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Philosophical pragmatism and religious belief: interpreting Christian non-realism through john Dewey and Richard Rorty

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DOCTOR IN PHILOSOPHY

1996

ABSTRACT

In this thesis I consider the account of religious non-realism in the work of Don Cupitt and in other prominent writers belonging to the 'Sea of Faith' network. I argue that the appropriate context of the non-realists understanding of religious belief is provided by philosophical pragmatism as this is presented in the work of John Dewey and Richard Rorty. This context outlines important aspects of the 'Sea of Faith' religious non-realists' self-understanding; and provides them with an argumentative resource which they can employ against alternative critical-realist approaches to religious belief. I show that John Dewey's understanding of religious faith coheres with many of the ideas expressed by religious non-realists and that Rorty's pragmatism provides religious non-realism with a contemporary philosophical articulation of its theology. In order to defend this assertion I argue that Rorty's pragmatism does not necessarily lead to radical subjectivism nor to a dangerous political ideology as some interpreters have suggested. Further, I argue that his ideas are open to theological appropriation and that his rejection of religious belief is tempered by a tolerance toward those who still find a use for it. Rorty, I claim, has such a use. He employs the term 'God' as a backdrop against which he can present his own account of a pragmatic culture. I show that his work contains positive references to the influence that religious belief has had on the development of such a culture and argue that this pragmatic culture fits well with a non-realist understanding of religious belief.

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SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR IN PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF DURHAM

DEPARTMENT OF THEOLOGY

1996

2 8 MAY 1997

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

The subject matter of this thesis deals with an approach to religious belief that has met with a good deal of opposition, hostility and ridicule.[1] Nevertheless, John Hick claims that the concerns which separate religious realists like himself from religious non-realists like Don Cupitt highlight "the most fundamental of all issues in the philosophy of religion today."[2] The first three chapters of this thesis will consider the ways in which the non-realist side of this debate, associated with the work of Cupitt and other writers belonging to the 'Sea of Faith' network, has expressed itself. The remaining chapters will argue that an appropriate context for understanding the non-realist account of religious belief is provided by philosophical pragmatism. I shall defend this link between religious non-realism and pragmatism by highlighting in chapter five the religious ideas of John Dewey and the parallels between these ideas and those of the religious non-realists. I shall then defend this association of ideas further by arguing in chapters six and seven respectively that Richard Rorty's contemporary philosophical pragmatism does not necessarily lead to radical subjectivism nor to a dangerous political ideology as some interpreters have suggested. I shall further argue, in chapter eight, that his rejection of religious belief is not absolute. He has a use for religious belief and employs the term 'God' as backdrop against which he can present his own account of pragmatic culture. His tolerance of private religious belief and the positive picture he sometimes presents of the religious influence on the development of a pragmatic culture, makes it possible to argue that Rorty allows to such a culture a non-realist understanding of religious belief. In chapter nine I conclude by suggesting that a theological appropriation of Rorty's work is possible and that the consequences of such an

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[1] Witness the contentious nature of the debate around the publication of Anthony Freeman's *God In Us* and his consequent dismissal from the teaching post that he had held in the Church of England. A good summary of this debate is found in *Must a Priest Believe* a transcript of a BBC 'Heart of the Matter' programme transmitted on 19th September 1993.

[2] John Hick, 'Religious Realism and Non-realism: Defining the Issue' in Joseph Runzo (ed) *Is God Real?* (London: Macmillan, 1993) p. 3.

appropriation by 'Sea of Faith' religious non-realists would help to develop aspects of their own self-understanding as well as providing them with an argumentative resource which they can employ against alternative critical-realist approaches to religious belief.

The phrase 'Sea of Faith' is taken from Matthew Arnold's poem *Dover Beach*, in which he compares the ebbing tide with the slow withdraw of a religious faith centred upon a benevolent, purposeful creator. Without God, the poem concludes, the world, lacks peace, love, joy and purpose on its own account. But for the religious non-realist, this is not a cause of melancholic despair but an opportunity to see religion in a new light, as a way by which humans create the values that Arnold saw as going out with the tide. The main catalyst of the religious non-realism in Britain has been the work of Don Cupitt and its popularisation through the media of newsprint, radio and television. In particular his eight part television series the 'Sea of Faith', has led to the formation of the 'Sea of Faith Network'.[3] This network is an inter-denominational group of clergy and laity, which also includes humanists and members of faith traditions other than Christianity. Together they share a common desire to 'explore and promote religious faith as a human creation'.

The network is constituted by a diverse group of individuals. Its members express a variety of opinions about religious belief. Therefore, in chapter one, I shall discuss the work of some of the prominent writers in the network in order to narrow down the type of religious mentality that I take as being representative of the network's theological stance. Like Ludwig Feuerbach in the nineteenth century, they argue that the doctrines of religious belief, when understood in a literal or realist sense, can only be taken as a self-projection of human desires and ideals from which the community of believers are then ultimately alienated.[4] Unlike Feuerbach however, they do not believe that the rejection of a literal or realist understanding of

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[3] David Boulton, *A Reasonable Faith: Introducing the Sea of Faith Network* (Loughborough: Sea of Faith Network, 1996).

[4] Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, (1841), (E.T. George Eliot, New York: Harper and Row, 1957), pp. 12-14.

God necessarily undermines religious belief. They accept Feuerbach's analysis that "there can be no more in God than is supplied by religion," but would disagree when Feuerbach adds that "religion gives up its existence when it gives up the nature of God."[5] For the 'Sea of Faith' religious non-realists, (henceforth referred to simply as religious non-realists), we can continue to be religious and continue to employ a vocabulary about God even though God is recognised as a human creation. This is because religious truth, for the non-realist, pertains less to the status of that to which a word in a vocabulary refers and more to the status of the vocabulary itself, in terms of how it enables us to cope with the world in which we live. While Van A. Harvey argues that a concentration upon Feuerbach's later work would reveal a greater emphasis on religious belief as an affirmation of life and its contingencies and a desire for happiness in the face of nature's necessities rather than an emphasis upon the projection of our alienated essence,[6] I shall not, in this thesis, be concerned with Feuerbach's work. The reason for this is that while his theology is the precursor of many of the ideas of religious non-realism, the tenor of his thought is ultimately hostile to religious belief.[7] As Harvey notes, ultimately Feuerbach's is an atheistic critique of religion which wavers "between the view that religion is the wish to be free from the necessities of nature and the view that religion is the attempt of primitive peoples to control nature for the sake of happiness."[8] The first view suggests that religion derives from an innate human capacity to project out our alienated essence. The second view suggests "that religion is a product of ignorance and that people who have science have no need of religion."[9] Unlike Feuerbach, religious non-realists argue that religious belief is a desirable human creation that

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[5] ibid., pp. 15 and 17 respectively.

[6] Van A. Harvey, 'Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx' in Ninian Smart, et al (ed.) *Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West*, Vol. 1. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 291-328.

[7] Nevertheless, Harvey allows that privately Feuerbach "possessed a deep religious sensibility" ibid., p. 320. which is evidenced by a quotation taken from one of Feuerbach's letters that would be applauded by religious non-realists. Feuerbach notes:

> There is only one true reasonable religion. It is the joy of life, the delight, which will not permit itself to be interrupted, in whatever is positive in life.

Ludwig Feuerbach quoted by Harvey ibid., p. 320.

[8] ibid. p. 321.

[9] ibid., p. 321.

we should continue to explore and promote. While they understand God as a human creation they also regard spiritual and religious ideals as supreme human values which it would be de-humanising to abandon and which ought still to be promoted within accepted styles of Christian worship. However, this does not necessarily distinguish them from the main body of liberal theological thinking that has developed in the twentieth century. In an attempt to make this distinction, the 'Sea of Faith's' own document, *Notes For Newcomers*, contrasts non-realism with what it terms the semi-realism of liberalism. It notes that non-realism denies the meaningfulness of asserting a belief in a transcendent divine being. The *Notes For Newcomers* continues:

> This [non-realism] contrasts with semi-realism as understood in liberal theology where God may not be personal but is nonetheless an existing transcendent reality in which one may trust.[10]

Religious non-realists separate themselves from liberal theology by giving up any residual belief in the independent reality of God. This begins to help to define 'non-realism' but it is not a completely adequate definition.

According to Hick, it is unlikely that there are any "pan-realists who believe in the reality of fairies and snarks as well as of tables and electrons; and likewise few if any omni-non-realists, denying the objective reality of a material world and of other people as well as of gravity and God."[11] Realism and non-realism are not 'across the board' responses to all the objects which we could conceivably refer to. For example, Hick notes that certain religious realists like Richard Swinburne "are inclined to be realist in relation to at least some universal and to logical truths, while others (such as myself, [Hick] for example) are inclined to be non-realist at this point."[12] It is quite possible, Hick argues, to be realist about some objects of referral and non-realist about others. As he notes, Bishop Berkeley "was an idealist in

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[10] Sea of Faith, 'Notes for Newcomers', quoted by Stephen Mitchell, 'Creating an Identity' in David Hart (ed.), *Sea of Faith Network: 5 Years of Making Waves* (Loughborough: Sea of Faith Network, 1994), p. 13.

[11] John Hick, 'Religious Realism and Non-Realism' op. cit., p. 4.

[12] ibid., p. 4.

relation to the physical world and a realist in relation to God"[13] and we could add that Feuerbach was a realist in relation to the physical world and an 'idealist' in relation to God. Indeed, despite the valuable insights Feuerbach makes about the human creation of religious belief, he can be regarded as a religious realist in the sense that he claimed to have identified the "correct translation of the Christian religion ... into plain speech." "God," he asserts, "is the manifested inward nature, the expressed self of a man." Or again, he notes, "... what by an earlier religion was regarded as objective, is now recognised as subjective ... ."[14] Here the truth of religion, for Feuerbach, as Karl Barth notes, is an "anthropological realism."[15] Feuerbach's religious non-realism can be portrayed as a positivism about the human which is, according to Barth, "in its way as indemonstrable as revelation itself ... ."[16]

Further to Hick's account of this distinction within realism, the American pragmatist Richard Rorty suggests that since the nineteenth century realism has been conceived in two distinct ways. On the one hand there are the positivists like Bertrand Russell who offer an empirical account of realism and who insist that reality is bound in time and space with truth being the correspondence of our language and concepts to this reality. On the other hand there are the Platonists, the transcendental philosophers who insist "that some normative sentences about rationality and goodness correspond to something real, but invisible to natural science."[17] For positivists, talk of reality refers to the immanent material world. The Platonists, however, would wish to qualify what is meant by such talk to include principles and ideas beyond time and space which are inaccessible to sense experience.

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[13] ibid., p. 4.
[14] Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, op. cit., pp. xxxiii, 12-13 and 13.
[15] Karl Barth, 'An Introductory Essay' [E.T. James Luther Adams 1957.] in Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, op. cit., p. xxiv. Reproduced from *'Die Theologie und die Kirch,'* Vol. 2. 1928. pp. 212-239. Equally, Jack Verheyden argues that for Feuerbach, "the predicates of God are not only ideals but receive ontological actuality in the unfolding course of the human race". Verheyden, 'Ludwig Feuerbach's Philosophy of God' in Runzo *Is God Real?* op. cit. p. 36.
[16] Barth, 'An Introductory Essay' op. cit., p. xxviii.
[17] Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), p. xv.

For many realists, God is to be excluded from what counts as real. The existence or non-existence of God, they claim, makes no difference to the empirical world and so the question of God's reality is meaningless. The religious impulse is accounted for by reducing its myths and language to more empirically acceptable realities so, for example, "the meaning of a religious assertion is given by its use in expressing the asserter's intention to follow a specified policy of behaviour."[18] The 'religious' realist will reply to the atheistic realist that the existence of God does make a difference to the empirical world. Indeed, without the existence of God, the world would be unintelligible. As Hans Küng notes:

> God is the most real reality, active in all reality: everywhere and at all times providing the world and men with a final point of reference, a unity, value and meaning.[19]

Thus the dispute between realists and non-realists may, as often as not, be a dispute between these different types of realism.

While Hick is correct to note that the contemporary debate between religious realists and non-realists is not conducted on anti-religious grounds,[20] questions about which objects of discourse we should be realist about and which we should not introduces issues with which realists are fundamentally concerned but which non-realists will wish to drop altogether. Thus, contra Hick, an omni-non-realist position is possible, I will suggest, if we follow Richard Rorty and attempt to move beyond positivism and Platonism by dropping the fundamental concerns that both share; concerns that include the accuracy and correspondence of linguistic representations of the world (or of God) to the supposedly foundational reality that give such linguistic terms their meaning and reference.[21]

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[18] R.B. Braithwaite, 'An Empiricist's view of the Nature of Religious Belief' in Basil Mitchell (ed.), *The Philosophy of Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 80.

[19] Hans Küng, *On Being A Christian* (E.T. by E. Quinn, Glasgow: Fount, 1978), p. 295.

[20] Hick, 'Religious Realism and Non-Realism', op. cit. p. 8.

[21] Richard Rorty, 'Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism' in Ludwig Nagl and Richard Heinrich (ed.) *Wo steht die Analytische Philosophieheute?*, Weiner Reihe: Themen Der Philosophie, R. Oldenbourg Verlag, Munich, 1986. pp. 103-115.

In a book on the realist/non-realist debate, *Is God Real?*, Joseph Runzo defines religious realism. He writes that for realists "religious discourse is meaningful if it involves ontological reference to an external, self-subsistent God."[22] According to this view religious non-realism becomes the simple negation of the affirmation of the reality of God. As Runzo notes:

> ... realists hold that there exists a transcendent divine reality, independent *at least in part* of human thought, action or attitude. Religious non-realists deny this.[23]

Yet, he recognises that total independence would cut the realist off from the world, or from God, altogether. In order to avoid such a counter-intuitive suggestion the philosopher Mark Sacks, leaning heavily upon the ideas to be encountered in this thesis through the work of Richard Rorty, offers in his book *The World We Found*, a distinction between ontological dependence/independence and causal dependence/independence.[24] Items in the world will have a causal relation to our experience of them, and in this sense there will always be a relation of dependence between us and the world. The realist, Sacks notes, also apparently needs these items to be ontologically independent of experience as a necessary condition for asserting their reality.[25] Unfortunately it is not at all clear that asserting ontological independence has any practical value in determining the status of what is and what is not real. Sacks writes:

> We simply cannot conduct an enquiry in the absence of object-directed experience; and yet ... [realists] ... want to establish what is the case independent of it.[26]

The realist's own criteria of ontological independence, Sacks argues, is itself that which makes realism problematic.[27] Causal dependency is all we need when it

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[22] Runzo (ed.) *Is God Real?*, op. cit., p. 164.
[23] ibid., p. 1.
[24] Mark Sacks, *The World We Found: The Limits of Ontological Talk*, (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court 1989), pp. 7-11.
[25] ibid., p. 21.
[26] ibid., p. 23.
[27] ibid., pp. 23-24.

comes to talking about the various items we encounter in the world. The lack of determinacy that the realist's criteria exhibits is confirmed by Runzo's use of the ambiguous phrase, 'at least in part', when he talks of God's independent reality. Such a phrase immediately raises a question that has little or no agreed answer, namely; 'Which 'parts' of human experience are to be included and which excluded, when it comes to determining the independence of divine reality?' This question arises when we consider William Alston's account of religious non-realism. For Alston, Paul Tillich and John Hick (and by extension Runzo) are to be understood as offering versions of religious non-realism because they do not affirm a large enough 'part' of divine revelation as independent 'of human thought. action and attitude'.[28] With such disagreement among religious realists we might conclude, as Sacks does, that:

> [the] distinction between real objects and those which are not real would seem to be sharply dissipated once we realise that there are no satisfactory guidelines for its application.[29]

The notion of causal dependence will be developed later in the thesis in relation to Rorty's account of the work of Donald Davidson in order to outline an appropriate definition of non-realism.

To anticipate this, and in order to clarify the meaning of the term 'non-realism' from the beginning, it will be useful to draw a distinction between non-realism and anti-realism. These terms tend to be employed synonymously by religious non-realists.[30] Recently, however Cupitt has attempted to distinguish them. Anti-realism, Cupitt suggests is a paradoxical position, the "contradictory of realism, its straight antithesis."[31] Non-realism, on the other hand, is not concerned with

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[28] William P. Alston, 'Realism and the Christian Faith', in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 38. 1995. pp. 37-60.

[29] Sacks, *The World We Found*, op. cit., p. 22.

[30] Don Cupitt does make at least two attempts to distinguish anti-realism from non-realism in *Creation out of Nothing*, (London: SCM Press, 1990) pp. 92-105 and *The Last Philosophy*, (London: SCM Press, 1995), pp. 148-149, Although the latter attempt is more successful than the former, it is not followed through or developed systematically.

[31] Cupitt, *The Last Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 148.

"disconcerting paradoxes," but is still defined by him as "the contrary of realism."[32] This thesis accepts the definition which Cupitt offers of anti-realism and will follow Rorty in seeing it as implicitly sharing the same foundational concerns of realism.[33] However, non-realism is defined more positively not by *opposing* it to realist concerns but by *abandoning* these concerns altogether. It will align itself with pragmatism in regarding our common sense intuitions about the external world as satisfied by a relation of causal dependency without the ontological independence over which realists dispute with each other and with anti-realists and over which theists often dispute with atheists. A pragmatic religious non-realism will want to clear away such disputes as unhelpful to the practices that constitute our religious activity. Such activity will be experienced in terms of its practical effects and its success will be judged on the extent to which it enables us to cope with the world in which we live. Religious non-realism will not posit the existence of God independent of, or antecedent to, the humanly created vocabularies of religious faith and so will regard both the affirmation and the negation of such an entity as a non-issue.

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[32] ibid., p. 149.

[33] Richard Rorty, *Objectivity,Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 1-17.

CHAPTER ONE

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE RELIGIOUS NON-REALISM OF THE 'SEA OF FAITH' THEOLOGIANS

1 1.Introduction:

My aim in this first chapter will be to outline the particular affirmation of religious belief and practice found in the writings of Christian non-realists belonging to the 'Sea of Faith network'. I shall highlight their claim that religion should now be explored and promoted as a human creation and their rejection of atheism. I shall emphasise their recognition of the usefulness of religious belief and practice and the sense of liberation that they feel at having adopted a non-realist account of religious belief.

