

Can an atheist believe in God?

ANDREW S. ESHLEMAN

*Department of Philosophy and Liberal Studies, University of Arkansas at Little Rock,
Little Rock, AR 72204*

Abstract: Some have proposed that it is reasonable for an atheist to pursue a form of life shaped by engagement with theistic religious language and practice, once language and belief in God are interpreted in the appropriate non-realist manner. My aim is to defend this proposal in the face of several objections that have been raised against it. First, I engage in some conceptual spadework to distinguish more clearly some varieties of religious non-realism. Then, in response to two central objections, I seek to articulate the most promising version of the view. I conclude by discussing some practical and moral objections to a non-realist form of religious life.

Introduction

Can an atheist believe in God? Of course, the short and uninteresting answer is ‘No’. That is, the answer is ‘No’, and must necessarily be so if (1) we understand the word, ‘God’, to refer to a personal, immaterial being whose attributes include qualities like omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and omniscience; (2) understand an atheist as one who denies that such a being exists; and (3) understand the phrase ‘believe in’ to function as it does when my nine-year old son asks a playmate, ‘Do you believe in Santa Claus?’ To understand the question this way is to understand language and belief about God in a religious realist sense. According to religious realism, religious discourse about the existence and nature of sacred reality – in this case, discourse about God – should be understood to refer to a transcendent ultimate reality. Thus, to ask whether someone believes in God is to ask – at least in part – whether she or he thinks a certain metaphysical claim about reality is true.

Though a slow burn at the liberal fringe of Christian theology can be traced back to Ludwig Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity*, the need to coin a label like ‘religious realism’ to mark a contrast with its alternative, ‘religious non-realism’ is only decades old and parallels the drawing of similar distinctions in meta-ethics and philosophy of science during the mid-twentieth century. As will be discussed below, there are several varieties of religious non-realism. However,

it may be characterized briefly as the view that religious discourse about a sacred reality may be interpreted as asserting truths about human experience or expressing and/or promoting essentially human desires, attitudes, values, and ideals rather than as an attempt to refer to a supernatural ultimate Other.

For some atheists – perhaps most famously, Freud – a non-realist analysis of the unconscious aim of religious language has been coupled with a critique of the role of religion in human life. However, others have been more favourably disposed to the role of religion and have proposed that one might be an atheist yet rationally choose to live as if God exists. That is, in spite of their rejection of theistic metaphysics, they hold that it is reasonable for an atheist to pursue a form of life shaped by full engagement with theistic religious language and practice – e.g. those ritualized behaviours involved in worship and prayer – by reinterpreting religious language and belief in a non-realist manner. If this proposal is coherent, then perhaps there is a sense in which one may be an atheist yet believe in God. Of course, for the atheist here, the phrase ‘believe in’ will not entail assent to a metaphysical proposition about a supernatural reality. Instead, it will signal commitment to an ideal and way of life shaped in some important way by religious language and practice, as, for example, when one says one believes in self-sacrifice, life-long monogamous relationships, or some political cause.

A number of objections have been made to the proposal that an atheist may reasonably adopt a theistic form of life, once language and belief in God are understood in a non-realist manner. In this paper, my aim is to respond to these objections more directly than its proponents have to date. First, I engage in some conceptual spadework to distinguish more clearly some possible varieties of religious non-realism. Second, I identify the two most important objections to the non-realist proposal, objections alleging it to be fundamentally incoherent. In response to these objections, I then seek to articulate the version of non-realism that makes most evident why an atheist who adopts it might rationally choose to lead a theistic form of life. Finally, I conclude by discussing some practical and moral objections to this form of religious life.

Varieties of religious non-realism

Religious non-realism is best understood in contrast to its counterpart: religious realism. Three claims are central to the realist’s interpretation of discourse about a sacred reality:

- (1) Such discourse possesses (or presupposes other utterances that possess) cognitive status – i.e. it is intended to make assertions capable of being true or false (where their truth or falsity is understood in the objective sense of not being contingent upon human beliefs about their truth or falsity).¹

- (2) Some such assertions are intended to affirm the existence and nature of a metaphysical reality (or aspect of reality) that exists over against the realm of everyday experience that is subject to investigation by the empirical sciences; and
- (3) Some set of assertions of the preceding kind about a sacred reality are true.

In sum, religious realism, as I will understand it, is a view about the intended function and referent of religious discourse (these I will refer to as the 'realist aspirations' of religious discourse), as well as its success in accomplishing what is intended. On the realist view, such discourse is intended to make (or entails) truth-claims that affirm the existence of a supra-mundane reality, and at least some such claims are true. A religious realist may acknowledge as well that religious discourse performs a number of other important functions in religious life but will often maintain that at a fundamental level the meaningfulness of religious language and the meaningfulness of its associated practices are grounded in their commitment to realism.

Before moving to a description of some particular varieties of religious non-realism that might be adopted by an atheist, let me pause to make two preliminary comments in order to avoid some unnecessary confusion. First, note that strictly speaking, the word, 'atheist' refers to one who denies only that a certain kind of ultimate reality exists, namely the god of classical theism – a personal deity that has created the world and is characterized by the standard omni attributes. If, on the other hand, one understands 'God' to refer to whatever it is that exists as a sacred reality, then being an atheist in the strict sense is certainly consistent with belief in God, even in the realist sense of 'believe in'.

