language is the fact that we take sentences of religious language to stand in logical and explanatory relations with non-religious sentences. We can, for example, use apparently descriptive sentences as the premises of arguments that have religious conclusions. For instance:

(12a) The earth is approximately 4.5 billion years old;
(12b) If the earth is approximately 4.5 billion years old, then the earth was not created by God in approximately 5000 BCE;
(12c) therefore, God did not create the world in approximately 5000 BCE.

If the concept of truth operative in religious discourse is different from the one in geology, as minimalists seem to suggest, then this argument is invalid. However, it appears to be valid. This generates a problem for minimalism. For if the linguistic evidence that minimalists are using to analyze the concept of truth is drawn from the practical use of religious language by religious believers, then the fact that (12a)–(12c) is taken as valid should itself constitute evidence that there is a continuity in the concept of truth between religious and scientific discourse.

**Religious discourse**

Suppose the realist is right about the face-value reading of both the content and truth-conditions of religious language. Anti-realists may still argue that in using religious language, speakers are not committed to the truth of what they are saying. This position, called *fictionalism*, comes in two forms. Revolutionary fictionalists argue that although many religious beliefs are false, it is possible to engage in religious discourse in a morally and intellectually respectable way without actually holding religious beliefs. This is similar to the position described in relating to Don Cupitt. Another notable recent proponent of religion without religious belief is Peter Lipton (2007). However, there is also hermeneutic fictionalism according to which speakers, despite appearances, do not really believe what they are saying. No change in attitude is needed: fictionalism already accurately describes the meaning of religious utterances. Since we are focusing on non-revisionary theories of religious language, is hermeneutic fictionalism about religion defensible?

Hermeneutic fictionalism may seem plausible for some fields of discourse. Fictional discourse itself is an example, since participants in a fiction appear to make assertions and express beliefs but we do not take them, nor do they take themselves, to be lying. But defending hermeneutic fictionalism in the religious case seems particularly challenging since religious ‘believers’ clearly take themselves to be asserting truths and expressing beliefs. However, Georges Rey (2006) has defended a position akin to hermeneutic religious fictionalism that he calls *meta-atheism*. Since
this offers perhaps the most interesting attempt to support the fictionalist position, I will devote the rest of this section to evaluating it.\footnote{Rey’s strategy is unconvincing. In the space of just a few pages, Rey can do little more than rehearse the starting points of various familiar anti-theistic arguments in philosophy of religion. His claim that the occurrence of natural evil provides an argument against the existence of a benevolent God, for example, is not the knockout blow to religious belief he seems to take it to be, but just the opening gambit of a debate that has generated a huge literature. Perhaps Rey would argue that most of this literature has been of low philosophical quality (though can we speak much more highly about all the literature on universals?); but what he needs for his argument is that there is nothing to take seriously on this topic in the philosophy of religion. Rey doesn’t establish this; treating a topic as if it shouldn’t be taken seriously does not show that topic isn’t serious. Moreover, it seems patently false: Aren’t J.L. Mackie’s ‘Evil and Realism and anti-realism

Rey’s way around the apparent implausibility of the theory is to argue that, among practitioners of religion, there is widespread self-deception:

Despite appearances, many Western adults who’ve been exposed to standard science and sincerely claim to believe in God are self-deceived; at some level they believe the claim is false.

(2006: 337)

For anyone with a basic education in science, Rey contends, it is entirely obvious that religious claims are false. Rey is not suggesting, however, that educated religious people are being deceitful or insincere when they make religious claims, since they may think of themselves as believing what they are saying: ‘insincerity arises when someone says something, intending it to be believed, that they consciously know full well they wouldn’t avow’ (ibid. 338). Among the reasons why religious people do not consciously draw out the implications of their disbelief, Rey suggests the following: loyalty to family and other social groups; personal ties and identifications with religious institutions; resistance to changing one’s public stance; and the wish for one’s life to be part of a larger project. To establish hermeneutic religious fictionalism, he would need to adopt an account of self-deception in the religious case such that religious avowals do not express beliefs; while Rey states a preference for this account, he does not reject alternatives. Nevertheless, he provides the basis for hermeneutic religious fictionalism: when (suitably educated) religious people profess to believe in God they are not actually expressing religious beliefs.