1.2. Religion As a Human Creation:

Religious non-realists, such as Anthony Freeman, David Hart, Hugh Dawes, Graham Shaw, Stephen Mitchell and Don Cupitt, share with religious critical realists the idea that religious belief is, and always has been, a human creation. For the religious critical realist, religious beliefs "are the human creations of those who somehow have opened themselves to the ever-calling, ever-real realm of the spirit, to that God-presence that lives at the heart of the universe..."[1] Religious critical realists like Bishop Jack Spong, who addressed the eighth 'Sea of Faith' annual conference in 1995 with these words, believe that there *is* a real God beyond all our human constructions of the divine, a God of surprise that breaks open all our human symbols for God.[2] For the non-realist however, this is just one more human strategy by which we continue to avoid the demand to take full responsibility for our religious creativity. For these non-realists there is something of a practical imperative about this demand; the credibility of religion, and its future affectivity,

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[1] Jack Spong, 'Religion as a Human Creation?' in *Sea of Faith Magazine* Vol. 23. 1995.p. 12.
[2] It should be noted that there is a constituency within the 'Sea of Faith' that finds such a critical realist account of the human creation of religious belief appealing.

requires that we consciously assert our own responsibility for our own religious creativity. As Graham Shaw notes in his book *God In Our Hands*:

> the human origins of religious belief and the continuing human creativity in their development ... [has] ... to be honestly acknowledged, and indeed the future of religion depends upon this being done.[3]

For religious non-realists, to take full responsibility for our religious creativity, rather than relying on notions such as "the wordless wonder of that [divine] reality,"[4] is to presage a radical alternative to both conservative and liberal theology. This radical alternative is humble enough not to claim any final, foundational or absolute truth even for some mysterious reality beyond words. It sees religious belief as always in transition and constituted by the historical contingencies that constitute human life. To suggest that religious doctrine, formulated in this context, can act as a criteria for judging genuine religious, or indeed Christian, affiliation because they somehow represent truths built up within a religious tradition through encounter with, rational reflection about and prayerful devotion towards some ineffable source which these encounters, reflections and prayers make known is, according to non-realists, to place temporary historical, cultural and personal road-blocks upon human spiritual development and hinder those genuine human encounters, reflections and prayers to which realists refer and which constitute the religious dimension of experience. Thus in his book, *God In Us*, Anthony Freeman argues that religious belief requires a shift of emphasis "from heaven to earth, from the next world to this one, and from dogma to spirituality and ethics."[5] This means, for example, that belief in eternal life as something lived in a heavenly realm, needs to be re-defined in terms of the quality, meaning and purpose of life here and now.[6] The use of religious language about God becomes a means by which we point to, and further, our most significant human values. For Christian non-realists, religious people

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[3] Graham Shaw, *God in Our Hands*, (London: SCM Press, 1987), p. xiv.
[4] Spong, op cit., p. 12.
[5] Anthony Freeman, *God in Us*, (London, SCM Press, 1993), p. 29.
[6] ibid., p. 69.

should no longer feel the need to claim that God is independent of human creativity.[7] Freeman argues that faithfulness to the 'Declaration of Assent' means expressing his Christian belief in non-realist terms, for only in this way may the gospel be proclaimed afresh to our generation.[8] Both religious conservatives and theological liberals, according to Freeman fail to take up the challenge of modernity.

Conservatives build an artificial fantasy world cut off from everyday life. They require the acceptance of beliefs about God's reality, life after death, and miracles which, while once impressive human creations, have now become outworn. Freeman likens religious conservatives to people who are able to tell the time not because they have a watch but because someone once wrote it down for them.[9] Our understanding of the world changes and so must our understanding of religious belief. Science, philosophy and sociology, according to Freeman, no longer take account of a realist God in their methodology and nor do the majority of people in their everyday lives. A God who intervenes, a God who is an independent super person who can produce effects in this world, is no longer an option for a living religious faith. According to Freeman, not only is a realist conception of God incredible and thus unlikely to convince people today, it is also religiously unattractive. It projects a picture of God with little relevance to today's world and then proceeds to present this picture as if it were always independent of human projections. Then, in order to protect this supposed independence, the conservative requires us to divorce the reality of God from how we understand that reality's relation to the world. Bishop Richard Harries, for example, wishes to make this distinction. In his response to Freeman's book, Harries asserts both God's reality and God's relationality with the world in such a way as to suggest their independence

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[7] ibid., p. 25.

[8] ibid., pp. 73, 83. The 'declaration of assent' being a statement of loyalty to the tradition of the church and its promotion in a contemporary context. It is affirmed by clergy of the Church of England at their ordination.

[9] For Freeman, "To believe in a supernatural all-powerful interventionist God when the rest of the world has abandoned that belief, is not the same thing as having believed in such a God when it was the generally accepted world view." ibid., p. 8.

from each other.[10] "We have to distinguish," writes Harries, "questions about God from questions about how God relates to the world." He continues:

> God could still be very much there, holding all things in existence, enfolding all things with his love and filling all things with his spirit but may nevertheless deliberately not intervene,... .[11]

The non-realist would reply that such a distinction makes no sense: God's reality is only known in its relation to us and this relation for the non-realist, is always something we construct. 'Holding', 'enfolding', 'loving', 'filling' and 'deliberating' all seem very much like terms of relational involvement, if not miraculous intervention.

Freeman agrees with Harries that "religious faith is natural to us as human beings."[12] But while Harries opens the door to scepticism by asserting the independence of God's reality from God's relation to us,[13] Freeman is able to assert a new religious certainty. He writes, "Only when I had accepted that 'I do not believe in God' (my old [realist] God) was I free to discover how with integrity I could still say 'I believe in God' (understood in a new way)."[14] For the Christian non-realist the religious impulse does not require proof of its validity. For them, we might say, if we choose to interpret events in our lives in terms of a humanly created 'religious' vocabulary we can assert that God is constantly guiding the world and enfolding us in divine love with a certainty that no realist dualism can supply. The reality of God, God's relation to the world and the human religious imagination cannot be separated in the way the conservatives require in order to guarantee God's independence of human construction. A similar point is well summarised by Shaw. He writes:

> At the heart of a responsible religion is the recognition that my portrayal of God represents choices that I have made. .... There is no compelling God who exists to impose such choices upon us. If I am religious it is because I want to be. It is a way of life and an attitude to life which attracts and fascinates me. I sense within it unique opportunities.[15]

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[10] Richard Harries, *The Real God* (London: Mowbray, 1994), pp. 9-12..
[11] ibid., p. 9.(Both quotes)
[12] ibid., p. 20.
[13] ibid., pp. 18-19.
[14] Freeman, *God in Us*, op. cit., p. 11.
[15] Shaw, *God in Our Hands*, op. cit., pp. 177-178.

For Shaw, as for other religious non-realists, "it is possible for the religious person to recognise his responsibility for his God and yet to continue to believe in God..."[16] A non-realist understanding of God appears more religiously attractive than the God of the conservative religious realist because it is seen to be more effective in providing for the needs of a responsible, autonomously chosen faith.

According to Freeman, liberal theology fares no better than conservative theology. Liberal theology, he suggests lives a schizophrenic existence because it allows that religion is a human product and accepts a naturalistic account of life, yet it still wishes to see a real God working in, and through, these human products and natural processes. Thus in this liberal mode, writes Freeman:

> ... official church reports spend many pages loyally examining the biblical evidence and then effectively ignoring it when it comes to making recommendations. It seems impossible for liberal theology to avoid looking wishy-washy and defensive.[17]

While religious non-realists owe much to liberal theology,[18] they deny the possibility of accommodating a realist God to modern knowledge. For example, while David Hart accepts both that religious belief must not be "totally at variance with the general scientific and empirical conditions of late twentieth century Western humankind,"[19] and also that each generation discovers Christ from within "the crucible of their own experience,"[20] both defining characteristics of liberal theology,[21] he does not wish to see theological liberalism reinstated. He refers to the failure of liberalism by quoting favourably from Thomas Mann's novel *Doctor*

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[16] ibid., p. 145.

[17] Freeman, *God in Us*, op. cit., p. 9.

[18] For example Hugh Dawes describes his book as a liberal essay. Hugh Dawes, *Freeing the Faith*, (London: SPCK, 1992), p. 2.

[19] David Hart, *Faith in Doubt*, (London: Mowbrays, 1993) ,p. 18.

[20] ibid., p. 15.

[21] Along with accommodation "to modern experience, world views and criteria," David Ford indicates that liberal theology stresses "religious experience, historical consciousness, and the need for freedom from traditional dogma..." David Ford, (ed) *The Modern Theologians Volume II* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 309. In these terms 'Sea of Faith' non-realism does continue many themes from liberal theology though it abandons the type of accommodationism that leads to the theological schizophrenia which Freeman identifies.

Faustus. Here liberal theology is regarded as a contradiction in terms. Quoting Mann, Hart writes that liberal theology posits:

> A proponent of culture, ready to adapt itself to the ideals of bourgeois society, as it is, it degrades the religious to a function of the human; the ecstatic and paradoxical elements of the religious genius it waters down to an ethical progressiveness. ... [L]iberal theology ... is weak, for its moralism and humanism lack insight into the demonic character of human existence, cultured indeed it is, but shallow; of the true understanding of human nature and the tragic nature of life the conservative tradition has at bottom preserved far more; for that very reason it has a profounder, more significant relation to culture... .[22]

Unlike liberal theology, non-realism does not aim to accommodate the divine to the human. Rather, the modernising and experiential nature of 'Sea of Faith' religiosity and its desire to be free of traditional dogmas, aims at the creation of a radical theological perspective on the world which requires us to take full responsibility for our religious creativity. For non-realists, religion *is* 'a function of the human' rather than an accommodation of something extra-human to the human. In the light of theological changes over the last few hundred years, Freeman writes:

> Liberals, while happy to learn more of our religious origins and development, have still held that behind the human activity lies the guiding hand of a supernatural God. ... Radicals say that we do not need to bring in the supernatural at all. ... To invoke the supernatural is unnecessary, because we can explain all aspects of our life without it. It is also dangerous, because it leads to our claiming supernatural and indeed divine authority for things which are in truth only human.[23]

For non-realists, accepting religious belief as a human creation requires us to cease to expect religious truths to be anything other than human and conventional. They would have us abandon any idea that religious belief conveys some extra-human absolute or final truth. Indeed, Graham Shaw argues that any such absolute truth is inimical to religion and a perversion of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This gospel is not a matter of submission to a pre-ordained authority but rather points to

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[22] Thomas Mann, *'Doctor Faustus'* quoted in Hart, op. cit., pp. 22-23.
[23] Freeman, *God in Us*, op. cit., p. 10.

possibilities that are up to us to realise.[24] "The only privilege it bestows," writes Shaw, "is the opportunity to exercise our freedom and to achieve our peace."[25] This opportunity is lost if we see the gospel as providing absolute guiding truths, for then we cease to take full responsibility for our religious convictions.[26]

Shaw recognises that there is a danger that this approach is prone to the charge of subjectivism, but he argues that such subjectivism is often required in order to break free from a Christian community beguiled by claims about ultimate truth, claims which are often defended merely by appeal to paradox, mystery or providence; such cloaks of religious authority stifle genuine religious freedom. For Shaw, understanding religion as a human creation means that we are less able to manipulate other people through the use of such cloaks.[27] "Accountability to others," writes Shaw, "is much more difficult to manipulate than accountability to the unseen God."[28] It is an effective block to rampant subjectivism.[29]

According to Hugh Dawes, in his book *Freeing the Faith*, the claim to be in possession of religious absolutes restricts Christian renewal by making full church membership appear possible only if a certain collection of dogmas and practices are

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[24] For Shaw "holiness is not a matter of submission to authority, but of exercising freedom. The authoritarian note in scripture, which cannot be ignored, is only a foil to the invitation to freedom." Graham Shaw, *The Cost of Authority* (London: SCM. Press, 1983) p. 274.
[25] ibid., p. 275.
[26] Shaw writes:
> So long as the reader [of scripture] is expected to arrive at some prejudged conclusion, he will stand in awe of his guide. ... The benefit of reading scripture does not lie in arriving at a particular set of conclusions, but in the nature of the exercise. It is the stimulus to use our minds, to trust our judgment, to respond with our emotions and moral vision. In that exercise and in no other way scripture conveys its benefits to the reader. ... [I]t's value lies not in possessing one privileged meaning, but in wrestling with its perplexities. The disciple has no other reward apart from the struggle.
ibid., p. 276.
[27] ibid., pp. 277-279.
[28] Shaw, *God in Our Hands*, op. cit., p. 178.
[29] Such accountability, Hart argues, requires a recognition of religious pluralism without imposing on different religious faiths some universal or absolute category which they must all share. Hart notes:
> We do not have to discover a set of common characteristics between a collection of paintings to appreciate their individual and collective contribution to our human vision of the world. By walking around the gallery and appreciating them each and all, we enlarge our total vision, but we do not need to convince ourselves or anyone else that there is only one Reality the individual artists are attempting to portray on their canvases.
David A. Hart, *One Faith?*, (London: Mowbrays, 1995) p. 146.

wholeheartedly accepted.[30] When the church fails to see the human handiwork behind its beliefs and practices at least three disastrous consequences arise.[31] First, the absolutisation of certain values may lead to the absolutisation of specific social and economic conditions associated with a particular period of history. Second, a deontological legalism may follow as past answers to ethical issues get misapplied to contemporary moral dilemmas.[32] Third, the church itself may increasingly come to look, from the outside, like an esoteric club with outdated rituals and beliefs which are only meaningful to a dwindling minority.[33] Like Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations,* the Church, with its traditional dogmas and practices, is seen from outside as inhabiting a decaying, cobweb covered and moth-eaten environment where time has stood still.[34] If the church were to recognise religion as a human creation designed by us to meet our needs, it would find it easier to share in those important events which surround the lives of ordinary people today. By abandoning ritual purity or doctrinal correctness the church may discover its best means of renewal.[35]

Dawes notes that like non-realists, liberals concerned about the future of the Church and Christian belief also view the adherence to absolutes with a degree of suspicion. For example he quotes Maurice Wiles' *Faith and the Mystery of God* as follows:

> The position in which we find ourselves is one which seems to call at the same time for *an absoluteness of commitment and a recognition of the limitations of our own perspective,* both as individuals and as the Christian Community. Do without the first and there is a crippling loss of religious vitality; do without the second and there is a danger not merely of absolutizing our own perspective but of religious fanaticism as well.[36]

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[30] Dawes, *Freeing the Faith*, op. cit., pp. 10-20, 33.
[31] ibid., pp. 72.ff.
[32] ibid., pp. 72-74.
[33] ibid., pp. 13-15.
[34] ibid., p. 10.
[35] ibid., p. 14.
[36] Maurice Wiles, *Faith and the Mystery of God,* (London: SCM Press, 1982), p. 4 quoted in Dawes, op. cit., p. 118 (Dawes' italics).

For Dawes, *absoluteness of commitment* can be affirmed if it means a commitment to a radical, open and non-realist Christianity which sees doubt and questions as an asset rather than as a drawback. Such an open Christianity will find guidance from its tradition while admitting that its past is past; it will recognise the importance of the present moment and use its past in new and creative ways.[37] The difference between liberals like Wiles and non-realists like Dawes or Hart is that whereas for Wiles religious belief is "perspectival, parabolic and provisional"[38] because there is "that which cannot be directly spoken;"[39] non-realists believe that there is no "non-perspectival or absolute religious position"[40] because all such positions are our own human creations. Whereas the liberal still claims some access, however indirect, to an ultimate, final and absolute truth,[41] the non-realist will make no such claim. For Freeman, there is neither an absolute entity like God out there independent of our religious creativity, nor "absolute existing-out-there values such as peace, joy, goodness, beauty, love etc."[42] Such values, which are highlighted within the Christian tradition are our own creations and our religious vocabularies are not so much exhibiting a necessary "degree of indirectness"[43] but are expressing our commitment to those ideal values at the same time as they produce our picture of God.[44] A notion such as 'indirectness' is again seen by non-realists as representing a human strategy designed to enable us to escape admitting responsibility for our own religious creativity.

One problem for this non-realist approach might be that it risks encouraging moral relativism, but Freeman denies the relevance of this charge. He writes:

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[37] Dawes, *Freeing the Faith*, ibid., p. 119.
[38] Maurice Wiles, *Christian Theology and Inter-religious Dialogue*, (London: SCM Press, 1992) p. 64.
[39] Wiles, *Faith and the Mystery of God*, op. cit., p18.
[40] Hart, *Faith in Doubt*, op cit., p. 6.
[41] Wiles, *Christian Theology and Inter-religious Dialogue*, op. cit., pp. 79-80.
[42] Freeman, *God in Us*, op. cit., p. 70.
[43] Wiles, *Christian Theology and Inter-religious Dialogue*, op. cit., p. 65.
[44] Anthony Freeman, 'Theology and the Church' in *Modern Believing*, Vol. 35. 1994. p. 39.

> [Our] values were human even when they were believed to be eternal truths. It is human beings making human judgments who have given Hitler the thumbs down and Mother Teresa the thumbs up.[45]

Such judgements are liable to change, but as Freeman puts it, "If we know that all our values are human, it ought to make us a little more modest in our insistence on them."[46] Viewing religion as a human creation means living with and valuing change in matters of religious belief. As Shaw puts it, "Religion does not represent a continent awaiting discovery, it is rather an opportunity to be realized, and which like human art lives by being realized ever anew."[47] For non-realists, the pictures we create of God are fallible because they are historically contingent, dependent upon the demands and requirements of different human attitudes and practices as these arise and decline over time in relation to our ever changing human circumstances and purposes. For Freeman, accepting historicism means that each reinterpretation of Christian faith is "[n]ot just a different interpretation of the same essential core, but a different faith."[48] There are no timeless truths about God.[49] He writes:

> For me, this eternally true thing called 'the faith' is an illusion, a useful fiction to affirm our desire to stand in line with the great Christian heroes of the past. ... Every generation creates its own faith ... The faith of each century is different. Pretending that they are the same only gives ammunition to those forces within and outside the church which oppose change and innovation.[50]

Non-realists, then, value change and see it as part of the process by which Christianity is able to renew itself in each generation.[51] By valuing and promoting such change they hope to ensure that religion remains a relevant feature of people's lives.[52] Only a radical, non-realist account of Christian belief which accepts God as

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[45] Freeman, *God in Us*, op. cit., p. 70.

[46] ibid., p. 71.

[47] Shaw,. *God in Our Hands*, op. cit., p. 179.

[48] Freeman, *God in Us*, op. cit., p. 75.

[49] ibid., pp. 8, 28, 80.

[50] ibid., p. 77. By denying that Christian faith has an essential core, Freeman again displays the radical rather than the liberal orientation of 'Sea of Faith non-realism.

[51] Hart, for example, believes that a non-realist mentality is well suited to come to terms with the theological changes that are suggested by Feminist theology. See Hart, *Faith in Doubt*, op cit., p. 6.

[52] Freeman, *God in Us*, op. cit., p. 81.

a human creation is religiously attractive in today's world. By accepting a non-realist understanding of God, Freeman believes, "the church will be able to take up its rightful place in the creative area of life."[53]

Spiritual liberation is often seen by the proponents of religious non-realism to be a fruit of accepting this account of religious belief. For example, Hart describes his realisation of a non-realist understanding of religious belief as "a moment of pure joy"[54] and Freeman finds the innovation toward non-realism to be a liberation from what he sees as both the oppressive demands of traditional realist belief, and from the repression of human creativity and individuality which that belief often engendered in its followers.[55] This sense of liberation is keenly expressed in Freeman's description of his acceptance of Christian non-realism as a 'conversion experience'. He writes:

> ... it was not a conversion from unbelief to faith, but from a Christianity which had become oppressive to one which brought a glorious sense of freedom and joy. This freedom came when I accepted that I did not believe in God as a traditionally understood. That was a kind of trigger which released me to find a new meaning in the word God.[56]

For Freeman, part of the liberating experience of accepting a non-realist account of God, is the healthy disrespect that it encourages toward hierarchical conceptions of authority. It enables him to offer new interpretations of Christian faith without making Christianity have to conform to either credal of scriptural authority.[57] Such authorities should be regarded as replaceable human rules and guidelines. To claim divine authority for them leads to abuse of power and an unhelpful conservatism.[58]

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[53] ibid., p. 83.

[54] Hart, *Faith in Doubt*, ibid., p. 7.

[55] This sense of liberation is largely a personal matter which may be effected by anxiety about the loss of one's livelihood in the context of a Church willing to dismiss those who hold to a non-realist Christian faith. However, the sense of liberation involved here is more than a sense of being able to follow one's conscience against the dictates of authority, it is fundamentally a sense of liberation from the encrustation of dogma that has hampered the ongoing human spiritual pilgrimage.