Many people in the world deny the existence of God in the classical theistic sense but believe that there exists, in contrast to everyday reality, an ultimate reality or dimension of reality which can be experienced by human beings and in relation to which one ought to conduct one's life. Some have characterized this dimension of reality pantheistically (e.g. Hindu Advaita Vedanta and Spinoza) or as a transpersonal principle or aspect of reality (e.g. some Mahayana Buddhist and Taoist thinkers, as well, perhaps, as A. N. Whitehead and Paul Tillich). Despite their rejection of classical theism, those who hold such religious views are committed to religious realism insofar as they continue to affirm realism's three distinctive claims.² In the discussion to follow I will focus on non-realist interpretations of theistic religious language in particular; however, one should assume for the sake of this discussion that the atheist who might adopt such interpretations rejects belief in any sort of supernatural sacred reality, not simply the God of classical theism.

Second, the varieties of religious non-realism discussed below should be understood to be based on an 'error theory' of the standard use of religious

language.³ The proponent of an error theory of religious language grants that religious persons have typically intended their discourse about a sacred reality to be understood in the manner described by the first two claims above. That is, an error theorist believes that most Jews, Christians, Muslims, etc. who speak about God, intend, as the realist suggests, to make assertions about and affirm the existence of a personal object of devotion that in some sense transcends that aspect of reality subject to empirical investigation. However, the error theorist denies that any such assertions are true – that theists have failed to successfully refer to a supernatural reality when they use the word ‘God’. The error theorist thereby rejects the third of religious realism’s distinctive claims. Note that the definition of atheism (of either variety described above) requires that it be possible to interpret religious propositions about a sacred reality as making (or entailing) assertions about the existence of a transcendent reality, for it is these assertions that the atheist regards as false. Furthermore, if one reflectively endorses atheism so defined, then one is an error theorist as well.

It is important to distinguish varieties of religious non-realism based on an error theory from another set of views sometimes labelled ‘non-realist’. I have in mind here views inspired by some remarks on religion by the later Wittgenstein.⁴ Proponents of this view tend to deny that religious discourse – outside philosophy and philosophically dominated theology – has ever been in the business of making the sort of metaphysical truth-claims realists are wont to defend.⁵ This is an important view, but one outside the scope of the present discussion. In contrast, proponents of the non-realist views discussed below should be understood to concede the realist aspirations of traditional religious speech-acts; but having concluded that these aspirations are not fulfilled, they offer a reinterpretation of the aim and function of religious discourse. So, the atheist who proposes that it is rational to pursue a non-realist form of religious life is defined both in relation to how she perceives religious language is typically used by more traditional religious persons (as an atheist), and in relation to how she proposes religious language ought to be understood once its traditional aspirations are rejected (as a non-realist).

As noted above, atheism entails the rejection of the third of religious realism’s distinctive claims – the claim that at least some assertions affirming the existence of a sacred reality, say God, are true. In virtue of this, an atheist is an error theorist. She may also be a non-realist of the sort considered here if she then proceeds to offer a reinterpretation of religious language that involves the rejection of one or both of the first two aspects of religious realism. Several varieties of religious non-realism can be distinguished on the basis of which of these two are rejected and how they are rejected. In what follows, I think it helpful to describe these varieties as theoretically distinct in order better to understand the various claims that have been made by non-realists. However, in the writings of the

authors cited the views are sometimes mixed, and I will, in the end, identify a mixed version as the most plausible.

First, a non-realist may agree with the realist's first claim – that assertions referring to God are cognitive in form – but deny the second – that they need to be understood as metaphysical assertions about a supernatural reality. References to God are better interpreted, the non-realist might contend, as asserting truths about human beings. We might dub this view, 'religious positivism'. Like its historical cousin in philosophy of science, the view here is that all statements referring to unobservable theoretical entities are best translated as referring to that which is empirically observable.⁶ In this fashion, the New Testament scholar and theologian Rudolph Bultmann says, 'I *am* trying to substitute anthropology for theology, for I am interpreting theological affirmations as assertions about human life'.⁷ More recently, Don Cupitt interprets 'God' as a symbol for the demand on human beings to attain – to the highest degree possible – self-knowledge and freedom from selfishness.⁸ Having thus reinterpreted the referent of 'God', he then interprets doctrinal statements about God's attributes as describing features of that demand for transcendence. For example, to say that God is immutable is to say that the imperative to seek self-knowledge and transcendence is absolute and unchanging.⁹

Two more common forms of religious non-realism reject the positivist's commitment to the cognitive status of God-talk. The first of these, religious expressivism, emphasizes, like positivism, the need to reinterpret instances of theological discourse as discourse about human experience but emphasizes the non-cognitive role of such religious discourse in expressing emotions, or in prescribing values, as well as perhaps one's intention to act in accordance with the latter. As Richard Braithwaite once claimed, 'God is love' may be interpreted as announcing one's intention to lead an agapeistic life.¹⁰ Richard Schacht nicely sums up the emphasis of this form of 'post transcendent religion':