I do not propose to evaluate the fictionalist’s claim that religious beliefs are false. However, Rey makes the much stronger claim that religious beliefs are obviously false, which he needs in order to motivate his contention that religious people know ‘at some level’ that what they purport to believe is false. There are two stages to Rey’s argument for this claim. First, he distinguishes (a) serious and difficult ‘philosophical’ issues, such as the existence of universals or the nature of meaning, from (b) ‘shallow’ empirical issues that do not merit serious philosophical consideration and that can be settled without difficulty by observation and reflection, such as the existence of ghosts or gremlins. Rey proposes to put claims about God into the latter category. However, religious questions are treated and have been treated very seriously, over many centuries, by philosophers who are neither frivolous nor unintelligent. So Rey needs to show that philosophers have been wrong to treat religious questions seriously: this is the second stage of his argument. He does this by briefly setting out standard problems for belief in God – for example, that natural evil ‘provides reason to doubt there’s any such being’ (ibid. 340) – and objections to arguments for the existence of God (for example, that the design argument ‘can’t be taken seriously since Darwin’).

Rey’s strategy is unconvincing. In the space of just a few pages, Rey can do little more than rehearse the starting points of various familiar anti-theistic arguments in philosophy of religion. His claim that the occurrence of natural evil provides an argument against the existence of a benevolent God, for example, is not the knockout blow to religious belief he seems to take it to be, but just the opening gambit of a debate that has generated a huge literature. Perhaps Rey would argue that most of this literature has been of low philosophical quality (though can we speak much more highly about all the literature on universals?); but what he needs for his argument is that there is nothing to take seriously on this topic in the philosophy of religion. Rey doesn’t establish this; treating a topic as if it shouldn’t be taken seriously does not show that topic isn’t serious. Moreover, it seems patently false: Aren’t J.L. Mackie’s ‘Evil and
Omnipotence’ or Alvin Plantinga’s God, Freedom and Evil philosophically serious and rather good and interesting works? Rey could argue that Mackie and Plantinga are in different ways self-deceived (Plantinga for defending a view that ‘at some level’ he knows is obviously false; Mackie for taking seriously a topic that he knows ‘at some level’ obviously does not merit it) – but this would be question-begging. The obvious falsity of religious belief needs to be established to argue that people are self-deceived about it.

Rey does have a supplementary argument. Religious discourse exhibits features that, he suggests, show that it is ‘understood to be fictional from the start’ (ibid. 345). Rey offers three main pieces of evidence for this. First, religious claims rely on texts and authorities for their support that are largely insensitive to (in the Christian case) biblical scholarship or historical assessment (ibid. 344). In contrast, science has no sacred texts and only ‘provisional’ figures of authority; the authority of a scientist or a scientific text depends on the degree to which what they say is supported by current research. Second, religious claims are detail resistant. For example, in the Christian story of the creation of the universe, in the information given on how the creation happened – how exactly God brought the universe into existence, how his intervention occurred, the sequence of events, etc. – very few details are provided and no serious research is conducted. In contrast, there is extremely detailed information available about the origins of life and the universe and extensive ongoing scientific research programs underway that continue to fill in more of those details. Third, Rey thinks that religious discourse resembles fictional discourse because of the tolerance religious people show to what he takes to be patently ‘delusional’ and ‘idiosyncratic’ claims. The story of Abraham obeying God’s command to sacrifice his son is given as an example. In summary, Rey proposes that the use of religious discourse betrays the sketchiness, the lack of supporting evidence (and lack of interest in supporting evidence), and tolerance of fantastic implausibilities that also characterize our use of fiction.

Even if Rey’s view that religious beliefs are obviously false is unpersuasive, does his supplementary argument about the similarities of religious and fictional discourses lend support to his meta-atheist theory that religious people do not believe ‘at some level’ their own religious claims? The problem with Rey’s argument is that it relies on a misleading comparison between the claims of the majority of (educated) practising religious people and professional scientists. If we look at scientific discourse as it is employed by most people – those with the same basic education in the field that Rey assumes in the religious case – it does not look in much better shape than religious discourse with respect to the criteria that Rey proposes. Take a quite simply stated and understood scientific theory, such as the Darwinian theory of evolution. Most people who claim to believe this theory have little knowledge of or interest in the evidence in its favour (they might think that it has something to do with the fossil record, perhaps) and will happily appeal to authority to justify it: it is the leading theory in biology textbooks and is widely supported by biologists. One does not generally find among people prepared to assert that the Darwinian evolutionary theory is true on the basis of scientific authorities anything comparable to the checking of texts and historical evidence that Rey finds suspiciously absent among people who make religious claims on the basis of biblical authority (ibid. 343). Similarly, most people’s understanding of scientific theories is often sketchy, informed by metaphor, and limited to a superficial level of detail: it is detail resistant. Rey’s third point that some religious claims are delusional seems to be rhetorically of a piece with his contention that they should not be treated seriously. If his point is just that some religious claims presented in certain contexts can look bizarre, then the same applies to some scientific claims – notably some of the central claims of quantum mechanics.