[56] Freeman, *God in Us*, op. cit., p. 11.

[57] ibid., p. 75.

[58] ibid., p. 82.

Thus for Freeman, "Taking the non-existence of a supernatural God as our working hypothesis will lead to a more open and democratic form of church life."[59]

This sense of liberation also features strongly in the work of Graham Shaw. He builds up a picture of the oppressive realist God that emerges from within the practices and traditions of biblical religion. For him, to be liberated from the oppressive consequences of belief in the biblical God requires us to recognise the human responsibility for this, or any, God. By attributing qualities of omniscience and providence to God, and understanding God through the metaphors of 'judge' and 'king', 'Lord of history' and 'creator of the universe', religious leaders who evoke such a God end up by taking for themselves the power invested in that God and claim to speak in that God's name, while declining responsibility for the consequences that follow from the actions carried out in the name of that God.[60] With such a picture, God's all-seeing eye is usually enough to keep most believers in line with the rules imposed by the religious elite. It insures the realist's system of religious control and confirms that within such a system "the only human initiative and responsibility which are allowed are sin and guilt."[61] A non-realist conception of God, however, requires us to take and acknowledge full responsibility for every aspect of our faith including the God we create.

According to Shaw, Jesus offers a way of liberation from the God of power because he accepted full responsibility for the God of peace which he evoked in his life and death.[62] To follow Jesus, to take full responsibility for our religious faith, is

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[59] ibid., pp. 82-83.

[60] Shaw writes:

> The religious leader declines any responsibility and attributes all to God. In reality he contributes far more than he realizes or acknowledges to that God. His assent, his interpretation of the religious tradition, is what gives that God vitality. He tells himself of course that he believes and behaves as he does because God exists. It is the existence of God, which absolves him of responsibility. If such a God does not exist, then it is the religious leaders who have to accept full responsibility for the conflicts they create in his name.

Shaw, *God in Our Hands*, op. cit., p. 51. According to Shaw, such conflicts are the result of unbalanced social relations that arise from the religious fantasies of power and control which Shaw associates with the God of realism and which he believes the gospel message of freedom and peace has brought into question.

[61] ibid., pp. 50-51.

[62] ibid., pp. 133-136.

to be in a position where we no longer manipulate and control others by appealling to the God we evoke. It is to be liberated from the religious fantasies of power dreamt of by the religious elite.. The goodness of the God Jesus evoked is as transcendent as the cross was to those who stood at its foot, but this is a transcendence that describes the moral difference between the realist God of power and the non-realist God of peace.[63] The God of peace and grace, who displays his weakness on the cross points us, Shaw argues, to a more responsible and less repressive faith. Despite the attempt of the Gospel writers and St. Paul to rehabilitate the realist God through evasive fantasies of power expressed in terms of providence and resurrection, "our task as Christians today," writes Shaw, " is to learn to affirm the crucified Christ without resort to those evasions of his story"[64] To own responsibility for our God is to liberate ourselves from the oppressive consequences which Shaw believes to be inextricably linked with belief in a realist God. Shaw concludes:

> I ... fully recognize my responsibility for my God and yet believe that only in the use of such language, in which I address God and discover myself in speaking to him, can I approach a self-knowledge which is both honest and sustainable.[65]

1.3. The Rejection of Atheism:

The fact that Freeman and Shaw still affirm and value belief in God, understood in non-realist terms, indicates an important concern of religious non-realism Alongside its commitment to the view that religion is a human creation it asserts with equal candour its opposition to atheism. According to Freeman it is 'unfair' to represent the Christian non-realist self understanding as atheistic.[66] 'Sea of Faith' non-realists may appear to share a common agenda with atheists when they assert that:

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[63] ibid., chap. 1 and 4.
[64] ibid., p. 20.
[65] ibid., p. 145.
[66] ibid., p 25.

> ... there is nothing beyond or outside human beings, neither 'God' nor some notion like 'Ultimate Reality' that gives life meaning and purpose.[67]

But in fact, they argue, that it is precisely because humans have always given life meaning and purpose through the use of religious ideas, by employing a religious vocabulary and by engaging in religious practices that we should not succumb to an atheistic construction of reality. As Freeman writes:

> We [non-realists] still find value in the Christian vocabulary, including the word God, and in the Christian stories, especially those of Jesus. A secular humanist, an atheist, has no place for such things.[68]

Thus, unlike some contributors to the 'death of God' movement who wanted to keep Christianity in terms of the example and teaching of Christ but not its metaphysics,[69] non-realists wish to maintain belief in a God who acts in and through human creativity. In religion, they argue, human beings affirm life's meaning and value by employing a language about God. While, according to Shaw, belief in an all powerful realist God "is at best mistaken and at worst deceit,"[70] he notes that:

> Once we have recognised that all religion is man-made, instead of repudiating it with a misplaced sense of disappointment, we might still choose to affirm religious activity as something which enriches our lives and which like other forms of art is inextricably intertwined with human creativity and freedom. ... [I]t must be something of an embarrassment to all but the most complacent atheist that so much of man's social organisation and artistic achievement has been associated with religion.[71]

According to Shaw what non-realists learn from atheists, like Bertrand Russell and J.L. Mackie, is that the ruse of an objective God, whose reality we unconsciously project in order to receive in return a forceful controlling power over us, has now come to an end. What the atheist tells us is that we can do away with the realist God of power. But, for Shaw, this termination of the God of power was anticipated in the life and death of Jesus. Shaw writes:

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[67] Sea of Faith, 'Notes for Newcomers' quote by Stephen Mitchell, 'Creating an Identity' in David Hart (ed.) *Sea of Faith Network: 5 Years of Making Waves*, (Loughborough: Sea of Faith Network, 1994), p. 13.

[68] Freeman, *God in Us*, op. cit., p. 28.

[69] Alistair Kee, *The Way of Transcendence*, (London: SCM Press, 1971), pp. 69-70.

[70] Shaw, *God in Our Hands*, op. cit., p. 153.

[71] ibid., pp. xiv-xv.

> He [Jesus] made his challenge not as an atheist, but in the name of his God. The response he encountered rules out the notion that it was therefore less radical than that of the modern atheist. Indeed despite its negative critique of metaphysical theology, modern atheism remains trapped in the categories of the religions of power which it purports to attack. ... Its preoccupation with the existence and objectivity of God is a perverse acknowledgement of the religious tradition it wishes to overthrow.[72]

Thus for the non-realist, Shaw continues:

> Accepting much of the atheists' argument does not threaten the heart of Christianity, rather it impels religious people to rediscover it.[73]

The heart of Christianity, according to Shaw, is prayer and practice which takes its inspiration from the God of peace and grace for whom Jesus took full responsibility.[74] The, atheist's critique should be neither ignored nor regretted since it "returns Christians to the foot of the cross"[75] However, taking responsibility for the God we evoke, does not mean submitting to atheism. Shaw writes:

> The atheist assumes that in once revealing our creativity in our religion, he has destroyed it; but the Christian has no reason to be surprised or abashed that he is responsible for his God. Instead he has only to learn to say with confidence and humility, 'My Father and I are one' (John 10.30).[76]

Most Christian non-realists, therefore, are not claiming to offer religion without God They recognise that in taking responsibility for our God we are able, in Freeman's words, to "benefit from using God religiously, without believing in him as an objective and active supernatural person."[77]

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[72] ibid., pp. 169-170.
[73] ibid., p. 170.
[74] ibid., pp. 172-176.
[75] ibid., p. 170.
[76] ibid., p. 177.
[77] Freeman, *God in Us*, op. cit., p. 24. The paucity of rigorous argument in Freeman's book should not blind us to the main points that he and other Christian non-realists are making , namely, that language about God has a place and a central one at that within non-realist theology and that such theology offers the best hope for religious renewal in a secular culture. It offers for Freeman, "the most authentic form of Christianity which can be held today." ibid., p7.

1.4. A Practical Orientation:

This last point adumbrates a further significant aspect that emerges when the 'Sea of Faith' non-realists present their understanding of religious belief, namely, orientation around practice. They suggest that a religious vocabulary will need nothing more to sustain it than those practices in which it is found to be useful and that discussion about God, and worship to God will remain central aspects of this vocabulary. As Shaw writes:

> ... the only reality of God lies in the *use* of that word by human beings. It does not refer to some supernatural or mysterious or special being; it is instead a word of the creative imagination by which we construct first in imagination and ultimately in *reality* a new and different world.[78]

Religious beliefs have real effect in the practical world of everyday life. In this pragmatic context, religious experiences are seen by non-realists as experiences we humans have in relation to the God we create and then recreate in the light of these experiences so that, according to Freeman we are "using God pragmatically ... [rather] ... than thinking about him theoretically."[79] Equally, the arguments for the existence of God are seen by non-realists as attempts by a previous generation of Christians to create a language about God in terms which were useful to human purposes that these arguments now fail to fulfil. We can now construct our God in terms useful to our current purposes and in ways which are no longer dictated by the methodological procedures of the traditional proofs.[80] This is not because the proofs can be shown to be false but because they are no longer religiously useful. Religion should not now be concerned with dubious questions of proof but rather should be concerned, in Freeman's words, with the "human attempt to make sense of the human predicament."[81] For Christian non-realists the pragmatic value of having a vocabulary about God rests in what it enables us to do. For them, such a vocabulary enables us to cope with the world we live in by encouraging us to choose

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[78] Shaw, *The Cost of Authority* op. cit., p. 282. (My italics).
[79] Freeman, *God in Us*, op. cit., p. 23.
[80] ibid., pp. 16-18.
[81] ibid., p. 81.

to see our lives in terms of meaning and purpose despite what evidence there may be to the contrary. As Hart puts it, religious stories help to "illuminate our situation."[82] They also help to transform it. As Shaw notes, the significance of a vocabulary about God "is uniquely precious." He adds:

> ... it is an integral part of human freedom, a means by which we transcend the given and transform ourselves and the world.[83]

According to Shaw, this transformative function enables us to transcend the given by means of imaginative detachment. This allows us to challenge and subvert existing structures of human power and authority. It calls us to action and "facilitates the creative redescription of reality."[84]

In *Faith In Doubt*, Hart argues that the realist conception of God is of no further religious use to us.[85] Nevertheless, we can still utilise a traditional religious vocabulary. The usefulness of a vocabulary about God is sustained by the practices of prayer and worship. He writes:

> religious non-realists believe that the traditional language of God is the most helpful matrix for human beings to relate and connect with the deepest parts of themselves, and that this language if often useful in discovering the workings of the parts of ourselves that seem outside the scope of our rational control.[86]

Affirming Christian belief and practice as a means of "speaking about ourselves, and discovering the roots of our personality and interpersonal communication,"[87] Hart offers a non-realist account of Christian worship. He writes:

> ... liturgies can give us a right sense of ourselves in our human context, and loving perceptions of the others with whom we are inextricably bound through our families and our society .... [O]ur worship prepares us for lives of worthiness; liturgy is the text for full commitment to the panoply of human values, and gathering together in prayer is a way of

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[82] Hart, *Faith in Doubt*, op cit., p. 138.
[83] Shaw, *The Cost of Authority*, op. cit., p. 282.
[84] ibid., p. 283. Divorced from action, Shaw asserts, imaginative constructions can only lead to religious fantasy.
[85] Hart, *Faith in Doubt*, op. cit., p. 1.
[86] ibid., p. 20.
[87] ibid., pp. 21-22.

> saying with others: ... 'let us give each other the chance not to exploit and injure but to work with and build up'.[88]

The many different styles of praise and forms of worship mean that unlike doctrine, liturgy is dynamic, ever changing and undogmatic, permitting "spontaneity and free expression".[89] There is, for Hart, no question of the existence of God 'out there' to whom our worship is directed. For according to Hart, God is "nothing more or less than the human creation and articulation of the area of our deepest concern."[90] With this view of God, our religious worship constitutes the activity of a community of 'soul-friends' who "give expression together in symbolic form to our deepest spiritual yearnings and our human longing for some understanding of the ... [universe]."[91] Both Freeman and Dawes express similar points about worship.[92] For Freeman, Christian worship is an extremely useful human activity which provides discipline and stability in life and a sense of belonging and fellowship, not only with one's contemporaries, but also with past generations of Christians.[93] For him, while prayer and worship "is not about talking to an invisible supernatural being...[but] about stillness and recollection and aligning one's will and one's actions with one's highest values,"[94] he believes that we can still utilise reference to 'God' by understanding prayer and worship "as a process of bringing to bear on our world and our life those values which we call God."[95] Like Hart and Dawes, he acknowledges that the closure of belief in the traditional realist conception of God makes little difference to the non-realist's approach to worship and prayer. As Hart put it:

> Just as we do not need to live and dress in Elizabethan costume to attend and learn from a Shakespearean play, so it is not necessary to have a realist mentality or to believe in a Father-God 'out there' to benefit from participation in sacramental liturgy.[96]

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[88] ibid., pp. 92-93.
[89] ibid., p. 91.
[90] ibid., p. 69.
[91] ibid., pp. 69-70.
[92] Freeman, *God in Us*, op. cit., p. 52 and Dawes *Freeing the Faith*, op. cit., pp. 106-108.
[93] Freeman, *God in Us*, op. cit., pp. 52-53.
[94] ibid., p. 57.
[95] ibid., p. 57.
[96] Hart, *Faith in Doubt*, op. cit., p. 87.

To show how this can be the case, Hart offers a non-realist interpretation of the order of Holy Communion in the Church of England. He begins by quoting a non-realist preface to the service written by Ronald Pearse which highlights the high regard non-realists have for Christian practice. It reads:

> A responsible spirituality is important for our health and for the well-being of the world. It can be supported by following a way of life within a fellowship. The Christian Church is a fellowship which maintains and renews itself in the Eucharist, for which we have assembled. In this, we honour our historic myths and practice, discerning and using with integrity the content of our tradition and the opportunity of new insights, orienting ourselves anew in honesty, love and creativity.[97]

Next Hart proceeds to give a non-realist account of various stages in the service. The prayer of confession recognises the 'fact of brokenness' in our relationship with ourselves, other people and the world, helping to free us from our past failings and to being again renewed. With the pronouncement of absolution one can feel at peace again with oneself and a stronger sense of solidarity with one's worshipping community. The readings of sacred stories and the sermon show that there is no grand biblical view to be offered, only a collection of fragmentary stories that make up a continually growing mosaic upon which the congregation may wish to reflect or even to add further pieces.[98] The creed is another focus for communal solidarity in which the precise content of the words is less significant than the communal affirmation of faith.[99] In the prayers of intercession the congregation share the concerns of the wider and local community, remind themselves of their common mortality and become aware of where practical action might be appropriate.[100] The peace is symbolic exchange of fellowship and the offering of bread, wine and a financial collection signify the self-giving of the members of the community in the service of others and allows each member to see themselves as both giver and

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[97] ibid., p. 80.

[98] ibid., pp. 80-81.

[99] ibid., p. 81, For Freeman the creed can be equated with a rugby player's song in terms of its use in creating communal solidarity. Freeman, *God in Us*, op. cit., p. 84.

[100] Hart, *Faith in Doubt*, op. cit., p. 82.

receiver.[101] The breaking of bread points to the fragmentation found in the lives of individuals and communities and a willing acceptance of the human condition. The communion is taken passively but each communicant receives the bread and wine by their own choice, thereby preserving their own creativity in faith.[102] Finally, the dismissal suggests, in the words of Stephen Mitchell, quoted by Hart, that "faith is not a matter of truth, more of bearing fruit."[103] He thus concludes:

> The language of liturgy ... can offer us a collection of interpretative tools which ... can connect us with our deeper selves and with one another in a manner that frees rather than truncates our spiritual development.[104]

According to Shaw, if we do still wish to talk about the truth of Christianity then this is to be found not in believing its doctrines "but by trying to practise it"[105]

1.5. Conclusion:

In this first chapter I have considered some of the religious ideas found in the published works of various prominent members of the 'Sea of Faith' network. I have summarised their concern to establish, as a matter of religious imperative, a non-realist understanding of religious belief.

For the sake an appropriate and credible religion for today, religious non-realists in the 'Sea of Faith network believe that Christians now need to accept that religion is a human creation for which we should take full responsibility. A non-realist religious faith will radicalise liberal theology by denying the religious usefulness of asserting the existence of God independent of, and antecedent to, our human creativity and thus also any absolute, final or ultimate religious vocabulary. It will accept change and contingency and a need for a greater humility about one's own religious assertions. Further, it affirms an antipathy toward atheism and a deep awareness of the human need for, and the usefulness of, religious belief and practice. Religious non-realists believe that this will lead to a spiritual liberation in

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[101] ibid., p. 83.
[102] ibid., p. 84.
[103] ibid., p. 85.
[104] ibid., p. 93.
[105] Shaw *The Cost of Authority*, op. cit., p. 279.

which Christianity is promoted in ways that are less oppressive than is suggested by a realist conception of God.

I have discussed the work of these 'Sea of Faith' writers without referring to the work of Don Cupitt in order to emphasise that 'Sea of Faith' religious non-realism is not limited to the ideas of one individual. Nevertheless, Cupitt's work is strongly influential. All aspects of the discussion so far can be attributed to ideas in Cupitt's work. In *Taking Leave of God*, Cupitt outlined the view that religion is most appropriately understood as a human creation. It is an extremely useful human enterprise which we need to continue to promote. For Cupitt, "God is a myth we have to have."[106] "Religious language" he adds "is not in the business of describing really-existing super-sensible objects and their activities. ... [R]eligious language is not descriptive or metaphysical but intensely practical."[107] Cupitt views religion as a pathway for practical living, rather than as a set of doctrines to which assent must be given. Religion is "a continuous flowing creative process, a little like art; humanly constructed and constructing, of course, yet retaining its own special place and authority in our lives."[108] Since "everything now is a product of time and chance,"[109] it is not surprising if we change our religious ideas. We can now watch God evolve as we take responsibility for our religious activity.[110] It is this, Cupitt believes, which makes life a spiritual journey.[111] Indeed, part of what it takes to make Christianity credible today involves embracing transience and change so that "the daily practice of religion becomes itself the only goal of religion."[112] Such a religion will be:

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[106] Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, (London: SCM Press, 1980), p. 166.
[107] ibid., p. 164.
[108] Don Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, (London: SCM Press, 1990), p. x.
[109] Don Cupitt, *The Time Being*, (London: SCM Press, 1992), p. 116.
[110] Don Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, (London: SCM Press, 1989), p. 65.
[111] ibid., p. 69.
[112] Cupitt, *The Time Being*, op. cit., p. 126.

> ... a religion without absolutes, without perfection, without closure, without eternity. A religion ... that says yes to time, contingency, open-endedness, transience.[113]

Cupitt is confident that we "can *easily* go on being religious and creating religion in the full awareness that religion is only human"[114] without seeing this as atheism.[115] For Cupitt, "religious faith matters a lot"[116] and "what God is, is given by the part God plays in the religious life."[117] Non-realism is not simply 'being modern' for it own sake but is primarily a source of Christian renewal.[118] Cupitt thus sees a pragmatic demand placed upon Christians to ensure that a religious vocabulary and religious practice continue for their own sake. A realist interpretation of that vocabulary, however, is now not the best way to achieve this.[119]

In the next two chapters I shall turn to a more detailed exposition of Cupitt's work. I shall do this for two reasons. First, in order to outline various intellectual, religious and ethical explanations for the growth of 'Sea of Faith' religious non-realism, and second, to establish the significant role played by philosophical pragmatism in these explanations. This will be important for the second half of the thesis which will attempt to show first, that many of the ideas of 'Sea of Faith' religious non-realism are anticipated in the religious thought of the American pragmatist John Dewey and second, that a philosophical articulation of religious non-realism might now be sought in the work of the contemporary American pragmatist Richard Rorty.