Religions ... are fundamentally a matter of the expression, affirmation, elaboration, and promotion of certain sets of values To ask whether they are true or false is to make a kind of category mistake, akin to that which one would be making if one asked the same question with respect to operas or symphonies.¹¹

Religious expressivism can take a variety of forms depending upon the function attributed to theological speech-acts, yet it is committed to the view that such utterances are not themselves asserting anything to be true – either about God or human beings. Note, however, that religious expressivism may be coupled with other forms of realism – that despite this emphasis on the non-cognitive status of theological speech-acts, an expressivist can hold that the attitudes expressed in such utterances are attitudes about something that she believes to be true in a realist sense. So, for example, one might hold – as Braithwaite did – that theological utterances express an attitude toward a moral ideal, and hold – as

Braithwaite did not – both that statements about a moral ideal can be true or false and that some are in fact true.

Finally, a third form of religious non-realism denies that the meaningfulness of engaging in religious discourse depends upon our ability to translate God-talk into either assertions about something other than a supernatural being or expressions of one's emotions, attitudes, or commitments. According to this view, which we'll call 'religious instrumentalism', religious discourse is to be understood as useful fiction, a powerful vehicle through which we might realize fuller and less ego-centred lives.¹² On this view, the traditional meaning of religious terms remains intact. For example, the word 'God' still refers to an immaterial personal agent. However, according to instrumentalism, such terms are understood to belong to a larger fictional narrative that includes not only those things recognizably narrative in form but theological discourse as well. Contrasting the instrumentalist understanding of the biblical creation narrative with that of a fundamentalist realist, Howard Wettstein writes,

She, not unlike one who reads the narrative as an actual account of creation, dwells in the potent imagery For her, of course, the story is not factually correct. But this is, to her mind, almost not worthy of mention; it is both obvious and completely beside the point, the religious point. The powerful religious resonances and intimations of the story are available to her, as they are to the fundamentalist, as a consequence of dwelling so wholeheartedly in the drama of creation.¹³

According to the instrumentalist, inhabiting the time-tested world of religious narrative and imagery is a valuable means of structuring one's life around a conception of the good and of bringing about a corresponding transformation of one's character. Central to the instrumentalist's view is that the ethical import of immersing oneself in religious discourse as fiction is independent of one's metaphysical commitments.¹⁴

Two important objections

Theists and traditional non-religious atheists find themselves unexpected allies in opposing the religious non-realist's claim that it may be rational for an atheist to live as if God exists. Both groups have tended to believe that the meaningfulness of religious language and practice is essentially tied to its realist aspirations and so often object that the practice of religious non-realism is fundamentally incoherent. On this view, the fact that some self-proclaimed atheists have practised theistic forms of religion does not, by itself, establish the rationality of doing so. That is, critics may suspect that either the individuals in question are not truly atheists (but perhaps instead merely closet agnostics) or that their religious practice is simply a habitual and sentimental leftover from earlier days when it was accompanied by realist belief. The suspicion of an underlying incoherence has been expressed in the form of two related objections.

Below, I sketch how these objections may be raised against each of the three forms of non-realism outlined in the previous section.

Religious positivism has seemed persuasive to many when employed as part of a theory concerning the historical genesis of the idea of God – e.g. in Feuerbach's claim that the concept of God was humanity's unwitting projection on to the universe of human nature purified and freed of limitation.¹⁵ If something like this is correct, then there is an important sense in which theology can be reduced to anthropology as Feuerbach and Bultmann claimed. But the present question is whether there is any point in an atheist making statements about God so understood and conjoining them with the practice of religious ritual. The motivation for doing so is not clear. There are at least two related problems. First, if, as the religious positivist claims, the symbol 'God' can be decoded, and all statements about God translated into anthropological, psychological, or moral statements, it's not clear why an atheist – should she wish to make statements of the latter variety – should not simply make them in their own terms rather than resort to coded theological terms. In other words, once the naturalistic meaning of such religious discourse is discovered or designated it ceases to have a distinctive function and thus seems ripe for elimination. As John Robinson once remarked, religious discourse of this kind would seem to be 'semantically superfluous'.¹⁶

The second difficulty for religious positivism is that it leaves religious practice unmotivated as well. To see this clearly, consider the contrast with the link between religious realism and prayer. When the realist engages in prayer she takes herself to be communicating with a supernatural being distinct from herself. The behaviour is motivated by a belief about what is appropriate in relation to that Other – e.g. a belief that the Other's greatness calls for praise, or perhaps that someone for whom the intercessor prays might receive some divine aid in the midst of a crisis. These sorts of motivations are clearly inaccessible to the religious positivist, and it's not clear how the view could fill the lacuna.¹⁷ The problem is only amplified if one pays attention not only to the linguistic intentions involved in many prayers but also to the variety of ritual postures that are often partly constitutive of the practice. For the realist, one strikes a submissive posture out of reverence and humility in the presence of the Other, but if there is no Other in the realist sense, then why kneel or prostrate oneself?