Rey could persist with this argument by conceding that most people’s use of religious and scientific discourse is akin to their use of fictional discourse, but that in the professional use of
scientific discourse (and not in the religious case) there are no ultimate authorities and it is possible to fill in the details of theories. Rey’s position would then be that while both religious and scientific discourse are widely used as fiction, religious discourse is comprehensively fictional, whereas in science there are professionals who can credibly be said to believe what they are saying. To establish this, however, Rey would need to show that there is no comparable group of professional theologians (Bible scholars, systematic theologians, etc.) who have religious beliefs – something he does not attempt to do. A good starting point would be to show that religious claims are obviously false; as we have seen, however, Rey’s arguments for this are unsuccessful. Neither Rey’s argument about self-deception nor his comparison of religious and fictional discourse, therefore, provide good reason for meta-atheism. Neither do they establish hermeneutic religious fictionalism.

As a final point, even if cogent and compelling arguments could be made in favour of meta-atheism, more work would be needed to establish hermeneutic religious fictionalism. For meta-atheism to be a form of religious fictionalism, a particular account of self-deception is required. It is not essential for hermeneutic religious fictionalism that religious people have formed the belief, on any ‘level’, that their religious claims are false; what is essential is that they do not believe that what they are saying is true or, at least, that if they have any religious beliefs – if they exist on some ‘level’ – those beliefs are not expressed in their religious avowals. Rey writes: ‘I can well imagine someone regarding self-deceptive beliefs as genuine beliefs, and as simply manifesting ways in which people’s beliefs can be bizarrely irrational and compartmentalized’, and ‘there may be further levels at which [religious people] may also believe in God’ (ibid. 337). In other words, the arguments for meta-atheism are compatible with accounts of self-deception that are not consistent with hermeneutic religious fictionalism. If religious people believe their religious claims and ‘at some level’ believe those religious claims are false but do not recognize this inconsistency because of compartmentalization of their beliefs, then meta-atheism will be true and hermeneutic religious fictionalism false. So even if – contrary to what we have found – there are good arguments for meta-atheism, a successful hermeneutic religious fictionalism will require an argument for Rey’s preferred account of self-deception.

Conclusion

We have reviewed three main lines of dispute between realists and anti-realists about religious language and found in each case that anti-realism falls short of providing a compelling alternative. We should note, however, that religious anti-realism has yet to receive the kind of detailed and clearly argued defence in the philosophy of religion that other kinds of anti-realism have received in other areas of analytic philosophy. Notably, expressivism remains a resilient anti-realist option in ethics, while moderate forms of attitude theory and fictionalism have recently received extensive attention. There are plenty of currently unutilized resources available to religious anti-realists by considering comparable arguments developed for anti-realism in other philosophical fields.

Notes

1 I don’t exclude the possibility of religious sentences that do not have a religious subject matter. The Song of Songs, for example, has little in the way of religious content but might be considered religious language and its use part of religious discourse. However, I take the cases considered here to constitute a region of religious language of most immediate philosophical interest, with language that posits God being most central; it also captures the scope of religious language as it has been addressed in the philosophy of religion.
While there is no formal statement of belief with which its members are expected to agree, I think this is in line with the position set out by Don Cupitt (1984) and the views of many of its participants.

For a discussion of Berkeley’s views, see Oppy and Scott (2010: 19–32).

For more on the motivation argument, see Blackburn (1998: 97–100).

See Blackburn (1998); for a different model of expressivism see Gibbard (1990).

This mixture of cognitivism and expressivism has become an increasingly popular option in ethics. See, for example, Copp (2001).

For a discussion see Mason (2007).

A different kind of fictionalist position, that construes talk of God as irreducibly metaphorical, is pursued by Anthony Kenny (2004).

This is not, of course, a problem for Rey since he does not claim to be a religious fictionalist; it is, however, an issue for any hermeneutic religious fictionalists hoping to employ Rey’s arguments for meta-atheism.