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[113] ibid., pp. 81-82.

[114] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 26.

[115] Cupitt notes that this is not atheism because someone like a religious non-realist "cannot describe the basis of her own existence except in religious language." *Life Lines*, (London: SCM Press, 1986) p. 138.

[116] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 36.

[117] Cupitt, *The World to Come*, op. cit., p. 63.

[118] Cupitt outlines the form of renewal he has in mind. First, the Church must be this worldly, it should look sideways to solve its problems and recreate itself, not upwards toward some external holy realm. Second, the Church will need to see its beliefs in terms of moral rather than intellectual allegiance. Third, it must be open and willing to accept change. Forth, it will need to be creatively engaged in the never ending, never completed, struggle for the production of meaning and value and fifth it will say yes to contingency. *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., pp. 59-61.

[119] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, (London: SCM Press, 1988), p. 36.

CHAPTER TWO

THE INTELLECTUAL HERITAGE OF RELIGIOUS NON-REALISM

2.1. Introduction:

In the last chapter I discussed the religious thought of the non-realist 'Sea of Faith Network'. They claim that an effective religious faith of the future will have to be non-realist. However, they do not consider in any detail why this claim has the force that they assume it to have. My first aim in this chapter will be to consider the intellectual explanation for the phenomena of religious non-realism. I shall do so by examining the work of Don Cupitt, for it is chiefly upon his account of the cogency of these explanations that the other Sea of Faith writers tend to rely.[1] My second aim will be to emphasise the pragmatic strand in his work. This strand, I will suggest, can be understood as providing these explanations with a semantic space which is not already filled by realist presuppositions.

Although Cupitt's explanations of the attractiveness of religious non-realism overlap and draw upon each other, it will be useful to attend to them under three separate headings. First, there is his interpretation of the intellectual heritage upon which he draws; second, there is his account of more recent developments in this intellectual heritage associated with the linguistic turn in philosophy and third, there is his consideration of pressures internal to religion and ethics which make a non-realist rather than a realist religious faith a genuine inheritor of the Christian tradition. In this chapter I shall attend to the first two; in the next chapter I shall attend to the third. In so doing I will not be primarily concerned to offer a detailed developmental account of Cupitt's work. Such accounts are readily available elsewhere.[2] I will, however, refer to Stephen Ross White's classification of the

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[1] David A. Hart, *One Faith?*, (London: Mowbrays, 1995), p.6.
[2] Scott Cowdell, *Atheist Priest? Don Cupitt and Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1988). Stephen Ross White, *Don Cupitt and the Future of Christian Doctrine* (London: SCM Press, 1994).

stages of Cupitt's theological pilgrimage in order to provide the context against which to set my discussion.

According to White, intellectual integrity has driven Cupitt from the critical realism of his early theological writings into the non-realist stage of his thought marked by the publication in 1980 of *Taking Leave of God*, and then beyond into a third stage; a radically linguistic, anti-foundational account of non-realism itself.[3] In the first stage of Cupitt's theological pilgrimage outlined by White, Cupitt juxtaposes a critical realism concerning divine transcendence based on the *via negativa* with a concern for the imagery and practice of religious belief. The images we have of God are always our own creations, yet we have no reason to deny the possibility of a real God beyond these human images. A God who is ineffable and transcendent bursts open all our images and thus confirms their inadequacy. Our images of God undermine themselves by pointing to the divine presence hidden beyond all such imagery. God, Cupitt writes, "is his hiddenness."[4] Cupitt's early work attempts to weld together the nearness of the God of human imagery and practice with the transcendent otherness of God suggested by the *via negativa*.[5] At this stage Cupitt comments:

> ... what God is is not so much expressed in our success in speaking about him as rather indirectly suggested by our failure.[6]

Here, Cupitt accepts much of the modern critique of religion suggested by Feuerbach, Freud and others. These thinkers are not to be viewed as supporting a non-realist understanding of religious belief but as extenting the *via negativa's* denial of affirmative pictures of God.[7] We must think of God in human imagery but

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[3] White, ibid., p. 97.

[4] Don Cupitt, *Christ and the Hiddenness of God* (London: SCM Press, 1971), p. 206.

[5] ibid., pp. 198-213.

[6] ibid., p. 203.

[7] Cupitt held this position up until 1980 and it is perhaps best expressed in *The Leap of Reason* (London: SCM Press, 1976). Also see Don Cupitt, *Explorations in Theology 6* (London: SCM Press, 1979), pp 56-57.

we must also deny the adequacy of this imagery.[8] Only in this way can God be understood in his hiddenness.

However, the denial of the adequacy of this imagery, when pushed to its limits, leads Cupitt into the non-realist stage of his theological pilgrimage. In this stage, rather than indicating the transcendent mystery of God, the *via negativa* is transformed into a critique of the usefulness of *any* belief about the reality God. This shift in Cupitt's position can be seen as the result of his attempt to answer with integrity a question he asked himself in *Christ and the Hiddenness of God*. He asked:

> How can religion both be sure about God and yet be sure of the inadequacy of all the representations of God with which it operates?[9]

The answer he gave in that book, which saw the *hiddenness* of God revealed as hidden in our various inadequate attempts to imaginatively speak of God, proved unsatisfactory. Now God becomes understood by Cupitt as a regulative ideal: the sum of our goals and values projected in the imagery, and lived out in the practice, of religion. I intend in what follows, to consider some of the reasons Cupitt gives to explain why his theological pilgrimage has led him from his earlier critical realist understanding, to a non-realist understanding of religious belief.

2.2. The Intellectual Heritage of Cupitt's Religious Non-Realism:

Cupitt suggests that in the contemporary socio-historical context, religious realism is becoming problematic as an intellectually viable option for religious believers to hold. Historical developments in our understanding of ourselves and our world over the last four hundred years have put belief in a real God under a good deal of strain. Cupitt cites the change in the seat of intellectual authority as a chief cause of this strain.[10] In *The Sea of Faith* and *Only Human* Cupitt enlists the support of various

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[8] Cupitt, *Christ and the Hiddenness of God* (Second Edition. London: SCM Press, 1985), p. 7.
[9] ibid., p. 56.
[10] For Cupitt, this intellectual revolution can be clearly shown to have taken place when we compare the picture of the world presented in modern science with the picture of the world that we can gain by reading the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662), or even the *Alternative Service Book* (1980), where a

influential movements and individual thinkers to catalogue this change. It is a change away from religious dogmatism toward what Cupitt terms 'critical thinking'.[11] Critical thinking is marked by the acceptance that all knowledge is human and that all human knowledge is natural, historical and instrumental. Whereas pre-critical thought orientated itself around an antecedently existing reality out-there, critical thinking "begins with our cognitive powers."[12] In critical thinking, religion can no longer act as a buttress for a set of treasured social dogmas supposedly revealed from some authoritative source outside of the human realm.[13] Rather, religious goals are internal to spirituality, "a function of human religiousness,"[14] but nonetheless transcendent and authoritative as freely chosen and action-inspiring ideals. Cupitt writes:

> Religion is an *activity*: it postulates a goal and seeks to attain it. Realist theologies claim that the religious ideal is already actual, being fully attained in the metaphysical realm quite independent of any effort by us ... they [thus] cut the nerve of religious striving.[15]

For critical spirituality on the other hand,

> [T]o speak of God is to speak about the moral and spiritual goals we ought to be aiming at, and about what we ought to become ... . The true God is not God as picturesque supernatural fact, but God as our religious ideal.[16]

In this form, religion can survive in a culture that has become fully humanised, naturalistic, historicised and instrumental.

In *The Sea of Faith* Cupitt offers an account of what he takes to be the historical development of Western culture in this direction and thus an explanation of why a

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pre-scientific picture of the world is still maintained. Don Cupitt, *The World To Come* (London: SCM Press, 1982) pp. 53-59.

[11] Don Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith: Christianity in Change* (London: BBC, 1984), pp. 249 ff. and 257.
[12] ibid., p. 252.
[13] ibid., p. 250.
[14] ibid., p. 265.
[15] ibid., p. 265.
[16] ibid., p. 270.

realist conception of religious belief seems to him intellectually unsatisfying. Here I shall mention four pairs of thinkers who have had an important impact on Cupitt's thought: these are Descartes and Kant, Galileo and Darwin, Hegel and Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. All of these figures are considered here only in terms of their significance to Cupitt. I do not intend to offer a comprehensive account of their work.

From Descartes' method of radical doubt and from Kant's transcendental philosophy we learn, according to Cupitt, that all knowledge is human knowledge.[17] From Descartes we learn that certain knowledge is obtainable only through rational human thinking.[18] We can doubt everything except that it is we who doubt. Descartes' method creates a conception of the self that is, according to Cupitt, "autonomous and self-defining." Descartes' subject, Cupitt continues, "finds his criterion of truth within himself and ... generates his own knowledge for himself out of his own resources."[19] The human knower thus rivals God as the source of certain knowledge.[20] However, Descartes required God's existence in order to guarantee the successiveness of our clear and distinct ideas. We need a notion of God to unify our self-understanding created by the method of doubt.[21] This need itself represents a crucial reversal in the traditional understanding of the divine-human relationship. Now, instead of humans being created to fulfil the divine purpose, God is being used by us to fulfil the requirements of the rational human mind. The history of secularised thinking then becomes a series of stage posts in which human beings are increasingly able to find ways of fulfilling these requirements for themselves. God thus increasingly becomes an unnecessary hypothesis.[22] Perhaps the most important

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[17] ibid., pp. 131-133, 136-139.

[18] Don Cupitt, *Radicals And the Future of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1989). pp. 134-135.

[19] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., p. 133. Later Cupitt finds reason to repudiate Descartes' foundation of selfhood: see *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., pp 167-169.

[20] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., pp. 198-199.

[21] René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and the Meditations* (1637 and 1641) (E.T. F.E Sutcliffe, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968.), pp. 132-133 and 54-60.

[22] But as Eberhard Jüngel, *God As the Mystery of the World* (1977) (E.T. Darrell L. Guder, Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1983,) Ch. 3, points out, while this may lead us to question our reliance upon metaphysical theology it does not necessarily imply the inevitability of a non-realist

of such stage posts is found in Kant's transcendental idealism which attempted to answer the sceptical consequences that follow from Descartes' internalisation of indubitable knowledge.

Without the role played by God in Descartes' system it would be difficult to know for certain that our humanly generated knowledge of the world is in fact in touch with the contours of our actual environment. Thus, John Locke argued that our humanly generated knowledge of the world is not based on rational innate principles but on sensations; that is, empirical perception and our reflection on these perceptions. Sensations produce simple ideas of the external world in our mind and reflection produces complex ideas.[23] Together they give us our knowledge of the physical and moral world.[24] However, in the work of Bishop Berkeley, Locke's empiricism becomes transformed into absolute idealism and God again becomes the basis for asserting indubitable knowledge. Berkeley points out that the idea of substance, in the view of Locke, was a 'complex' idea requiring both sensation and reflection and is therefore to some extent mind-dependent. This impression is further enhanced by Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities. The primary qualities are those intrinsic to the idea of an object that sensation produces in us. As intrinsic, they remain the same under different conditions and include things like the solidity, extension and mobility of an object and its number. The secondary qualities include the object's colour, smell, taste etc., These are relative to the conditions of observation; imposed by the mind rather than being intrinsic to the object. Nevertheless, since these relative secondary qualities are crucial in both defining the object and in differentiating it from other objects, and since 'substance' is itself a mind-dependent 'complex idea', Berkeley is led to suggest

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understanding of God. The reality of God could be revealed rather than a matter of metaphysical construction.

[23] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). (Glasgow: Fount, 1964 ed.), pp. 83-98.

[24] Ethics here becomes a matter of utilitarian reflection on experiences of pain and pleasure.

that our experience of objects as a whole must be of mental rather than material phenomena.[25] For Berkeley objectivity has nothing to do with materiality. "... [W]hen I shut my eyes," writes Berkeley, "the things I saw may still exist but it must be in another mind."[26] This 'other mind' is the absolute mind of God. Thus, as Descartes, Berkeley sees God as the final fallback for an understanding of human knowledge. It is this reliance upon God to which David Hume objected. For Hume, the idea of God like other abstract ideas, "arises from reflecting on the operations of our own mind."[27] Without either the God of Descartes or the God of Berkeley, neither rationalism nor empiricism seemed able to provide an adequate foundation for human scientific knowledge.[28]

It was this scientific and theological problem that Kant attempted to address. In doing so Kant replaced the God of Descartes and Berkeley with a human-centred transcendental idealism. For Kant, objective knowledge results from the application of transcendental, *a priori* human concepts—our intuition of space and time and our categories of understanding—to experience. In this way objective knowledge is constituted by our concepts rather than simply discovered. As Cupitt puts it, "the world mirrors the mind, and not the other way round."[29] Accordingly Cupitt learns from Kant that:

> The creative work of turning chaos into cosmos, ascribed in the past to God, is now seen as something that is necessarily done by human activity.[30]

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[25] George Berkeley, *The Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710) and *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (1713). (Glasgow: Fount, 1962 ed.), pp. 68-70, 88.

[26] ibid., p. 110. Also pp. 108-111, 140-146, 200-201, 225.

[27] David Hume, *Enquiries* (1777) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 19.

[28] For example, Hume was troubled by the question of how we arrive at the knowledge of cause and effect and was forced to conclude on empirical grounds that the law was established merely by convention and thus not a strictly scientific law at all. ibid., pp. 27-39. Hume saw his task as bringing to public attention the sceptical consequences that flow from empiricism. This is not a situation that Hume was entirely comfortable with since, as Antony Flew points out, if cause and effect were a matter of convention, miracles would seem to be conceivable and this for Hume would be catastrophic for science. *David Hume: Philosopher of Moral Science* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 82 ff.

[29] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., p. 138.

[30] ibid., p. 138.

For Kant, our concepts are synthetic *a priori* judgements; knowable only as the conditions necessary for any knowledge at all. This means that beyond them and the phenomenal knowledge they make possible, there is no other knowledge to be had. Any notion we have that claims to take us beyond space and time—any notion of an eternal supernatural God, for example, will need to be understood as an ideal of reason and, if useful, a guiding principle for action. What God cannot be is an object of possible experience.[31] For Cupitt, Kant informs us that "God should ... be interpreted as a guiding ideal... ."[32] However, Cupitt also displays some ambivalence toward Kant. Kant, for Cupitt, is a 'semi-realist'[33] who still insists upon the objective necessity of his *a priori* concepts and the raw data, or noumena, they allow us to interpret.[34] Equally, like Descartes, Kant also conceived God as being logically necessary. God, for Kant, is a necessary postulate of practical rather than theoretical knowledge. Kant suggests that the unconditional moral law within us by which we choose to do right or wrong requires us to postulate (i) our own freedom so that we may freely choose right from wrong, (ii) our immortality so that virtue can be rewarded with happiness in another life if not in this life, and (iii) God, as that in whom the unity of virtue and happiness is guaranteed.

However, Kant's attempt to redefine the reality of God as a postulate of moral knowledge is not without its difficulties. On one count, the postulate of God seems to perform a similar function to the postulate of immortality, thus questioning our need to postulate both. On another count, both of these postulates put into question the autonomous unconditional nature of virtue specified in the first postulate. Thus, for example, T.M. Greene writes in his introduction to Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*:

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[31] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) (E.T. Norman Kemp Smith London: MacMillan edition 1929), pp. 525-531 (A 631-642, B 659-670.) See Don Cupitt, *The Time Being*, op. cit., pp. 124-125.

[32] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., p. 230.

[33] Cf. Cupitt, *Radicals And the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 167 with p. 124.

[34] ibid., p. 85, and Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., pp. 57-59.

> If on Kant's own principles, it is wrong to use men merely as means to our own ends we are not entitled to bring God into our scheme of things primarily as a means to our ultimate happiness.[35]

Rather, the virtuous act should be seen as its own reward. There is apparently, therefore, no need to postulate either God or immortality as necessary conditions of morality. Equally significant, Greene notes, is that Kant's conception of the happiness that is virtue's reward, is understood by Kant as "sentient in character ... [and yet] he [Kant] has previously shown that man's sentient nature is phenomenal, that is, temporal and not eternal."[36] To suggest therefore that God guarantees the unity of virtue and happiness is to bring God into the phenomenal realm of experience, precisely where Kant has argued God cannot be. Thus if the notion of God works as a moral ideal at all, it must do so according to Cupitt "as the symbolic personification of ... guiding principles and ideal goals"[37] and not as a necessary postulate of moral knowledge.

The value of Kant's account of theoretical and practical knowledge for Cupitt is that it shows how "we autonomously impose rules on our own action in order to bring into being the world that our reason tells us ought to be."[38] Cupitt then takes Kant's account of ethical autonomy and applies it to religion. It is we who freely choose to be religious for religion's own sake.[39] Accordingly, if religious belief is to be freely chosen and not based on some illusionary heteronomous supernatural guarantor for its validity, we must drop the idea of God as an objective being with existence independent of us. Religion must be disinterested in the sense that it "cannot depend upon any external facts such as an objective God or a life after death."[40] Instead, God is to be fully humanised: a symbolic personification of our

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[35] T.M. Greene, 'The Historical Context and Religious Significance of Kant's Religion', Introduction in Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793) (E.T. T.M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. lxiv.

[36] ibid., p. lxiv.

[37] Don Cupitt, *The World To Come* (London: SCM Press, 1982), p. 150.

[38] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., p. 138.

[39] Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM Press, 1980), p. 95. "The religious requirement," Cupitt notes, operates "like a Kantian categorical imperative."

[40] ibid., p. 10.

religious ideal.[41]   To be faithful to itself, religion cannot have any objective

cognitive content because "if God were to become in any way determinate," writes

Cupitt, "he would restrict the freedom which is the essence of spirituality."[42] Like

Kant's moral will, religious faith can only be binding upon us if we freely choose it

ourselves.   Its truth must become subjective if it is to transform us spiritually.[43]

Given Kant's account of human knowledge, religion must become non-realist if it is

to work at all. However, Cupitt notes:

> I continue to speak of God and to pray to God.   God is the mythical
> embodiment of all that one is concerned with in the spiritual life. He is
> the religious demand and ideal ... and the enshriner of values.   He is
> needed—but as a myth.[44]

Despite the epistemological shift of emphasis from the known to the knower, the

idea of God still has an important religious function in Cupitt's religious non-

realism.

With the second pair of thinkers, Galileo and Darwin, the natural world, the

processes that govern it and the development of life within it, become understood

from the perspective of what is humanly knowable through observation and

experimentation rather than through divine revelation. The religious account of the

universe, as understood from the biblical witness, is replaced by a very different

human account of nature; an account which takes its point of origin from the

physical world rather than from the workings of some supernatural metaphysical

force.[45]

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[41] Cupitt writes: "We use the word 'God' as a comprehensive symbol that incorporates the way the religious demand presents itself to us (God's will), its ideal fulfilment by us (God's essence), and the mythic psychodrama that envelops us on the way (God's action)." ibid., p. 96.

[42] ibid., p. 107.

[43] ibid., p. 166. Note, however, that Cupitt later repudiates his quest for the essence of religion within the internalised autonomous religious consciousness. See Cupitt, *Radicals And the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 52.

[44] Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, op. cit., p. 166.