Religious expressivism would seem to fare no better in the face of these two objections. The expressivist denies that religious utterances in the form of assertions should be understood as such, holding instead that they be interpreted as expressing some non-cognitive state. But insofar as the expressivist, like the positivist, believes it possible to translate the meaning of such religious discourse into naturalistic terms, then the same question arises as to why one should not express one's attitude in naturalistic terms in the first place. To return to Braithwaite's example, why should one resort to theological assertion when one

can simply say, 'I intend to live an agapeistic form of life'? Similarly, it is not yet clear what distinctive role religious ritual is to play in the expression of one's emotions, attitudes, and commitments.

Religious instrumentalism, of course, explicitly seeks to articulate what might motivate the atheist to engage in religious discourse and practice – namely, that by engaging religion as a fiction one may foster growth in one's moral character. The general point here is an important one. A central aim of religion, arguably whether it be of the realist or non-realist variety, is to bring about an inner transformation of one's self and a corresponding change in one's conduct. Religious instrumentalists can draw upon the widely shared experience of being moved and transformed by fiction to explain the point of religious discourse and practice absent its realist elements.

But simply reminding us of the transforming power of fiction does not provide an entirely satisfactory answer to the two objections at hand, for the objections may be reformulated as follows. First, it's still not clear why the atheist should accord theistic religious discourse such a central role in shaping her life when there exists such a wide variety of fiction available that might be used to stimulate personal growth. What, if anything, is distinctive of religious fiction? Second, one might grant that reading and reflecting on fiction is useful but still question the point of religious *practice* for the instrumentalist. Even if one accepts that the Tanakh, the Bible, the Qur'an, etc. may be read as inspiring fiction, why should this require anything more than that we make sure we have a copy of each on our bookshelf beside our copy of William Bennett's *Book of Virtues* to pull down now and then and read for our moral edification?

Responding to the coherence objections

The above objections are not the only criticisms made of religious non-realism. Nevertheless, they are perhaps the most important, for they go to the heart of the issue between realists and non-realists: whether the meaningfulness of religious language and the practices associated with it require that they reflect realist aspirations – i.e. that their meaningfulness depends upon the intentions described in the first two of realism's central claims. I will argue that the non-realist can mount a plausible defence in the face of these objections by supplementing religious instrumentalism with elements of religious expressivism. On this view, religious discourse will be understood as fictional, yet I will hold that its role cannot be cashed-out solely in terms of its instrumental value. Call this view, 'fictionalism'.

In order to meet the first of our objections – that religious discourse can serve no distinctive purpose for the non-realist and so becomes eliminable – it is necessary to understand religious discourse as a special kind of symbolic fiction. Symbols are powerful non-cognitive tools in the *expression* of shared experience

and commitments and in the *provocation* of a shared response in the direction of an ideal that has yet to be realized.¹⁸ Religious discourse on the view being developed here is symbolic in this sense and so combines the emphases of both expressivism and instrumentalism. For example, the image of Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible, unrelenting in love and the pursuit of justice, yet lamenting, through the prophets, Israel's treatment of the poor, may symbolically direct our attention to the plight of the poor amongst us, give expression to the shared experience and commitment of those struggling to realize a just social order, and point to the character necessary to bring about its full realization.

To this general notion of symbolic fiction, we must add that religious discourse on the present view is mythological. Mythological discourse, understood here as a subset of symbolic discourse, is a meaning-loaded narrative that has been adopted by a particular community to give expression to and foster a form of life defined by its guiding ideal(s).¹⁹ Thus, mythological fiction, unlike some other forms of symbolic fiction, functions to establish and perpetuate the identity of a people over time.²⁰ This is significant in two respects.

First, it highlights the fact that we are to imagine our fictionalist as one who belongs to a religious community. The instrumental benefit of associating with a like-minded community is clear. It is a powerful thing to gather with people who embrace similar ideals, who are willing to devote time to their elaboration and celebration, and who share a commitment to pursuing their realization. Moreover, it is difficult to find non-religious versions of this sort of community in contemporary Western society. Second, we should imagine that our non-realist belongs to a community that is, to a considerable degree, continuous with some theistic historical tradition with respect to its texts, theological expression, and practices. Sometimes this simply may be a matter of practical necessity,²¹ but I think the fictionalist has again a good instrumental reason for choosing to belong to such a community as well. In the course of their long evolution, existing religious traditions have developed a richness of insight, expression, and means of character transformation that one could not hope to reproduce should one seek to 'wipe the slate clean and start afresh'.²² The wise non-realist, of course, will not accept tradition uncritically, but neither will he be quick to dismiss elements of the tradition he finds incomprehensible or objectionable. As many thoughtful realists (and hopefully, university students) have discovered, there is sometimes much to be gained from struggling with a syllabus not of one's own making.²³

I have dwelt a bit on the communal aspect of religious mythology because it provides a partial reply to the objection that such discourse can serve no distinctive function for the non-realist. While granting that many of the expressivist elements of religious language could be translated without loss into naturalist terms, and that one need not turn to religion to experience the ethically transforming power of fiction, the non-realist may highlight the way in which religious discourse can play an important role in defining and fostering a community

devoted to the realization of its guiding ideal. I now want to suggest that what allows such discourse to retain its specifically religious quality, on a fictionalist view, is the way its central symbols point to a distinctive kind of guiding ideal.