[45] Galileo, and to a greater extent Darwin, are evoked in Cupitts' texts to symbolise a naturalistic and a secular view of ourselves and our world. This secular, naturalistic, view is one in which our knowledge of the world is now provisional and shifting; one in which knowledge is produced by us rather than revealed to us. This view is one in which we look to meteorology rather than prayer when we need rain; to the physicist, chemist, or biologist rather than to the interpreter of Genesis, when we

From Galileo, according to Cupitt, we learn that what was once preached as an eternal truth about the way God had created the world was in fact nothing more than an understandable but misguided human picture of the world based upon limited and inaccurate observations. However, not only did the religious understanding of the universe have to countenance the idea that it had been in error: that a supposedly immutable doctrine about God's creation of the earth at the centre of the universe was in fact going to have to change; but also that the mechanical view that replaced it seemed to leave little room for divine intervention. With Galileo, God begins to be squeezed out of the universe.[46]

Although Galileo still found a place for God, he had displaced the earth from the centre of divine creation and made God appear more distant, less likely to act against his own mechanical laws. This Deistic image of God gained some popularity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but was dealt a severe blow by Darwin's theory of evolution. "After Darwin," writes Cupitt, "religion must reconcile itself to this earth."[47] If Galileo suggested a radical transcendence of God, Darwin suggested God's radical immanence. Aubrey Moore conceded in the nineteenth century that now God must be considered as everywhere present in the universe or nowhere.[48]

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need to know about the creation of life and the origin of the universe. One in which we look to medicine rather than divine intervention for the cause and cure of human illness. We now see that our previous world-views were all man-made and, Cupitt notes, that the modern scientific picture of the world makes "obsolete all previous world-views" (Cupitt, *The World To Come* op. cit., p. 54). It is one in which, according to Cupitt, a realist conception of religious belief does not fit in. It no longer has a useful role to perform. Don Cupitt 'A Tale of Two Cities: The World to Come' a dialogue with J.A.T. Robinson in J.A.T. Robinson, *Where Three Ways Meet* (London: SCM Press, 1987 p.31.). Cupitt writes:

> As the course of this world became gradually more completely explicable in purely natural terms there was less and less need to appeal to supernatural agency. One can describe how and why other people in the past believed in supernatural causes and effects, but it has become increasingly difficult to think in such ways oneself, today.

Cupitt, *The World To Come*, op. cit., p. 60.

[46] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., pp. 42-48.

[47] Don Cupitt, *Only Human* (London: SCM Press, 1985), p. 56.

[48] Aubrey Moore, 'The Christian Doctrine of God' in Charles Gore (ed.) *Lux Mundi* (London: John Murray, 1891 edition), pp. 73-74.

For Cupitt, from Darwin we learn that creation is not cosmos but chaos. The random mutation of species and a fit environment for survival is responsible for human existence and not the direct act of divine fiat. While for Galileo, God wrote the book of nature *and* the books of scripture, in Darwin's biological account of human life the book of scripture is shelved. Many Christian beliefs about scriptural authority, creation, sin, atonement and human nature had to be re-thought.[49] The result, for Darwin, was a loss of faith in a benevolent creator in favour of an enforced contentment with agnosticism.[50] For Cupitt however, the fact that faith had to be re-thought after Darwin lends support to the idea that religious belief is, and always was, a human creation designed by us to fulfil natural human purposes.[51] In naturalising our knowledge of the world both Galileo and Darwin caused a necessary re-evaluation of our religious understanding of ourselves and our world. For Cupitt:

> Darwinism compelled people to see that the thinking subject is not a metaphysical entity somehow occupying a privileged position outside nature, but is itself merely a product of nature and immersed in nature, so that all human thinking is in the end practical;...[52]

The human species is no more privileged than any other and we have no more right to think we survive death than any other living creature. According to Cupitt the liberal theology that has attempted to incorporate Darwin's insights still has not come to terms with the naturalistic and non-purposive consequences of Darwinism; only a radical non-realist theology can do this.[53]

From the naturalistic perspective on human knowledge, which Galileo and Darwin helped to create, a different conception of religion begins to emerge; one

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[49] Cupitt, *Only Human*, op. cit., pp. 41-47.

[50] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., p. 66.

[51] ibid., p. 245. In Cupitt's later work the purpose of religion is to sustain the moral imperative to value life in all its contingency and transience and to employ creative uses of language in order to re-value whatever has been undervalued. See Don Cupitt, *The Time Being*, op. cit., and *The New Christian Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1988).

[52] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., p. 187.

[53] Cupitt, *Only Human*, op. cit., p. 47.; *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., pp. 49, 55.; *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 34.; *The Last Philosophy*, (London: SCM Press, 1995), pp. 20, 37-38.

that makes it "possible to see morality and religion as made for man, rather than the other way round."[54] From this perspective, the philosophy of religion found in Feuerbach, Freud, Marx, Durkheim and others accounts for religion by viewing it as a human creation: a projection of our alienated essence, a neurosis, a consolation from political oppression or a code of social norms. In each case religion is viewed as emerging from within the natural conditions of human existence. However, this is not necessarily a negative development unless it is assumed that a naturalistic account of religious belief can successfully dismiss our need for religion. The problem with such assumptions is that they tend to be reductive and positivistic. They rest upon some account of an uninterpreted given that is found in the conditions that are thought to underlie authentic human existence: some pure unalienated fixed human essence or some extra-cultural account of the scientific world. But Cupitt is as opposed to naturalistic realism as he is to religious realism[55] and he finds resources for this opposition in the next two pairs of thinkers. With the first pair, Hegel and Kierkegaard, natural human knowledge itself becomes historicised, and with the second pair, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, any supposedly fixed points of reference for knowledge in the human or in nature are shown to be historically contingent and without foundation in anything other than our current instrumental and cultural practices.

According to Cupitt, Hegel's philosophy teaches us that all natural human knowledge is historical and changing while from Kierkegaard we learn how to deal religiously with this new naturalised and historicised account of human knowledge.[56] Cupitt writes:

> Hegel shows a realist idea of God becoming so fuzzy, metaphorical and indefinite that it eventually dissolves away altogether. Kierkegaard shows that the way to restore religious seriousness and depth to life is to give up

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[54] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., p. 67.
[55] Cupitt, *The Time Being*, op. cit., pp. 64-66.
[56] ibid. pp. 162-163.

the cosmic and metaphysical side of theistic belief, and to make faith in God subjective and existential.[57]

With Hegel, Cupitt suggests, we learn that the doctrines of Christianity become imaginative apprehensions of the relentless progress of 'spirit'. For Hegel, Cupitt notes, the incarnation represents "the ... identity of the human spirit with Spirit itself; [while Christ's death and resurrection] symbolised the principle of ... contradiction and reconciliation that permeated all Hegel's logic."[58] Any conception of transcendence that we have will never be ahistorical. After Hegel, Cupitt notes:

> Religious ideas could be seen as projections of the human imagination ... something which for the moment might seem to stand over against man but which in time was necessarily destined to be reabsorbed into man as his consciousness advanced another stage.[59]

There remains in Hegel the teleological realisation of absolute spirit within the historical process, but Cupitt reads Hegel after Darwin for whom the processes of life and history have no absolute end. The immanent historical process is not moving toward some ultimate fulfilment and is itself purely the result of random chaotic events.[60] From Hegel, Cupitt argues, we learn that "all frameworks, world views, science, moralities and the like are internal to ... our historicality,"[61] we become aware of the hermeneutical complexity involved in understanding the past and further, aware of the contribution we make in creating religious belief. We learn, notes Cupitt, "that religion is human, historical and cultural all the way through."[62] Our current theologies are relativised to our own historical context.[63] We recognise, in short, that our "[b]eliefs are datable human products."[64] But historicity need not be conceived negatively as decay or as a move away from an original perfection.[65] Cupitt maintains a positive evaluation of time without the

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[57] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., p. 249.
[58] ibid., p. 140.
[59] ibid., p. 141.
[60] Cupitt, *The Time Being*, op. cit., pp. 40-41 and *After All* (London: SCM Press, 1994), pp. 89-90.
[61] Don Cupitt, *Life Lines*, op. cit., p. 98.
[62] Don Cupitt, 'Anti-realist Faith' in Joseph Runzo (ed.) *Is God Real?* (London: MacMillan, 1993), p. 54.
[63] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., p. 36.
[64] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., p. 252.
[65] Cupitt, *Only Human*, op. cit., p. 5.

further Hegelian belief that the historical process is teleologically directed by the systematical movement of Spirit. Such a general notion tends to downplay the role of the individual's free choice as the significant feature of historical change and development. Thus, at this point, Cupitt turns away from Hegel to Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard, Cupitt notes:

> ... [goes] beneath realist ideas of God to the primal meaning of God as *my* God, my life-aim, my spiritual task and goal; and *'my* God' is not a metaphysical being but the expression of my spiritual commitment to my life-aim.[66]

Faced with Hegel's all-encompassing system Kierkegaard turned inward to a religious and existential seriousness which replaced the general movement of the historical dialectic with individual historical human choices before God.[67] According to Cupitt, Kierkegaard believed that "the various worlds men may construct and inhabit are products of their own inner lives"[68] and not the products of spirit's self-expression. He thus reviled any attempt to refer to the objectivity of God on the basis of a system such as that of Hegel. Kierkegaard's insistence upon God's transcendence, according to Cupitt, was aimed less at restoring the traditional realist picture of God and more at underlining the internal and spiritual decision of faith which had to be made by a free act of will, that is, a will not dependent upon something like Hegel's metaphysics or Christendom's reduction of God to an ascent-demanding object in a creed.[69] Thus, for Cupitt, we learn from Kierkegaard that:

> The problems of religion must not be solved abstractly in thought but concretely in human existence. Theology must be translated into spirituality. Hence the attack on metaphysics and objectivity, and in the long run the development of a non-realist interpretation of religious belief.[70]

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[66] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., p. 249.

[67] ibid., pp. 151-152. He thus resembles Pascal who "facing up to the eternal silence of the infinite spaces, was forced back upon Christ, the human realm and the heart." Cupitt, Only Human, op. cit., p. 47.

[68] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., p. 155.

[69] ibid., pp. 150, 154.

[70] ibid., p. 230.

After knowledge has been humanised, naturalised and historicised, faith remains possible as an inner demand "to become a fully individuated spiritual subject."[71] However, Kierkegaard does not go far enough for Cupitt. Cupitt notes:

> Kierkegaard maintained the traditional western Christian religious psychology unaltered, for he lived before the age of Darwin, Nietzsche and Freud. Today we have to pass through the fire of their criticism, and that will require us to go a long, long way beyond Kierkegaard's position.[72]

This brings us to the fourth pair of thinkers that Cupitt believes have helped to shift the intellectual seat of authority away from a realist and towards a non-realist conception of religious belief, namely, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. From Nietzsche, Cupitt learns that:

> All our knowledge is practical and perspectival, evolved in the service of group life. There are no facts, only interpretations, and no truths, only useful fictions.[73]

For Nietzsche, when knowledge is fully human, natural and historical it must also be understood as perspectival; offering no fixed truths or agreed notion of reality. Rationality thus becomes a set of superficial, but useful, human interpretations. According to Cupitt, the aim of *The Joyful Wisdom* and *Zarathustra* is to announce to the world the effect of the death of God and to call for an affirmation of a playful ironic celebration of life's transience and contingency. When knowledge becomes perspectival, understood as a collection of competing fictions, critical thinking itself becomes just another manifestation of the 'will to power' and the desire for truth is forced to recognise its own perspectival status. Cupitt notes:

> ... the will to truth, ... when pressed to its furthest limit, comes at last to the ironical conclusion that there is no absolute truth, and is forced to pass over into the superman's joyful wisdom of 'goodwill towards appearance'.[74]

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[71] Cupitt, *The World To Come*, op. cit., p. 61.
[72] ibid., p. 61.
[73] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., p. 202.
[74] ibid., p. 206.

The platonic distinction of appearance and reality collapses leaving claims that attempt to account for reality, religious or otherwise, as examples of the all too human will to power.

However, Cupitt disagrees with Nietzsche about the implications that perspectivism has for religious belief.[75] Whereas Nietzsche believes that Christianity cannot survive the end of foundationalism and the collapse of reality into appearances, Cupitt believes that it can. Christianity, he argues, is "well able to ingest even its own death."[76] Whereas, for Nietzsche, the crisis of realism leads to complete nihilism in which only the 'Superman' creates his own world *ex nihilo*, Cupitt believes that this crisis is a "religious necessity ... [a] ... stepping-stone to something new and constructive."[77] The end of a realist understanding of religious faith does not lead us into atheism or agnosticism, but rather draws us closer to a religious affirmation of life in all its transience and contingency.[78] Whereas Nietzsche saw in religion an oppressive morality designed to encourage a slavish mentality of the herd and a set of beliefs and laws designed to fend off our fear of life's contingency, Cupitt sees in religion the human effort to put value and meaning into the world devoid of any value and meaning on its own account. For Cupitt, the truly religious person is someone who finds in religion the strength to make meaning in the void. He writes:

> Traditionally realistic religion functioned to make people weak, but there is the alternative of a non-realistic kind of religion that functions to make people strong.[79]

This ability to make meaning through religion is infused with irony. Meaning is always of our own making and so is religion. Religion is a human creation that helps us live in the void. For Nietzsche, the strong have no resources other than

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[75] ibid., pp. 209-210.

[76] Cupitt, *Life Lines*, op. cit., p. 203.

[77] ibid., p. 111.

[78] Don Cupitt, *What is a Story?* (London: SCM Press, 1991), pp. 153-154, and *The Time Being*, op. cit., Ch. 7.

[79] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 69.

their own strength by which they create meaning. For Cupitt, it is religion that provides us with common resources for re-creating our world. "Through religion," writes Cupitt, "it is we who must make life make sense."[80]

Despite this level of disagreement, Cupitt is still much indebted to Nietzsche. According to White, this debt is threefold: the criticism of Christianity's slavish mentality, the proclamation of the end of realism, and the affirmation of life within the void.[81] None of these, however, should be taken as a denial of the possibility of a religious commitment. For example, Albert Schweitzer's idea of 'reverence for life', as a guiding principle of valuation, can be seen as a moral re-creation of Nietzsche's will-to-power as the 'will-to-live' transformed by the religious impulse into the 'will-to-love'.[82] Because of the harsh and violent nature of the universe, such 'Reverence for life', will always be "an unavailing ethical struggle"[83] and thus reminiscent of both Kant's attempt to unify virtue and happiness and, Jesus' proclamation of the imminent Kingdom.[84] Schweitzer's attempt to bring the kingdom of God on earth through his missionary and medical activity is, according to Cupitt, "an obligatory impossibility"[85] which points to the moral worth of the Christian story. This is a story, Cupitt notes, that tells us to:

> Give up ... illusory mystical yearnings, accept the human condition, love your neighbour, pour your own life out into the common life of all humanity. In a word, give up God and be content with Christ.[86]

This message, however, is too blunt to be accepted. We therefore need stories about God and God's kingdom in order to help us to give up belief in God; that is, the God of realism.[87]

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[80] ibid., p. 69. Also see, Cupitt, *The World To Come* op. cit., pp. 129-130
[81] White, *Don Cupitt and the Future of Christian Doctrine*, op. cit., p. 44.
[82] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., pp. 106-109.
[83] ibid., p. 232.
[84] ibid., p. 232.
[85] ibid., p. 232.
[86] Cupitt, *What is a Story?* op. cit., p. 133.
[87] ibid., pp. 134-154.

After Nietzsche, according to Cupitt, theological thinking about God becomes paradoxical and ambiguous. Like all knowledge, it is not only seen as human, natural and historical; it is also instrumental and pragmatic. What becomes important is the use people make of religious language; how it functions in what they aim to achieve, rather than questions about the reality that lies behind such use.[88]

For Cupitt, this instrumental, or pragmatic, element of modern religious believing in which the "concern for meaning entirely replaces the traditional concerns for objective existence and knowledge of what exists,"[89] is embodied in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Cupitt writes:

> From the new non-realist viewpoint a person believes in God if the idea of God does some real work and plays a constitutive part in his thinking and in shaping his way of life; for as Wittgenstein says, a word that does no real work is like an idle cog in a machine.[90]

In his early work, the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein limited the meaningful use of language to the way words picture things leaving other uses of language in a paradoxical state of trying to express ineffable mysteries. In his later work, however, particularly in his *Investigations*, he argued that language is not meaningful simply because it might picture things but because in doing so it exists within a context of practices that provided the rules governing the meaningful use of words in that context. The meaning of a sentence in one context of practices may differ from the meaning of *that* sentence given in a context of practices that engender a different set of rules for language use, even though the same words are used in both cases. Thus, as far as religious language is concerned, Schweitzer's religious 'obligatory impossibility' becomes, in the early Wittgenstein, 'inexpressibly wonderful' and in the later Wittgenstein 'inexpressible wonder' is seen as the

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[88] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., p. 232.
[89] ibid., p. 241.
[90] ibid., p. 245.

practical form that religious language takes.[91] Cupitt believes that we learn from Wittgenstein that:

> ... the more we become conscious of the merely-human character of religious language, the more clearly we see that all religious 'knowledge' is—and has to be—simply practical.[92]

Cupitt adds:

> Philosophy, in his [Wittgenstein's] view, is a sustained attempt to cure ourselves of transcendent illusions and persuade us to be content with what is—and what *is*, is language and the human realm, and nothing else.[93]

For Cupitt, just as Wittgenstein draws attention to our use of language in everyday life, in order to cure us of certain philosophical illusions, so genuine religious belief, by turning us toward this world, cures us of certain theological illusions about the reality of God.[94] For Cupitt, Wittgenstein's outlook was naturalistic, voluntaristic and human, making Wittgenstein, according to Cupitt, "a non-realist about religion ... [and] ... everything else."[95] When knowledge becomes understood as human, natural, historical and instrumental it also becomes understood pragmatically. Our knowledge and our theories, Cupitt writes, "can be described as 'true' only in the sense that, and for so long as, ... they work usefully."[96]

So far in this section I have sketched very briefly Cupitt's account of four pairs of thinkers. In Cupitt's view, the work of these thinkers helps explain why non-realism in religion has become not only possible but requisite. Each of these thinkers have contributed to a shift in the intellectual seat of authority. If religious belief is to remain intellectually credible it must, Cupitt believes, now adopt for itself a non-realist self-understanding. Such an understanding of religion would

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[91] ibid., p. 243.
[92] ibid., p. 221.
[93] ibid., p. 222.
[94] Don Cupitt, *The Last Philosophy*, op. cit., pp. 1-3.
[95] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., p. 222.
[96] ibid., p. 188.

"teach us to accept and make the most of our new sense of ourselves and our place in nature."[97]

While I have limited myself to a discussion of eight thinkers upon whom Cupitt relies in order to explain the intellectual heritage of non-realism, I cannot emphasise too much that I have been considering Cupitt's own interpretation of their work. Other interpretations of the significance of these thinkers, interpretations that make religious belief more amenable to religious realism, are equally possible and defensible. Therefore, reference to these thinkers should not be taken as offering conclusive proof that the intellectual endeavour is moving inexorably in the direction of religious non-realism. However, reference to them does help explain why Cupitt, and others like him, think that non-realism in matters of religious belief is something which we now ought to try to explore and promote.

Alongside his intellectual account of the decline of religious realism, Cupitt also believes that there are a number of social changes which have also contributed to the shift in intellectual authority that has seen this decline. Two examples noted by Cupitt are the movement toward democracy and the effects of industrialisation. In the case of the former, Cupitt suggests, the notion of political authority underwent a profound social change after Galileo's discoveries. It became more difficult to claim for it "the sort of cosmic backing that [it] had always had in previous societies." As a result, Cupitt continues, authority becomes understood as originating from below, "from within the human community rather than from a higher world above."[98] The steady movement toward democracy is seen by Cupitt as a manifestation of a tacit acceptance of religious non-realism. Authority for government comes not from a divine source independent of us, but from rationally conceived constitutions, collective human decision-making and community

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[97] Cupitt, *The World To Come*, op. cit., p. 62.
[98] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., p. 46.

participation. As the notion of a free citizen within a democratic society emerges, the notion of religious authority is weakened.[99] Cupitt writes:

> The work of politics was no longer merely to enforce obedience to sacred authority, but to establish consent and public debate.[100]

While Cupitt admits that enlightened citizenship and democratic government are not entirely faultless, noting that democratic government is itself "maintained by a mixture of force and mystification,"[101] he is nonetheless correct to point out that now the human rather than the divine authorisation of political and social control is almost universally recognised. This recognition has seen the withdrawal of religious belief from the social space it once occupied and this has detrimental consequences for its realist self-understanding.

Another cause of this withdrawal, Cupitt suggests, is industrialisation. According to Cupitt, the industrial revolution brought home to a vast number of people the intellectual shift that had taken place in western Europe. In the new industrial towns the old religious certainties were replaced by the harsh reality of industrial progress and the struggle for economic power. According to Cupitt, the church neglected or disclaimed these industrial areas and many of the leaders of the new working classes abandoned religion and took up politics.[102] Meanwhile the successes of the industrial revolution meant that human progress was measured in terms of the great feats of human engineering, invention and discovery. Human ingenuity and progress became the measure of all things especially when it successfully turned to the melioration of harsh working and living conditions suffered by the industrial poor.[103] Human betterment is now seen less as a matter of supernatural intervention and more as a matter of the instrumental realisation of desired ends through human ingenuity and creativity. The sense of well-being and

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[99] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., p. 74.
[100] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., p. 134.
[101] Cupitt, *Life Lines*, op. cit., p. 179.
[102] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., p. 26.
[103] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., pp. 189-190.

desire for progress it engendered, Cupitt maintains, continues now in late capitalist society but it is lived vicariously through mass production, the media and our participation in the commercial marketplace.[104] "What religion used to call faith," Cupitt notes, "is now re-christened consumer confidence."[105] The social space available for religious belief and practice thus appears to recede even further. Even the invention of the motor car and the camera can be shown to have eroded and supplanted the social space once occupied by religious practice and belief.[106]

Again, however, we must take care not to assume that these social factors justify a non-realist account of religious belief. They do however help explain why some theologians are now finding non-realism appealing. For these theologians the human, natural, historical and instrumental understanding of knowledge that has developed in the last 400 years, and the various changes in our social lives over that period, make religious non-realism an attractive position to hold. Convinced by a picture which sees life as all there is, these theologians believe that we need the resources religion provides in order to help us make our lives meaningful.[107] Religion both inspires creativity and calls us to work toward the realisation of the

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[104] Cupitt, *The Time Being*, op. cit., pp. 77-80.

[105] ibid., p. 78.

[106] In relation to the motor car, for example, D.Z. Phillips shows how its use eroded the ritual of the funeral procession. More people have cars, roads widen, traffic increases, processions move faster, other drivers no longer slow down. "Slowly but surely," writes Phillips, "factors which first seemed to have little to do with religion eroded a religious response." D.Z. Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life* (London: MacMillan, 1986), p. 90.

In relation to the camera Cupitt alludes to Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (E.T. Richard Howard, London: Fontana edition 1984). For Barthes, the photograph fills the ritual space in society that deals with the dead: a space vacated by religion. (ibid., p. 92.). But in the photograph even the dead become ephemeral. The photo, which replaced ritual and story—important aids to memory—itself erodes, so that "by making the (mortal) photograph into the general and somehow natural witness of 'what has been,' modern society has renounced the monument." (ibid., p. 93.). This itself becomes a further erosion of religion's social space. Cupitt writes:

> These many images of vanished instants fail to cohere, do not add up to anything substantial ... We have been and we are no more than long chains of fleeting events that cannot be disentangled from the universal flux of becoming ...

Cupitt, *Life Lines*, op. cit., pp. 192-193. We see, Cupitt notes, "that without the activity of the myth-maker, reality, ... the world and our life is no more than a stream of vague and fleeting events that pass away from moment to moment." (ibid., p. 192.). Hence, there is a need for religion, if not realist then non-realist religion.

[107] "Religion," writes Cupitt, "is our way of making sense of a life that otherwise would make no sense at all." Cupitt, *Only Human*, op. cit., p. 191.

values it enables us to imagine. This will be religion purged of its realist beliefs. It will, Cupitt notes—perhaps over-dogmatically and paradoxically, be religion "undertaken just for its own sake, as an autonomous and practical response to the coolly-perceived truth of the human condition."[108] As an autonomous internalised ideal, to act religiously will be to act both freely while avoiding egoism and to act disinterestedly without the thought of some great heavenly reward.[109] "This," Cupitt notes, "is true religion: all else is superstition."[110] Purged of its realist beliefs religion can begin to countenance the human, natural, historical and instrumental interpretation of its own claims and concerns. Such an interpretation will be pragmatic in at least three respects.

Firstly, as an autonomous internalised principle guiding action, "God is the work 'God' does in framing and facilitating the act of faith."[111] As such, the religious demand which 'God' mythically personifies[112] remains for the non-realist both authoritative and transcendent.[113] A God who exists in an objective sense would be religiously inappropriate because, Cupitt notes:

> The authority of the religious requirement has to be autonomous and intrinsic in order that it may be fully internalized, imposed by us freely upon ourselves and made our own.[114]

In this way God can be understood as working in us an inner transformation without jeopardising our spiritual freedom. Cupitt writes:

> ... when I bind the religious requirement unconditionally upon myself it so affects me that I quite properly and meaningfully describe it as waiting, as searching me out, as judging and condemning me, as restoring me, freeing me and as filling me with divine spirit.[115]

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[108] ibid., p. 202.
[109] ibid., p. 190.
[110] ibid., p. 202.
[111] Cupitt, *Life Lines*, op. cit., p. 138.
[112] Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, op. cit., p. 113.
[113] Cupitt, *Only Human*, op. cit., p. 136.
[114] Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, op. cit., p. 96.
[115] ibid., p. 93.

For Cupitt, a meaningful God is an affective God, "only as I take religious realities to heart and make them wholly my own," he writes, "do I discover what religious truth is."[116] This truth is my spiritual liberation.

Secondly, this religious truth is not only pragmatic in the sense of being known in its practical effect on the believer; it is also pragmatic as praxis. Religious truth is not primarily a matter of intellectual assent: it has to be done; practised in concrete situations of life.[117] As Cupitt notes, "... the meaning of the word 'God' shows itself in the practice of religion."[118] And elsewhere, Cupitt adds:

> Religion is practical, and the function of religious doctrines is to show us in condensed and symbolic form what this practical reality of religion is, and to guide us along its path. The concrete lived reality of the religious life comes first, and the doctrine is simply a mythical representation of it, ...[119]

Thirdly, religious belief is pragmatic in the sense that it enables us to cope with the world in which we live. It provides tools and resources that help us to live the spiritual life.[120] It enables us to make meaning out of our lives and to create values to live by.

These pragmatic strands in Cupitt's thought survive the eclipse of his first attempt to present an account of non-realist religious belief in terms of the autonomous internalised religious consciousness, by his later, linguistic account of non-realist religious belief. But just as they are sometimes submerged under Cupitt's occasional dogmatic and realist account of the autonomous internalised religious consciousness, so in the latter account they tend to be submerged under Cupitt's occasional dogmatic and post-modernist account of language. Nevertheless, these pragmatic strands are significant features of Cupitt's understanding of religious non-realism and provides Cupitt with an alternative to the positivistic critique of

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[116] ibid., p. 92.
[117] ibid., pp. 126, 130.
[118] ibid., p. 57.
[119] Cupitt, *The World To Come*, op. cit., p. 38.
[120] Cupitt, 'A Tale of Two Cities' op. cit., pp. 23, 25.

religious realism. In the positivist's view,[121] science provides us with objective knowledge which is incompatible with the beliefs of traditional Christianity. In the pragmatist's view, science has no epistemologically privileged status. As Cupitt notes, when pragmatism prevails, science, religion, morality, and art will be judged by the "contribution [they] make to human well-being,"[122] and not by whether they accurately represent some aspect of the world. On this view, Cupitt adds:

> ... science is one useful human language-game and religion is another, but both are human constructions... [123]

When writing these words, Cupitt was not prepared to adjudicate between the positivist's and the pragmatist's view of science. "Either way", he notes "religion loses its old realist sort of truth..."[124] Now, however, without losing his trust in the value of science,[125] Cupitt has increasingly taken his place with the pragmatists rather than the positivists and this inclination is affirmed in Cupitt's assimilation of the linguistic turn in philosophy. This turn itself provides a further set of reasons that explain why Cupitt and other religious believers now find a non-realist approach to religious belief attractive. It is this set of reasons that I shall now consider.

2.3. The Recent Philosophy of Language and Cupitt's Religious Non-realism:

The philosophy of language provides Cupitt, and other 'Sea of Faith' writers, [126] with perhaps the strongest set of reasons that explain the attraction to a non-realist understanding of religious belief. Religious belief requires a language in order for it to have any meaning and language is humanly created. However, Cupitt's appropriation of ideas from the philosophy of language is complex and is never systematised. He draws on the work of at least three philosophers who have rather

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[121] Such a view is exemplified by Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not A Christian*, (London: Unwin, 1957).
[122] Cupitt, *The World To Come*, op. cit., p. x.
[123] ibid., p. xi.
[124] ibid., p. x.
[125] Cupitt, *After All*, op. cit., p.9.
[126] See for example David Hart, *Faith in Doubt*, op. cit., pp. 2-3.

different emphases and presuppositions. These are: Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jacques Derrida and, more recently but less overtly, Donald Davidson. In this section I shall briefly summarise Cupitt's understanding of these philosophers. In doing so I shall not consider the background from which these philosophers draw their accounts of language, nor shall I consider whether Cupitt's interpretation of their work is the most apposite. My aim is merely to show the effect that these philosophers have had on Cupitt's work and the motivations they engender in this context for developing a non-realist account of religious belief.

Since the mid-1980's Cupitt has been convinced by what is perhaps the central argument of each of these philosophers, namely that our understanding of truth and meaning, and thus also our understanding of reality and objectivity, is always conveyed in and created by a human use of language.[127] However, this is not a conclusion that Cupitt was quick to accept. In the pre - non-realist stage of his theological pilgrimage, Cupitt was reluctant to embrace the Wittgensteinian understanding of religious belief associated with D.Z. Phillips.[128] This reluctance is perhaps reflected in the distant style in which, in *Taking Leave of God*, Cupitt comes to adopt what he calls Phillips' 'expressivist' account of religious belief.[129] It is not until *The World To Come*, where Cupitt describes this 'expressivist' account of religious belief as a welcome "theological pragmatism", that he wholeheartedly embraces the idea that language constructs reality.[130] He notes that in *The World to Come*, he first began to reflect on the type of Franco-American philosophy recently outlined by the American pragmatist Richard Rorty.[131] Thus from an early stage,

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[127] Don Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, (London: SCM Press, 1987), pp. 18-21.
[128] Cupitt, *The Leap of Reason*, op. cit., p. 41.; *Explorations in Theology*, op. cit., pp. 24-26.
[129] Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, op. cit., pp. 56-58. Phillips has always tended to use the term 'expression' when considering the nature of religious language but has never wanted to be understood as a non-realist. This is to some extent due to his association of non-realist with the views expressed by Richard Braithwaite in his 'An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief' in B. Mitchell (ed.), *The Philosophy of Religion*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). See D.Z. Phillips, *Religion Without Explanation*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), pp. 139-150 and 'On Really Believing' in Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, (London: MacMillan, 1993), pp. 33-55.
[130] Cupitt, *The World To Come*, op. cit., pp. 160-162. Also see pp. 12-13, 130-131.
[131] Don Cupitt, 'A Reply to Rowan Williams' in *Modern Theology*, Vol. 1, 1984, p. 26.

Cupitt's understanding of the constructive nature of language has been entwined with, and informed by, philosophical pragmatism.

This is also evidenced in Cupitt's account of Wittgenstein for whom, Cupitt comments, "words and sentences are not invisible essences laid up in a Platonic heaven, but are given by the part they play in social life".[132] In this view, the meaning a use of language has will always be a public matter and will depend upon the human practices that provide its public context. Talk of God will be meaningful within the context of our religious practices so that Cupitt can affirm that he can only understand 'God' in religious terms as "the part God plays in the religious life ...".[133] In this sense, language determines the religious reality. Religious realism must therefore be understood as a doctrine internal to a human use of language. For Cupitt, the value of Wittgenstein's account of language is the attention it gives to the use of language within our everyday practices, thereby drawing us away from, and curing us of, the tendency to posit meanings outside of human life and practice and human uses of language.[134] Cupitt never moves far from this Wittgensteinian view of language,[135] but in *Only Human* and onward, until *The Time Being*, Wittgenstein's notion that language provides the limits of our world[136] comes to be expressed by Cupitt in terms of the slogan associated with Derrida's deconstructive account of language: "*il n'y a rien hors du texte.*"[137] Claiming Derrida as his inspiration, Cupitt tells us:

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[132] Cupitt, *The World To Come*, op. cit., p. 54.

[133] ibid., p. 63. In this Wittgensteinian view, Cupitt writes: "Language does not gain its meaning by referring and copying in that way. Instead, language has to be seen as embedded in and interwoven with human practices." *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., p. 220.

[134] Cupitt, *The Last Philosophy*, op. cit., pp. 1-3.

[135] See for example Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 86.; *What Is a Story?*, op. cit., pp. 139-140.; *After All*, op. cit., pp. 31-32.

[136] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, (1922) (E.T. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, London: Routledge, 1961), ¶¶ 5.621, 5.63, 5.62; Cupitt, *The world To Come*, op. cit., p. 131.

[137] 'There is nothing outside of the text'. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, (1967) (E.T. G.C. Spivak, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 163. For an interpretation of Derrida's work that is more amenable to realism see Christopher Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism?* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990).; Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).; Graham Word, *Barth, Derrida And the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

> Outside life there is not even nothing. Stop thinking in such ways, cure yourself of trying to talk nonsense! Understand that language is all, and forget about trying to step outside, for there is no such step that could conceivably be taken.[138]

If the second stage of Cupitt's theological pilgrimage, as classified by White, is marked by a retreat inward to an internal space still occupied by the divine in the form of the autonomously chosen religious consciousness, then in the third stage this retreat is cut off. Religion now becomes a matter of public convention. Social change, rather than personal autonomy, becomes seen by Cupitt as the site of religious freedom and moral re-evaluation.[139] When all knowledge is seen as human, natural, historical and instrumental and when this knowledge is shown to be meaningful only inside a use of language, then we see that there can be no outside: no transcendence of the public human realm; no outside to history or culture; no outside to language.[140] Cupitt writes:

> [I]deas about transcendence are in themselves ... just "immanent; supernatural beliefs ... natural phenomena; mystical experiences of stepping right out of time ... have a natural history *in* time.[141]

Religious non-realism is a form of radical immanentism,[142] and radical linguistic outsidelessness is increasingly called upon by Cupitt to explain why we should now

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[138] Cupitt, *Only Human*, op. cit., p. xi. See also p. xii.

[139] Cupitt, *The Time Being*, op. cit., pp. 80-82.

[140] Although an outside may be imaginatively conceived inside language. Cupitt, *What Is a Story?*, op. cit., pp. 82, 102.

[141] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., p. 87 (Cupitt's own marks of omission and italics); also p. 120. Comparing Wittgenstein and Derrida on this notion of outsidelessness, Cupitt writes:
> Wittgensteinian might make the point by saying that for us the world is within language and not *vice versa*; Derrida, while saying essentially the same thing, speaks not of language but of texts and writing ... for however far we go in chasing after some extra-textual reality which can function as an objective criterion for checking the text, we will still be operating within the realm of text. Our relation to whatever we describe as 'reality' will still be subject to the textual logic which governs all thought. We never grasp objective 'natural presence' in a clear-cut, univocal way, for the very act of grasping is itself language-shaped. Whatever we do, we are always within the logic of text, which is secondary, differential and full of systematic ambiguities.
Cupitt, *Life Lines*, op. cit., p. 193.

[142] For Cupitt religion *is* learning to live with radical immanence. Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, op. cit., p. 149. He writes elsewhere:
> The Flux is outsideless. There is only all this, and there's nothing wrong with all this. The work of religion ought to be, not to take us out of it, but simply to reconcile us to it.
Cupitt, *After All*, op. cit., p. 17.

be religious non-realists.[143] According to Cupitt, after Derrida, words cannot be understand as transcendental signifiers. Rather, they are immanently inscribed signs that receive their meaning from other such signs in an unending relational chain of 'différance'.[144] All meaning must be understood as differential and humanly produced rather than referential and extra-human. "A dictionary," writes Cupitt, "shows meaning to be relational and differential ... not from sign directly on to [the] thing signified, but sideways from sign to sign."[145] Thus, in an important sense, Cupitt argues, language produces reality. "Your vocabulary," Cupitt writes, "shapes your world."[146] Religion, ethics, art, and science, as well as notions of self and world are all constituted by the language in which they are conducted.[147] When meaning is understood as its current usage within language, talk of an objective, realist, supernatural, extra-human God beyond language is finally silenced.[148] To find out all there is to find out about God we need not go beyond human life and human language. "Like us," Cupitt notes, "God is made only of words."[149] On Derrida's account of language Cupitt argues:

> ... everything is constituted within the foundationless, unanchored, evolving cultural-linguistic whole of which we are all part and to which we all contribute.[150]

Because language is always shifting and never fixed there can be no self-present meaning. All language in this sense is like writing. It has to be interpreted and re-interpreted.[151] Even speech, which appears to be grounded in the meaning intended

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[143] For the visionary nature of Cupitt's understanding of outsidelessness see Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., pp. 87-89.

[144] *'Différance'* indicating a combination of deferral to other signs and its difference from them.

[145] Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, op. cit., p. 21. Religion, Cupitt notes, must be seen as "a thesaurus of meaning." Cupitt, *Only Human*, op. cit., p. 205.

[146] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. ix.

[147] ibid., p. ix. Cupitt recognises that Nietzsche, Lacan, Lyotard and Baudrillard are also significant figures in the general development of the view of language which Derrida outlines. ibid., p. 12.

[148] ibid., p. 70. Also *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., pp. 12, 18.

[149] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. x.

[150] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 42.

[151] ibid., p. 12.

by the speaker, must presuppose the differential chain of meaning and will thus always be open to ambiguity and the slippage of self-presence.[152]

The third, more subtle, influence on Cupitt's understanding of language is Donald Davidson. Like Derrida, Davidson argues that there is no site for questions of meaning, truth and reality outside of, or beyond, a use of language. Samuel C. Wheeler III writes:

> For Davidson, ... [t]here is no 'presence' behind language, but rather, what is behind language is inseparable from further language.[153]

However, Davidson's accont of language is more amenable to the pragmatism and the linguistic and biological naturalism, that Cupitt wants to develop in theology, than is the deconstructive post-modernist account associated with Derrida. Indeed, Cupitt states that, at least since 1994, he is "wanting to read Davidson on language, rather than Derrida."[154] Cupitt's attempt to bring together biological and linguistic naturalism to produce a non-realist religious and metaphysical story that is not untruthful[155] may now no longer be facilitated by a deconstructive account of language. Since *After All*, Cupitt has followed the advice he gave in *Life Lines* to recognise the value of post-modernism and then "make haste to move on."[156] He now suggests that we require "a post-postmodernist attempt at reconstruction."[157] The difference between Davidson and Derrida is that whereas Derrida is concerned to see in the differential play of language an unspecifiable 'other' of language which supposedly prevents language itself from becoming the source of self-present meaning, [158] Davidson is concerned with the assumptions that are required by our

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[152] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., p. 112.; *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 141.