‘Be imitators of God’, writes the author of the Letter to the Ephesians. Like the realist, the fictionalist may be guided by the ambition to be recreated in the image of God. This aspiration does not require that God exist, but it does require a conception of God, i.e. a representation of a perfected state of being. The religious aspiration to imitate God is not an aspiration to wield god-like power or obtain perfect knowledge, but to construct a life in which the internal aspects of one’s self (e.g., one’s desires and values), as well as its relation to others and the wider natural world, are fully integrated and harmonious. It is sometimes alleged that perfect-being theology is an exclusively Graeco-Christian invention, yet evidence for the presence of this sort of religious ideal can be found in other theistic as well as non-theistic traditions.²⁴ The fictionalist need not believe that a state of comprehensive integration and harmony is possible, only that pursuit of it is eminently worthwhile.

Religious discourse is thus distinguished by the ambitious all-inclusive nature of its defining ideal. Dewey perhaps comes closest to an explicit recognition of the centrality of this feature of being genuinely religious: ‘The religious is “morality touched by emotion” only when the ends of moral conviction arouse emotions that are not only intense but are actuated and supported by *ends so inclusive that they unify the self.*’²⁵ This is an oft-overlooked feature in discussions of non-realism, but one which I think helps explain why non-realists are drawn to continue to talk about distinctively spiritual or religious ideals rather than try to describe the ends sought reductionistically in moral and psychological terms. Complete reduction on this view is not possible. Discourse about such an ideal *requires* symbolic representation for the same reason realist theologians have stressed the need for symbolic, metaphorical, and/or analogical description when referring to God. It is a kind of existence of which we may have some inkling but one that eludes full articulation, for our experience, and thus understanding, of such an existence is always at best partial and fragmentary.

To this point, I have been arguing that the fictionalist can defend the claim that religious discourse is capable of playing an important and distinctive role for an atheist by appealing to its instrumental value in fostering a community committed to the pursuit of an ideal that requires for its expression just the sort of symbolic representation we find in theological discourse. I turn now to the objection that the coherence of religious practice is undermined once a religion’s commitment to realism is forsaken.

First, the fictionalist can stress that the benefits to be derived from engagement with religious discourse conceived as fiction will not derive from a detached reading of the sacred text as literature but only follow upon full immersion, the sort experienced when we are apt to say that we lost ourselves in the novel we

were reading or the movie we were watching. This is because – as virtue theorists in ethical theory often remind us – changes in character are rarely, if ever, merely a matter of directing one’s mind and will in the proper direction but must also involve the cultivation and exercise of one’s emotional capacity. Emotional engagement is more likely to follow if we not only read religious texts but also locate ourselves within the make-believe religious world through our participation in ritualized speech and behaviour. When we corporately speak and act as if the story were true, we help unlock the transforming effect the fiction itself is capable of producing in us. This, I take it, is George Santayana’s point when he writes,

[Prayer] will not bring rain, but until rain comes it may cultivate hope and resignation and may prepare the heart for any issue, opening up a vista in which human prosperity will appear in its conditioned existence and conditional value. A candle wasting itself before a image will prevent no misfortune, but it may bear witness to some silent hope or relieve some sorrow by expressing it Worship, supplication, reliance on the gods, express both these things in an appropriate parable.²⁶

Here, it might seem that in recommending that one ‘act as if the story were true’, the fictionalist is suggesting that the atheist’s emotional engagement in religious ritual depends upon acts of self-deception – i.e. it requires convincing herself, at least momentarily, that God exists, contrary to her considered judgement. How best in general to explain our emotional engagement with fiction is no easy matter. If – as is widely accepted today – emotions are, at least in part, defined by some cognitive content (i.e. a belief that such-and-such is the case), then how is it possible for us to be moved by fictional scenarios when we know them to be fictional and so lack the requisite cognitive content? Space does not permit an adequate treatment of this larger issue,²⁷ but I think most would agree that it is implausible to think that our emotional engagement with fiction in general is best explained by supposing that those emotions rest on acts of self-deception. For example, my experience of being moved while viewing a play depicting a parent whose child has died does not depend on my convincing myself – even momentarily – that the one actor is the parent of the other and that one of them has just died before my eyes. However, one might urge that the worry here is not simply the concern about explaining in general how fiction is capable of affecting us emotionally but a deeper one, since the fictionalist view defended here requires not simply that one be moved by a theistic narrative but that one take part in the fiction through rule-governed ritual behaviours. In other words, the analogy here is not that of viewing a play but of being in the play and following the script.

Must the fictionalist deceive herself in order to *participate* in what she regards as a fiction? Again, I think not. What is required is that the fictionalist engage in an imaginative exercise. That is, she must imagine what it would be like were the fiction true and act in accordance with that imaginative construction. Here it may be helpful to be reminded of a popular strategy in athletic training for competitive

sports. Athletes in such sports are not only sometimes encouraged to practice under ‘game conditions’, but are also encouraged in such cases to imagine as they practise that they are in a game. Rule-governed patterns of behaviour befitting the imagined game circumstances are often prescribed, and the athlete is asked to perform them as if she were in the game. One may, for example, be asked to participate in a drill while imagining that one is playing in the upcoming championship. Suppose that a particular athlete completes the drill while successfully imagining herself to be in the championship game. We need not suppose that she must deceive herself in order to accomplish such a feat (so that afterwards she must remind herself that the real game has yet to be played).

Of course, the analogy between such an athlete and the fictionalist is not exactly parallel, since the relevant instrumental value of such an imaginative construction for the athlete is her performance in a real game, which serves as the basis of her imaginative model; whereas the value of religious ritual for the fictionalist will be expressed less directly in areas of life very much unlike the circumstances surrounding the ritual. (Note that the latter is true for whatever instrumental value ritual offers the realist as well.) In addition to illustrating the way imaginative construction may serve an instrumental purpose without self-deception, the athletic analogy may be revealing in another respect as well. It suggests that the capacity for imaginative construction is substantially influenced by one’s prior experience. An inexperienced athlete who has not yet played in the sort of game she is asked to imagine will have more difficulty with the imaginative exercise than one who has, and she may thereby not reap the same instrumental value from the drill. For a similar reason, I suspect that fictionalist forms of religious non-realism will always be more popular amongst former realists than among those who have never practised religion as a realist. For the former realist, the imaginative exercise is a *reconstruction* that no doubt relies, at least in part, on the ability to recall the experience of regarding the world from the standpoint of a religious realist.

Finally, I wish to conclude this section by denying that the point of religious practice for the fictionalist must be understood in strictly instrumentalist terms. That is, one might also think it crucial to speak and act as if the theistic story were true because of the symbolic value of expressing in religious ritual that one is on the side of the good as represented in the fiction. In an article with a different aim in mind, Robert Adams makes a strong case for the importance of such symbolic actions in our lives.²⁸ As Adams argues, the importance of symbolic action lies in its capacity to address a kind of helplessness that is an inescapable aspect of our existence – that despite one’s intentions and efforts, our ability to do good, conceive of it, and care about it is limited. One may seek to orient one’s life around a more or less articulate comprehensive conception of the good, but one’s success in bringing oneself and the rest of the world in line with it will always be incomplete.

Despite this fact, the quality of our lives is enhanced if we take the opportunity, not only to make what progress we may, but also simply to declare our loyalty to the good in actions that symbolize that allegiance.²⁹ This insight can help further explain the point of and motivation for religious ritual as practised by the fictionalist. To take again the case of prayer, a non-realist may engage in intercessory prayer for those in some dire need, not because she believes there is some chance thereby of effecting some aid, nor because she believes that in doing so she will contribute to the further development of her own moral and spiritual self, but simply because in doing so she symbolically declares that she is *for* those in need.

Practical and moral objections

In the foregoing I have argued that the meaningfulness of religious language and practice for a fictionalist can be defended against two important objections. I take these objections – insofar as they allege some incoherence in the view – to be the most philosophically serious. However, others have been raised as well. In this section, I discuss some practical and moral objections to religious non-realism.

As I pointed out above, the fictionalist and realist agree that a central function of religious practice is to bring about a transformation of one's character. But can we expect that a non-realist form of religion will be just as effective as its realist counterpart in bringing about this result? In other words, are the two not just functionally similar but also functionally equivalent? Many have raised doubts about whether there is any reason to think that religious non-realism has the resources to generate the same moral fruit, or even whether it can, as a religious movement, sustain itself since it regards itself as grounded in a fiction.³⁰

Some non-realists have asserted the functional equivalence claim or even suggested the stronger claim that religion would function better once its realist commitments were purged,³¹ but I see no reason why the fictionalist must commit herself to such strong claims. All that is required is the minimal thesis that the practice of a fictionalist form of religion is a means to promote human flourishing. Moreover, it is important to remember that the lasting power of a work of fiction is often attributed to its distinctive ability to direct attention to certain important truths about the human condition. Thus, it seems reasonable to suppose that the success of a particular form of fictionalism will depend largely upon how well it identifies and promotes those truths, including – I would suggest – moral truths. Again, though some religious non-realists have been moral non-realists as well, we need not assume that the first entails the second (especially that the first entails the crudest emotivist version of the second). If we imagine our fictionalist as a moral realist, then the appropriate comparison is not between one person who believes her religious practices to be grounded in

truth and another who does not; belief in truth of a certain sort is at the heart of both.

In the end, the persistence of fictionalism over time will depend upon whether its proponents continue to believe that the practices of their tradition play a useful role in both their ongoing self-transformation and in the expression of their ideals, as well as the conviction that they are unlikely to find equally powerful non-religious alternatives. The latter consideration is especially significant if the religious practice in question demands a significant degree of self-sacrifice. That is, it is unlikely that one will be motivated to engage in such self-sacrifice unless one is convinced either that there is no better way to accomplish the desired self-transformation and/or that the symbolic value of one's practice outweighs the personal costs incurred.