[153] Samuel C. Wheeler III, 'Indeterminacy of French Interpretation: Derrida and Davidson' in Ernest LePore (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 489.

[154] Cupitt, *The Last Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 134. Cupitt adds that in seeing words as tools for doing certain jobs the pragmatic tradition in philosophy resembles Wittgensteinian thought. ibid., p. 147.

[155] Cupitt, *After All*, op. cit., p. 39.; *What Is a Story?*, op. cit., pp. 81-82. I shall discuss this in a little more detail in chapter 5.

[156] Cupitt, *Life Lines*, op. cit., p. 127.

[157] Cupitt, *After All*, op. cit., p. 7.

[158] See Derrida's dialogue with Richard Kearney in Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 123-124.

ubiquitous interpretative activity. These assumptions give us our world more or less as we perceive it to be. Thus, on the presupposition of a Davidsonian account of language Cupitt is able to affirm a position between constructivism and naive realism,[159] in which "we together constitute a common life-world."[160] Our language and our world are inextricably interwoven. The objective world returns as a humanly angled construction on the outer face of language.[161] Explicating this point Cupitt writes:

> The only world we have, the only world we know anything about, and the only world we have the slightest reason to believe in, is the world of us talking animals, the world as it relates to, and is going to be seen by, beings with our needs, our purposes, our feeling and our language.[162]

Davidson thus provides Cupitt with an account of language situated in life and an account of human life that is situated in language. The meaning of life and the meaning of language are bound up with each other, there is no antecedently existing entity outside of language and life that further establishes their meaning or reality.

All three philosophers have played a significant role in undermining Cupitt's confidence in realism. But, from *The Time Being* onwards, he tends to use deconstruction piecemeal in order to illustrate a point against realism,[163] rather than wholesale as in *Creation Out of Nothing*. Equally, Davidson's account of language, which now dominates Cupitt's theology, was only mentioned in passing in *Creation Out of Nothing*.[164] Meanwhile, Cupitt's understanding of Wittgenstein's account of language as establishing meaning internal to our practices, is affirmed throughout

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[159] Cupitt, *The Last Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 50.
[160] ibid., p. 16.
[161] ibid., p. 58. For Davidson, language gives us our world. But Cupitt, while under the influence of deconstruction, sometimes suggests that the world drops out of the picture altogether. See *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 195. [It must be noted, however, that such a disenchanted view of the world may not represent Derrida's own account of deconstruction. See Frank B. Farrell, *Subjectivity, Realism and Postmodernism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 255-262.] Under the influence of Davidson, however, Cupitt argues that our common world is constructed by people who share a common language and that therefore "[e]verything is what it seems to be ... " Cupitt, *After All*, op. cit., p. 47.
[162] Cupitt, *The Last Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 101.
[163] Cupitt, *The Time Being*, op. cit., pp. 106-107.
[164] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 206. n.17.

Cupitt's works since *Taking Leave of God.* Taken together, all three provide Cupitt with a pragmatic account of language[165] that furnishes him with a set of reasons that help explain why a non-realist approach to religious belief now seems appealing.

Perhaps the most important of these reasons is the question that this account of language raises against the correspondence theory of knowledge upon which, Cupitt believes, many versions of religious realism, especially Platonic versions, rely.[166] Such versions of realism, Cupitt notes, suppose "that the great words of philosophy, religion, ethics and so forth, must stand for unchanging and invisible essences, like the Platonic ideas."[167] But Cupitt's account of language undermines this in at least three ways.[168] Firstly, it denies the realist any fixed starting point from which it might be possible to hook words onto things. What might appear to be a linguistic necessity is, Cupitt argues, just a piece of convention which is always liable to undergo change. There are no fixed points of reference around which it might be possible to build a stable theory of correspondence. If there is no non-conventional reason why the word 'table' should refer to the piece of furniture that I am currently resting on, then there is also no reason why the word 'God' should be understood as referring to anything other than the conventional set of meanings associated with the term. The realist might respond by arguing that in some cases conventional meanings might, by fortune, stumble across a natural hook-up between word and thing. Secondly, though, Cupitt points out that we hardly have sufficient reason to know when such a fortunate connection has been made. To recognise that a connection has been made presupposes that we already know in advance what the fortunate set of words would look like before coming to use them. As Cupitt notes, the realist would need to "employ some medium other than language in order to define the [language-to-reality relation and that] medium ... will have to be able to

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[165] Cupitt sees Wittgenstein as "a sort of pragmatist." (*Only Human*, op. cit., p. 203.), and despite its drawbacks, he still conceives the differential deconstructive understanding of language as defining meaning in terms of use (*Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 83.).

[166] Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, op. cit., Ch. 2 and pp. 99-100.

[167] Cupitt, 'Anti-Realist Faith' in Runzo (ed.), *Is God Real?*, op. cit., p. 46.

[168] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., pp. 59-60.

compass both ends of [that relation]."[169] We have no such medium. We cannot know the world in any way other than by our current linguistic conventions. These conventions cannot be compared with a view of the world that is outside them. Cupitt writes:

> ... we are so completely immersed in life-and-language that we cannot in fact spell out any other way that things might have been for us.[170]

Thus, Cupitt notes, our only possible source of true knowledge "is internal to our discursive practices, and external copying-truth is plainly mythical."[171] As Davidson argues, when it comes to the question of truth, "[t]here is no reason to look for a prior, or independent, account of some referential relation."[172] The only connection we need to make for truth to be philosophically significant "is the connection with the users of language."[173] Thirdly, Cupitt notes, the realist must assume that somewhere there is something, albeit as yet extremely amorphous, that really *is* how things are. Unfortunately, for such a notion to be meaningfully articulated it has to submit itself to the iterability of language. "The consequence is," Cupitt writes, "reality never gets fully closed or fixed but goes on being contested endlessly."[174] 'How things really are' remains amorphous and unspecifiable.

Thus, a correspondence theory of knowledge is incoherent because, as Cupitt notes:

> ... nobody can take up a fully-independent standpoint and vocabulary for seeing and defining the way the two orders [word and object] nestle together. What is it that fits snugly up against what, and where?[175]

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[169] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 38.

[170] Cupitt, *The Time Being*, op. cit., p. 138. Elsewhere Cupitt notes that conventionality "has the effect of destroying the old metaphysical foundations of knowledge" (*The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., p. 118.).

[171] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 39.

[172] Donald Davidson, 'The Structure and Content of Truth', in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 87, 1990, p. 300.

[173] ibid., p. 300.

[174] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 60.

[175] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 84.

It is also a cause of scepticism because, as Davidson points out, correspondence theories not only leave us uninformed about the nature of the transcendent entities to which our words are supposed to correspond, but also "such theories deny that what is true is conceptually connected in any way to what we believe."[176] It is ridiculous, Cupitt argues, to doubt that our beliefs about the manifest world, which language produces and presents to us, are out of touch with the world. We cannot possibly imagine how else the world might be.[177] As Davidson notes in the conclusion to his article 'Empirical Content', the connection between our beliefs and our world does not involve positing "sense data, uninterpreted givens or unwritable sentences."[178] Rather, it involves an act of interpretation in which the assumption of a shared linguistic world enables us to allow to a speaker that for the most part his beliefs are true beliefs. Davidson writes:

> ... the causal relation between our beliefs and speech and the world also supply the interpretation of our language and of our beliefs.[179]

In a passage clearly influenced by his understanding of Davidson, Cupitt writes:

> We are biological organisms, and for all intents and purposes our life-world is the world, and that's it. ... [T]he world is all ours, our home, full stop. There are no ... mysteries, ... This world, our life-world, is our only and final home: it has no further world beyond it. It is the world of our own shared feeling, our sympathy: of course it has no Beyond.[180]

If the correspondence model of knowledge is discredited so also, according to Cupitt, is foundationalism and the dualist metaphysics it creates. Both, Cupitt believes, are central elements of a realist account of religious belief.[181] Foundationalism usually conceives God or some self-evident proposition as blocking regressive questioning about the basis upon which our knowledge can lay claim to truth. A central core truth is envisaged against which various forms of

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[176] Davidson, 'The Structure and Content of Truth', op. cit., p. 299.
[177] Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, op. cit., p. 37.
[178] Davidson, 'Empirical Content', in E. LePore (ed.), *Truth and Interpretation*, op. cit., p. 332.
[179] ibid., p. 332.
[180] Cupitt, *The Last Philosophy*, op. cit., pp. 37-38.
[181] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 102.

knowledge can be judged. But Cupitt points out that our understanding of language would suggest that such foundational notions are redundant. In a comment primarily about foundations in morality, Cupitt writes:

> ... linguistic meanings ... simply cannot be held immobile in the way that foundationalism demands. So we must give up foundationalism and instead see ... religion as being an evolving language and a continuing conversation. It does not need and it cannot have either certain and immovable foundations, or invisible and extra-historical rails to direct it aright.[182]

If meaning is internal to a use of language there can be no non-linguistic, no non-relational account of foundations. Cupitt comments, "[t]here is no longer anything out there for faith to correspond to, ... the only test of faith now is the way it works out in life."[183] Like any human ideology, foundationalism is "carried in human practices and human language."[184] Language, Cupitt notes, "doesn't have or need a Beyond. ... [because it] already presupposes and produces a world all by itself."[185] To explicate this Davidsonian point, Cupitt compares realists to over-zealous onion peelers. Continually peeling in search of the core they "miss the point that objectivity is given with the whole onion."[186] As Cupitt notes elsewhere:

> ... after the turn to language, we see that the world of everyday life conjured up by our language is the only world there can be for us.[187]

It is now a matter of common sense that our knowledge of the world, our religion and anything else, is produced in language and since language is only human so too is our world and our religion.[188]

Another implication of this account of language, for Cupitt, is the demise of the notion of absolute truth. While some versions of religious realism may claim not to

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[182] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., pp. 142-143.
[183] Cupitt, *Only Human*, op. cit., p. 202.
[184] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., pp. 132-133.
[185] Cupitt, *The Time Being*, op. cit., p. 121.
[186] Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, op. cit., p. 19.
[187] Cupitt, *The Last Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 6.
[188] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 70. "Language," Cupitt notes, "has made God." ibid., p. 70.

rely upon a correspondence theory, they nevertheless claim to be adumbrating a theology that, if recognised as true, should be seen as representing a divine figure that must be asserted as true for all time. However, three points make it clear that there is no possibility of rejuvenating a notion of truth that would support realist claims about God. First, if something is claimed to be true it is not, Cupitt suggests, because we can make a strong thesis out of 'truth', but because such claims fit with our current linguistically established human consensual activity.[189] Second, such truths are "socially-produced, historically-developed, plural and changing."[190] As local and humanly created, they remain contingent, ambiguous and incomplete. They can therefore offer no support to realist faith. Notions like 'God', 'absolute truth', and 'moral order' are rhetorical uses of human language designed to produce a particular way of living by manipulating words into coherent stories. Thus, Cupitt writes:

> When I say that Christianity is true I mean that this particular system of signs and house of meaning is trustworthy and reliable as a ... vocabulary in which I can frame my own religious life. ... We do not need more than that ...[191]

Third, it is only within story that human talk of truth makes sense. It is only within the context of a specific creative use of language that 'God', or indeed a 'philosophy of language' itself, can have meaning.[192] In story we can conjure up an outside,

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[189] Cupitt, *After All*, op. cit., p. 41.

[190] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 45. Such truths are small 't' rather than capital 'T' truths: ibid., p. 45. They are personal and regional: ibid., p. 85. See also *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., pp. 12-13.; *The Time Being*, op. cit., pp. 47, 110, 116, 137.

[191] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 55. Elsewhere, Cupitt writes:
It is only because there is no truth, and instead merely a plurality of truths, that we have been able to rehabilitate the spiritual life, as being a pilgrimage through a long series of truths. Furthermore, this pilgrimage has no great destination and is never complete,...
Cupitt, *Life Lines*, op. cit., p.214.

[192] This is a story in which 'God' reveals himself in language and henceforth, Cupitt notes, has:
...to abandon his absoluteness and selfsameness and suffer dispersal into the endlessness of interpretation. ... [L]ike any other speaker of a human tongue he must become in the end nothing but the many different things that others make of him.
Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 143.

imagine the transcendent, and dream up visions of eternity, but such "stories of escape are still stories."[193]

For Cupitt, the ubiquity of language means that we are always within the stories we tell of our life and our world. These stories, include the stories we tell in, and about religion, and about language itself. They provide all the objectivity we need and a cogent explanation for the intellectual attractiveness of religious non-realism. Cupitt notes:

> Objectivity is given in and with language; it is not, as realists suppose, something external to language around which language wraps itself.[194]

Nevertheless it is still an open question whether we choose a realist or a non-realist story of religion. A choice between them, Cupitt suggests, will be made on pragmatic grounds, in terms considered to be most helpful to human living and most credible to the human intellect.[195]

2.4. Is Cupitt's Account of the Intellectual Heritage of Religious Non-realism Religiously Satisfying?:

Cupitt's critics do not accept his account of the intellectual heritage that I have been considering in this chapter. Brian Hebblethwaite, for example, argues that Cupitt's account of our intellectual heritage is selective and shaped by his "prior commitment to an anti-metaphysical ... pragmatic understanding of religious faith ..."[196] According to Hebblethwaite, the thinkers that for Cupitt constitute this heritage are either profoundly mistaken about their understanding of religious belief or are read so selectively by Cupitt that the service they actually do in rooting out false pictures of realist religious belief is turned into a criticism of all forms of religious realism.[197] Hebblethwaite accuses Cupitt of accepting unquestioningly the atheistic metaphysics of secular thought and of ignoring alternative theological positions

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[193] Cupitt, *What Is a Story?*, op. cit., p. 134; also pp. 29-30.
[194] Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, op. cit., p. 19.
[195] Cupitt, *Only Human*, op. cit., p. 9. *What Is a Story?*, op. cit., p. 79.
[196] Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Ocean of Truth: A Defence of Objective Theism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 52.
[197] ibid., Ch. 2.

which continue the task of interpreting modern thought in terms of theistic belief.[198] Above all, he accuses Cupitt of an unquestioning acceptance of Kantian subjectivity and Nietzschean constructivism.[199]

However, Hebblethwaite's account of Cupitt can be challenged. Firstly, we have seen that Cupitt does not accept Nietzsche's philosophy unquestioningly and his later account of religious non-realism demurs from his earlier attempt to ground religious belief in a Kantian style ethical subjectivity. Secondly, Hebblethwaite's own attempt to defend a realist account of truth, which amounts to a defence of the views of Michael Devitt against the combined wisdom of Donald Davidson, Hilary Putnam and Michael Dummett, is itself a selective account of the recent philosophy of science and leads in any case only to a materialistic and deterministic naturalism which Hebblethwaite argues does not fit with the human experience of life. For Hebblethwaite, only if our natural material world is created by a loving God can we make sense of our experience.[200] Thirdly, therefore, despite his own criticism of the type of philosophy of religion that builds a picture of God's reality from the prior assumption of that reality,[201] Hebblethwaite finds himself relying upon a prior theistic interpretation of human experience. His rationalisation of the world in terms of theism, his interpretation of human self-transcendence and his account of revelation all presuppose, rather than argue, a theistic ground to experience. Hebblethwaite's understanding of the intellectual heritage, we might say, is shaped by his prior commitment to a metaphysically orientated theistic understanding of religious faith.[202]

While Cupitt would claim that nothing hangs upon a privileged reading of the intellectual heritage connecting it with something like 'the truth of the matter',

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[198] ibid., Ch. 4.

[199] ibid., Ch. 5, esp. pp. 79-80.

[200] ibid., Ch. 7.

[201] ibid., pp. 142-143.

[202] June O'Connor points out that these prior assumptions on both sides mean that the arguments of one 'cut little ice' with the arguments of the other. June O'Connor, 'It's Time to Talk About Trust', in Joseph Runzo (ed.), *Is God Real?* op. cit., pp 177-178.

Hebblethwaite regards this as a necessary pre-requisite against which any religiously satisfying interpretation of the intellectual heritage, and that heritage itself, must be judged. For Cupitt, it is enough that this heritage provides abundant resources for the reconstruction and renewal of religious belief. Whereas Cupitt sees the truth of this heritage as opening "some pathways of intellectual, moral and religious renewal,"[203] Hebblethwaite sees its truth primarily in, and as much as it gives expression to, an antecedently existing divine reality. For Cupitt, the fact that alternative interpretations of this heritage exist suggests that 'the truth of the matter' is ambiguous and plural and not something determined by 'ultimate' or divine reality. The question between religious realism and religious non-realism in this context can thus be seen as a pragmatic question: 'does realism or non-realism for religious believers, offer the more satisfying account of the intellectual heritage?' If we express the issue in this way Hebblethwaite is certain that what he terms Cupitt's subjectivist, anti-metaphysical, expressivist, pragmatism is intellectually, religiously and morally inadequate to genuine religious sensibilities.[204] These sensibilities require that life has ultimate meaning and fulfilment. Only the existence of a real God along the lines revealed within the Christian tradition and scripture[205] can guarantee the salvation and eternal life that make life meaningful.[206] Hebblethwaite is astonished that anyone could find liberating the pale shadow of Christianity that is 'Sea of Faith' religious naturalism.[207] Such a view rips the heart out of religion and is tantamount to atheism.[208] It is a form of religious belief which simply does not fit traditional Christian belief. Hebblethwaite indicates that the type of Buddhism which Cupitt admires for its beliefless disinterested spirituality of the void, is

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[203] Don Cupitt, 'Responses', in David L. Edwards, *Tradition and Truth*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), p. 286.

[204] Brian Hebblethwaite, 'A Critique of Don Cupitt's Christian Buddhism', in Runzo (ed.), *Is God Real?*, op. cit., pp. 135-148.

[205] Hebblethwaite, *The Ocean of Truth*, op. cit., pp. 136-137.

[206] ibid., p. 142.

[207] ibid., p. 145.

[208] ibid., p. 152.

inadequate as a religion let alone to a religion of salvation.[209] Non-realism impoverishes religion and could never sustain a church.[210] Religious non-realism is morally inadequate, because by allowing that humans create their own values, the moral realm becomes arbitrary, historically contingent and relativistic. The only consequence will be nihilism. Hebblethwaite also notes that by reducing the human to the natural alone, religious non-realists make it impossible for us to have any understanding of that self-transcendence which is so important in exciting religious sensibilities toward an experience of the eternal and spiritual realm beyond the physical, material world.[211] Religious non-realism is intellectually incoherent because it fails to see that it cannot help relying upon a foundational metaphysics of some kind. As an example, Hebblethwaite mentions Cupitt's notion of life-energy[212] which seeks symbolic representation in art, science, religion or other areas of human endeavour.[213]

However, what these points fail to recognise is that Cupitt is writing for those for whom religious realism has ceased to be a live option. As Rowan Williams argues, Cupitt is not offering a religious hypothesis but a different religious vision.[214] What Cupitt wants is a reconstruction of religious belief which remains inside existing religious institutions. In the next chapter, I will show why Cupitt disagrees with Hebblethwaite and instead believes that non-realism is more conducive to religious renewal and more satisfying to religious sensibilities than is religious realism.