Some suggest that the practice of forms of religious non-realism like fictionalism – at least insofar as it is pursued alongside religious realists and not accompanied by explanatory qualifications – is deceitful and so morally objectionable. Of course, not all contemporary religious communities are defined by a shared commitment to religious realism. In such communities, there may be no presumption of religious realism; therefore the concern that one's practice might mislead others need not arise. The moral objection gains strength when one imagines a community that is defined, in large part, by its realist commitment, and thus where it seems reasonable to suppose that there would be a presumption amongst its members that one's religious language and ritual be interpreted in a realist manner. The objection is most acute in cases where the non-realist in question inhabits an official role as spiritual leader of a community wherein such a presumption is widely shared.

To mislead by action or omission is a morally significant and sometimes a morally serious matter. This is to say that a burden of justification must be met in cases where it seems reasonable to suppose that others will misinterpret one's behaviour yet one chooses to allow such misinterpretation. Furthermore, some realists may worry that more is at stake than interpersonal integrity. That is, some may be concerned that the presence of covert non-realists in their midst threatens the integrity of their community as a whole. These are legitimate concerns, but I doubt that it is possible to give a context-free answer to the question of whether the necessary justificatory burden can be met.

In the short story, 'Saint Manuel Bueno, Martyr' by Miguel de Unamuno, a rural Catholic priest hides his unbelief from his parishioners who look to him for spiritual guidance and solace.³² Father Don Manuel Bueno is tormented by his desire to be forthright about his true convictions but subordinates this desire to the love he has for the members of his parish, and his conviction that the practice of religion is a powerful force for good in their lives. Near the end of the story, Lazaro, an atheist and brother of the narrator, publicly 'converts' to Catholicism and becomes Don Manuel's assistant in ministry after the priest confesses to him

both his lack of belief and the nature of his ministry. Unamuno convincingly portrays the two men as engaged in a noble enterprise. Perhaps, then, there can be noble lies – i.e. times when a non-realist spiritual leader may justifiably allow others to misinterpret his or her practice. I suspect that such cases, if they exist outside fiction, are very rare. However, that the burden of justification might be met in the sort of case thought most acute suggests that it might also be met more frequently in cases where the non-realist does not bear quite so high a degree of responsibility.

Conclusion

Can an atheist believe in God? On behalf of the atheist, I have argued ‘Yes’, once language and belief about God are understood in the appropriate non-realist sense. That is, I have argued that she may rationally choose to join a community of others who, like herself, have committed themselves to the highest of human ideals – being recreated in the very image of God – and who have joined themselves in religious ritual to express and realize that aim.³³

Notes

1. The objectivity of the relevant truth claims is illustrated by the fact that a religious realist typically maintains that the proposition, ‘S exists’ (where S = God, Brahman, The Dharmakaya, or the Tao, etc.), has a truth-value prior to the existence of the species *homo sapiens*.
2. John Hick has been especially helpful in drawing attention in his writings to the fact that the issue of religious realism vs non-realism is not an issue about how to interpret theistic religious discourse alone. See, for example, his *Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1989), ch. 11.
3. The term ‘error theory’ is borrowed from J. L. Mackie’s use of the term in meta-ethics to distinguish his revisionist non-cognitivist view of moral judgements from those non-cognitivist views that deny moral judgements are typically intended to assert objective moral truths. See his *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York NY: Penguin Books, 1977), 35.
4. For a useful compilation of Wittgenstein’s remarks on this topic see ‘Ethics, life, and faith’, in Anthony Kenny (ed.) *The Wittgenstein Reader* (Cambridge MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1994).
5. The leading contemporary spokesperson for this view has been D. Z. Phillips. See, e.g. his *Faith and Philosophical Inquiry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 13–18; and ‘On really believing’ in J. Runzo (ed.) *Is God Real?* (New York NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), 85–108. Phillips has strenuously resisted being labelled a ‘non-realist’ since he rejects the terms with which the debate has been framed.
6. In drawing the distinction between positivist and instrumentalist versions of non-realism based on their parallels in philosophy of science, I am indebted to Robin Le Poidevin’s discussion in *Arguing for Atheism* (New York NY: Routledge Press, 1996), 107–114.
7. Rudolph Bultmann *Kerygma and Myth*, vol. 1 (New York NY: Harper and Row, 1961), 107.
8. Don Cupitt *Taking Leave of God* (New York NY: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1980), 9.
9. *Ibid.*, 100–103. Cupitt, elsewhere in this work, describes his view as expressivist and thereby non-cognitivist (56). These comments are difficult to reconcile with the way he describes the requirement symbolized by the word, ‘God’ in the passages I have cited.
10. R. B. Braithwaite ‘An empiricist’s view of the nature of religious belief’, reprinted in K. Yandell (ed.) *God, Man, and Religion* (New York NY: McGraw Hill, 1973), 221–222. Similarly, John Dewey writes in *A Common Faith* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1934), 20, that ‘[f]aith can not only refer to belief that some object exists but also the conviction that some end should be supreme over conduct’.

11. Richard Schacht 'After transcendence', in D. Z. Phillips and Timothy Tessin (eds) *Religion Without Transcendence* (New York NY: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 85–86.
12. Le Poidevin *Arguing for Atheism*, 112. See also Howard Wettstein 'Awe and the religious life', in P. French *et al.* (eds) *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, vol. 21: Philosophy of Religion* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 273–276.
13. Wettstein 'Awe and the religious life', 274. Of course, many religious realists would share Wettstein's rejection of a literal interpretation of the creation narrative, but this is exactly his point – that the meaningfulness of the story does not depend upon its historicity.
14. For another recent attempt to categorize the varieties of religious non-realism as I have sought to do in this section, see Peter Byrne *God and Realism* (Burlington VT: Ashgate Press, 2003), 1–20.
15. Ludwig Feuerbach *The Essence of Christianity* (New York NY: Harper and Row, 1957), 14.
16. John Robinson *Honest to God* (Philadelphia PA: Westminster Press, 1963), 51. See also Joseph Runzo 'Realism, non-realism and atheism', in *idem Is God Real?*, 168–169; Le Poidevin *Arguing for Atheism*, 113; and Eleonore Stump 'Atheism and awe', in French *et al. Philosophy of Religion*, 288.
17. Paul Badham 'The religious necessity of realism', in Runzo *Is God Real?*, 185–187; Stump 'Atheism and awe', 288.
18. For a nice discussion of the non-cognitive power of religious symbols, see John Herman Randall, Jr *The Role of Knowledge in Western Religion* (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 1958), 114–116.
19. 'This story, like others that figure centrally in the tradition, is not just a story. It is our own story, our own mythology These stories play a crucial role in the continuity of the community over time'; Wettstein 'Awe and the religious life', 275.
20. One might observe that religious discourse, understood as mythological fiction, is not alone in this regard. Accounts of a country's past are often more fiction than history and function in the same way to create and foster a communal identity. Some who are aware of the questionable nature of the historical claims may see reason to continue to take part in the celebration of national holidays grounded in that historical narrative.
21. That is, if one desires to be a part of a community that shares one's ideals, one may find that the only candidates available are such religious communities.
22. The phrase is Dewey's (*A Common Faith*, 6) and reflects his apparent negative attitude toward the particular historical manifestations of what he otherwise regards as an important religious impulse.
23. Daphne Hampson powerfully reminds Christian non-realists of the patriarchal nature of the symbolism embedded in their religious practice and challenges them to rethink their commitment to those symbols. See her 'On being a non-Christian realist', in Rowan Williams (ed.) *God and Reality* (New York NY: Mowbray, 1997), 85–99. Hampson's point is well taken, but we part company when she concludes that the evil of patriarchy cannot be overcome except by severing connections with religious traditions like that of Christianity.
24. For a discussion of how a similar idea operates within the Confucian tradition, see David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 241–246.
25. Dewey *A Common Faith*, 22 (my emphasis).
26. George Santayana *Reason in Religion* (New York NY: Dover Publications, 1982), 47.
27. For a more extended discussion of the role of emotions in an instrumentalist account, see Le Poidevin *Arguing for Atheism*, 114–120. Le Poidevin draws upon a popular philosophical account of how best to characterize the emotional response to fiction developed by Kendall Walton in 'Fearing fictions', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 75 (1978), 5–27. Walton's view is that fiction generates an emotional response that simulates emotions we experience in relation to real events. Stump anticipates such a move and wonders whether such quasi-emotions can produce the same desired fruit as the real emotions associated with realist belief; 'Awe and atheism', 287. I comment briefly on this brand of objection in the next section.
28. Robert Adams 'Symbolic value', in French *et al. Philosophy of Religion*, 1–15.
29. *Ibid.*, 12–13.
30. See, for example, Stump 'Awe and atheism', 286–287, and Badham 'The religious necessity of realism', 189, for the first concern; and for the second, Brian Hebblethwaite 'A critique of Don Cupitt's Christian Buddhism', in Runzo *Is God Real?*, 138–139.

31. Dewey and Cupitt seem to express the stronger view. The goal, as Dewey sees it, is to 'emancipate the religious quality from encumbrances that now smother or limit it'; *A Common Faith*, 10.
32. Miguel de Unamuno *Ficciones: Four Stories and a Play*, Anthony Kerrigan (tr.) (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 133–180. It is not entirely clear to me whether we are to understand that the priest is an atheist or that he simply rejects belief in an afterlife. Either of these readings will support the present point in the text.
33. For comments on earlier drafts of this paper, I wish to thank the Editor; two anonymous referees for the journal; Lee Basham, Douglas Hedley, Steve Jauss, Daryl Rice, Jan Thomas, Rico Vitz; and audience members at: The Midsouth Philosophy Conference at the University of Memphis; a colloquium presentation to the Department of Theology, University of Graz; a conference on religion and ethics at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford University; and the Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association.