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[209] ibid., pp. 117-119. For a more sympathetic account of Cupitt's similarities and differences with Buddhism see Gregory Spearritt, 'Don Cupitt: Christian Buddhist?', in *Religious Studies*, Vol. 31, 1995, pp. 359-373.

[210] Hebblethwaite, *The Ocean of Truth*, op. cit., pp. 139-153.

[211] ibid., pp. 128-129.

[212] Hebblethwaite, 'A Critique of Don Cupitt's Christian Buddhism', op. cit., p. 141.

[213] Cupitt consistently notes the heuristic nature of this term and reiterates that he has no desire to reinstate foundationalism by employing it. Don Cupitt, *Life Lines*, op. cit., p. 222. This view is confirmed by Mason Olds, who points out that Cupitt follows something like Spinoza's '*conatus*' or life impulse in his ethics rather than Plato's dualism. However, as Olds notes, Cupitt's preference is pragmatically orientated rather than metaphysically grounded. Mason Olds, 'Don Cupitt's Ethics', in *Religious Humanism*, Vol. 28, 1994, p. 85, n.10, relating to pp. 76-77.

[214] Rowan Williams, 'Religious Realism: On Not Quite Agreeing with Don Cupitt' in *Modern Theology*, Vol. 1, 1984, pp. 16, 18-19 ,22.

2.5. Conclusion:

My aim in this chapter has been to consider the intellectual heritage upon which Cupitt draws in order to explain why he and the 'Sea of Faith' religious non-realist's believe that religious non-realism is now an attractive option for religious people to adopt. The cumulative effect of significant ideas in the history of western thought, Cupitt believes, has shown our knowledge, including our religious knowledge, to be human, natural, historical and instrumental. Alongside other historical changes this shift in the intellectual climate has withered the social space available for realist religious belief. Religion now becomes understood as a human use of language and a set of human *practices* in which we engage for purposes that assist our living in the world. Talk of God now acts as a unifying symbol of religious life. If we are religious today, Cupitt believes, it is not because we are committed to putative supernatural truths but because it is pragmatically helpful in various ways for us to be religious. By offering an alternative immanent account of traditional realist belief, the so-called linguistic turn in philosophy provides the western philosophical tradition with a further impetus toward the development of religious non-realism. This linguistic turn pulsates with pragmatic resonance. In that Cupitt's view of language remains understood as human, natural, historical and instrumental this pragmatic resonance will dominate his account of religious non-realism. Equally, there are pressures internal to religious and ethical belief which, according to Cupitt, make a non-realist religious faith, rather than a realist religious faith, the religious inheritor of the Christian tradition. It is this claim that I shall discuss in the next chapter. Then, in chapter four I will consider some criticisms of Cupitt's position and introduce the pragmatic context in which the religious non-realist might understand the explanatory role of both the intellectual heritage, discussed in this chapter, and the pressures internal to religious and ethical belief, to be discussed in the next chapter.

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CHAPTER THREE

THE RELIGIOUS AND ETHICAL APPEAL OF RELIGIOUS NON-REALISM

3.1. Introduction:

The shift in the intellectual seat of authority alluded to by Cupitt helps to explain part of the appeal of religious non-realism. However, Cupitt is keen to emphasise that the religious non-realist does not aim to "resolve the idea of God into non-religious terms."[1] Religious belief, Cupitt argues, provides ample opportunity for the development of a non-realist theology. Indeed, he argues that it is for the sake of religion and its future that we now need to be non-realist. As White points out, Cupitt "attacks realism because he values religion."[2] Alongside various intellectual pressures, the renewal of religious belief itself constitutes a major motivation behind the development and appeal of religious non-realism. In this chapter, therefore, I shall be primarily concerned with those pressures internal to religious belief and ethical practice which Cupitt believes allows for a non-realist reconstruction and renewal of religious belief. Then, in the next chapter, I shall introduce the pragmatic context in which we might best understand the explanatory role of both the intellectual heritage which Cupitt sees as leading to the development of religious non-realism, considered in the last chapter, and the pressures internal to religious belief and ethical practice, which I shall considering in this chapter.

As we have seen, with the publication of *The Long Legged Fly* (1987), a significant shift of emphasis occurs in Cupitt's work. According to White's classification, this shift marks the transition from the second to the third stage of Cupitt's theological pilgrimage. In the second stage, from *Taking Leave of God*

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[1] Don Cupitt, *Only Human*, (London: SCM Press, 1985), p. 136.
[2] Stephen Ross White, *Don Cupitt and the Future of Christian Doctrine*, (London: SCM Press, 1994), p. 118. also p. 76. Or, as Joseph Runzo puts it, for Cupitt "theological realism can literally inhibit or even distort the life of faith." Joseph Runzo (ed.), *Is God Real?*, (London: MacMillan, 1993), p. 161.; Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, (London: SCM Press, 1980), pp. 2, 154.

(1980) up until *Life Lines* (1986), Cupitt's opposition to religious realism is motivated by what he takes to be its contradiction of genuine religious belief, practice and affection generated by the autonomous internalised religious consciousness. After *Life Lines* and from *The Long legged Fly* onwards, the autonomous internalised religious consciousness no longer acts as a religious *a priori* defining the nature of genuine religious experience.[3] Such *a priori* notions are themselves seen to be human, natural and historical.[4] The autonomous religious consciousness is itself dissipated into the flux of the contingent movements of language and life.[5] Religion is now understood as a public human activity created by a use of language.[6] No longer conceived primarily as an autonomous principle, genuine religious belief and practice becomes, for Cupitt, an ecstatic incarnational embrace of all that is transient and contingent, namely, life itself:

The self, the world and God are each dispersed and melted down into the continuous flux of the contingencies of language and life.[7] Language gets its meaning as it 'comes to life' in us and life gets its meaning as it is contextualised in language.[8] Religious non-realism therefore does not offer a futile hope for salvation by engineering an escape from the flux; rather, it encourages us to see that salvation occurs when we fully accept contingency. Religious non-realism, Cupitt argues,

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[3] Cupitt writes: "Especially around 1979-1981, I was preoccupied with the idea of defining the essence of the religious, as if 'the religious' as a category were an autonomous, pure and timeless essence that could be relied upon. My idea was that when I had discovered it I would use it as a touchstone for the criticism of theology. Kant had done a moral critique of theology, so I would attempt a religious one." But now, Cupitt continues, he realises that "morality and religion are not platonic essences; they are mere historical formations." *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, (London: SCM Press, 1989), pp. 52-53. However, even at this stage Cupitt is enticed by the lure of the *a priori*. Now it is not the *a priori* of the autonomous religious consciousness but the *a priori* reality of language. See Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, (London: SCM Press, 1987), Ch. 2-3.

[4] Don Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, op. cit., p. 30. *New Christian Ethics*, (London: SCM Press, 1988), pp. 85, 115 ff.

[5] Unable to "transcend the flux of phenomena," the self is "thoroughly woven into the world." Don Cupitt, *Solar Ethics*, (London: SCM Press, 1995), p. 3. Also Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, op. cit., p. 122.; *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., pp. 70, 88-89.

[6] Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, op. cit., p. 2 ff.

[7] Cupitt, *After All*, (London: SCM Press, 1994), op. cit., pp. 113-114.; *Solar Ethics*, op. cit., p. 52.

[8] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 13.

produces a greater happiness about the human condition than does realism. He writes:

> We have to say yes to what is before us, in all its contingency. Such is, I believe, the final message of an incarnational religion. The Eternal descends into the contingent world and is diffused through it.[9]

From this new perspective, realism becomes understood as anything that seems to stand in the way of our full acceptance of life in all its contingency and transience. Realism creates the deception of objectivity, immutability, unity and obligation.[10] It is a fiction, but its adherents labour under the illusion that it is more than a fiction.[11] Anyone holding to realism is thus deceived about life. They deny the valuative vitality that life brings to a universe that, in itself, is valueless and vitiate life with putative essences and foundations. The salvation that religion brings, Cupitt suggests, is the joyful acceptance of all that is fleeting, transient and contingent. This salvation is the cure for realism.[12] Thus, by identifying religion with a full affirmation of life in all its joyfulness, transience and contingency, Cupitt can view religion as indubitably opposed to any form of realism. Realism creates the anxieties about life from which religion would liberate us.[13] Realism is therefore anti-religious to the core. The religious person must consequently be an active non-realist[14] who sees in religion "a cure for metaphysics and a joyful celebration of transience."[15] Our salvation rests in our being able to say "yes" to our own temporality. To do this, and "for the sake of our salvation, we need to become non-realists."[16] In this context religion is no longer generated by an autonomous

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[9] ibid., p. 8. Also see p. 75.; *The Time Being*, (London: SCM Press, 1992), p. 8.; *The Last Philosophy*, (London: SCM Press, 1995), pp. 74-84.

[10] Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, op. cit., pp. 41-43.

[11] ibid., p. 144.

[12] Cupitt, *The Time Being*, op. cit., p. 2 and chapters 7 and 8. Jesus' recorded words in Luke's Gospel (LK 17 v. 33), and William Blake's poem 'Eternity' express the idea well. According to Blake: 'He who bends to himself a joy / Does the winged life destroy; / But he who kisses the joy as it flies / Lives in eternity's sunrise'. Cupitt writes "loss becomes gain, transience becomes eternal life." *What is a Story?*, op. cit., p. 154.

[13] Cupitt, *The Time Being*, op. cit., pp. 87-94.

[14] ibid., p. 173.

[15] ibid.; p. 165.

[16] ibid., p. 163.

principle but it is a story we tell and live by. It "lives only while we are making it up. ... [It] ... resembles art in being a human creative activity whereby a certain quality of life is produced."[17]

Equally, morality is no longer conceived by Cupitt as a set of internalised guiding principles that we autonomically choose to impose upon ourselves. Rather, for Cupitt, to act morally is to live vivaciously; to "inject value into life,"[18] to outpour ourselves continually, giving value and worth to all that is fleeting and contingent. Our moral task now is to create value and to 'face-down' nihilism. The religious and the ethical merge in Cupitt's theology of the kingdom. For Cupitt, the end of realism is concomitant with the coming of the kingdom promised by Jesus[19] and the realisation of our eternal happiness.[20]

Thus, whether we consider Cupitt's acceptance of non-realism from the second or the third stage of his theological pilgrimage we will be confronted by his assertion of the incompatibility of realism with religious belief and ethical practice. This perceived incompatibility is amply exemplified in Cupitt's work. I shall summarise some of these examples.

3.2 The Incompatibility of Religious Belief with Realism:

3.2a. Religious Pluralism: The growing awareness of religious pluralism over the last 150 years suggests that religious belief and practice is a product of human cultural activity.[21] According to Cupitt, in order to avoid this suggestion realists either assert that one's own tradition is, to varying degrees, an approximation of ultimate religious truth to which other faith traditions only aspire, or they hypothesise a unity of truth at the multi-faith level so that the religiously ultimate is understood as being conceived in different cultures by different names.[22] For the

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[17] Cupitt, *What is a Story?*, (London: SCM Press, 1991), op. cit., p. 129.
[18] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., p. 13.
[19] Cupitt, *After All*, , pp. 113-117.; *The Last Philosophy*, op. cit., pp. 3, 122-132.
[20] Cupitt, *The Last Philosophy*, op. cit., pp. 5-9, 11, 74-78.
[21] Cupitt, *Creation out of Nothing*, (London: SCM Press, 1990), pp. 117, 122-123.
[22] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 19.

non-realist, who has no truck with the notion of cross-cultural universals, this syncretism is just one more local human truth. The syncretists, Cupitt believes, are correct to assert that the different religious traditions do not exclude each other, but this is not because they share in an ultimate universal truth. Religions, according to Cupitt, are complex historical value systems that overlap each other in many areas of human concern and are always appropriating from each other's traditions.[23] For Cupitt, we should allow the assertion of each local religious truth claim while remaining committed to our own. Cupitt believes that it is no longer possible or useful for us to labour under the impression that there is one ultimate truth. Rather, we need to take seriously the existence of conflicting perspectives.[24] Cupitt states:

> There are many possible small-t truths. In adopting one to live by, we are choosing a life-style. We are choosing a fiction, a story to live by that suits us.[25]

Our awareness of religious pluralism on the synchronic plain leads to a further awareness of diachronic religious pluralism. As an "ever-changing human product,"[26] religion not only differs between contemporary cultures but also within cultures over historical periods.[27] God never has had a permanent identity: "... *de facto*," Cupitt notes, "God of modern Christianity has become very different from the God of sixteenth century Christianity."[28] This is not an idea that is amenable to religious realism,[29] but it is one, Cupitt believes, that many realists implicitly recognise, if only in order to attempt to evade its non-realist implications.[30] They know, Cupitt suggests, that the ontological status of theological language has been emptied of content, but hope that no-one notices. This, Cupitt argues, is an aspect

[23] Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, op. cit., p. 141.
[24] Also see David A. Hart, *One Faith?*, (London: Mowbray, 1995), pp. 1-9, 145-146.
[25] Cupitt, *What Is a Story?*, op. cit., p. 64. David Hart, *One Faith?*, op. cit., also understands God in the context of pluralism in terms of the part God plays in the narrative of faith. pp. 53, 166-167.
[26] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith: Christianity in Change*, (London: BBC, 1984), p. 187.
[27] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., p. 85.
[28] Cupitt, *Creation out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 118.
[29] ibid., pp. 118-119.
[30] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., p. 36. A paradigm example of this evasive tendency for Cupitt is Jungian theology. Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 104.

of the theologian's art: making contemporary theological opinion appear as the outworking of the traditional essence of faith, "as if," Cupitt writes, "they were offering recognisable portraits in slightly different styles of an objective Being with known lineaments who is independently established in the language."[31] Our age, for Cupitt, is the age of the artist-theologian.[32] The works of Tillich and Barth, for example, are respectively, considered by Cupitt as "a poetic expression of Lutheran psychology"[33] and an "expounding of the church's internal jargon."[34] They are productions of grand narrators.[35] Alongside Bultmann, Rahner and Pannenberg, Cupitt mentions them as producing "work[s] of art [that express] a personal vision ... [so that] ... it no longer makes sense to assess them as realists."[36] Diachronic religious pluralism, non-realists believe, is evidence that it is theologians who make theological sense of the world through the theological stories they tell, rather than some time-transcending, antecedently existing entity. As story, religion becomes intelligible as only human.[37] If realism claims to be taking us outside of religious stories it must also be taking us outside of religion. Revelation and religious experience evoke a God from within the religious story and not a being who antecedes our religious narratives.[38] So, for example, Cupitt writes:

> ... we can still have the experience of grace, providing that we don't mind acknowledging that it is textually generated.[39]

By inculcating an awareness of the human production of religious belief, religious pluralism is regarded by Cupitt as a pressure internal to religion that points toward religious non-realism. It shows, Cupitt notes, that:

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[31] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., p. 246.
[32] ibid., p. 246.
[33] Cupitt, *The Time Being*, op. cit., p. 86.
[34] Cupitt, *After All*, op. cit., p. 5.
[35] Cupitt, *What Is a Story?*, op. cit., p. 121.
[36] Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., p. 246.
[37] Cupitt, *What Is a Story?*, op. cit., p. 61.
[38] See Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, op. cit., p. 120.; *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., pp. 163-164.; *Creation out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 26.; *What Is a Story?*, op. cit., p. 95.
[39] Cupitt, *What Is a Story?*, op. cit., pp. 94-95.

> ... religion is a communal human imaginative creation, and ... that the only question is why people should ever have supposed otherwise?[40]

3.2b. The Problem of Evil: Second, Cupitt refers to the difficulty that realist religious belief has with the problem of evil. While, for the realist, there is primarily a dilemma to be faced, for the non-realist there is primarily a task to be achieved. The realist's dilemma is not just trying to equate a good, all-loving, all-powerful God with the fact of human suffering, but also trying to come to terms with the fact that this dilemma, by allowing that there is a problem at all, already implicitly denies the traditional realist conception of God in favour of a higher natural, human court of appeal.[41] Given the evidence of human suffering throughout history, there is now among many realists, a desire to re-think the traditional idea of God. The notions of divine impassability and omnipotence may need to be reconceived if the realist understanding of God, as a God of love, is to be maintained in the face of human suffering. God, they suggest, now needs to be understood as a God who suffers with us. Yet, as Cupitt points out, those theologians who suggest revising the traditional idea of God are accused by more traditional theologians of creating a picture of God so immersed in human suffering that God lacks the power to bring salvation and thus is not religiously adequate.[42]

In Cupitt's early account of non-realism he sides with the traditionalists. A God in whom we trust must be a God powerful enough to bring our salvation. But this traditional understanding of God is only believable as a religious ideal. If God were real, God would be morally culpable in the face of human suffering and thus religiously inadequate. Instead, Omnipotence and Immutability are to be understood as mythopoeic terms symbolising the power and unconditional nature of the

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[40] ibid., p. 125.

[41] Cupitt, *Creation out of Nothing*, op. cit., pp. 64-65.

[42] Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, op. cit., pp. 111-113. See Steven T. Davis' response to David R. Griffen's process theodicy echoed by John K. Roth. Stephen T. Davis (ed.), *Encountering Evil*, (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1981), pp. 191-136, esp. pp 119-122, 125-128. And R. Olson's critique of Jürgen Moltmann's understanding of the suffering God. R. Olson, 'Trinity and Eschatology: the Historical Being of God in Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg' in *The Scottish Journal of Theology* Vol. 36, 1983, pp. 213-227, esp. pp. 221-222.

internalised religious demand to pursue religious values.[43] In Cupitt's later account of non-realism he sides with the revisionists. The revisionists show us that it is we who create the picture of God that we need for our current purposes. Our revisions show that we narrate our stories about God in order to make God work for us.[44]

For the non-realist, the problem of evil no longer raises the questions it once did. Evil now presents us with a task to achieve rather than a dilemma to face. This task is to create value and meaning in the face of meaninglessness and is recognised when "we no longer expect the world to make sense antecedently and on its own account ..."[45] The moral worth, value and meaning of life is supplied by us and religion is our primary resource for doing this. In that we remain troubled by the old dilemma, as realists are, our energies for achieving the primary religious task of creating meaning and value will be unnecessarily encumbered by issues that simply need not bother us. For the non-realist, then, religious belief is not part of the problem of evil as it is for the realist, but part of the solution. Religion helps us to struggle against evil and meaninglessness by providing the resources we need to create value and purpose for our lives.[46]

3.2c. Prayer: Third, the incompatibility of realism with religious belief follows, according to Cupitt, from the Christian understanding of prayer. The value and effectiveness of prayer is undermined if it is conceived as a communication with a supernaturally existing entity who can be manipulated to intervene on our behalf. Conceived of in this way the religious response to life will be eroded as more people abandon prayer as an ineffective technology.[47] Rather, the practice of prayer should

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[43] Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, op. cit., p. 113.

[44] This point is made by David Hart, *One Faith?*, op. cit., p. 53. But also consider Cupitt's account of Bishop John Robinson's understanding of evil. Robinson poignantly wanted to see God even in the cancer, despite its destructiveness and apparent purposelessness. For Cupitt, this is to impose religious value on life and to make meaning out of meaninglessness by creating as well as responding to a religious vocabulary. It is this that leads Cupitt to suggest that "perhaps Robinson was a theological non-realist." *Creation out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 61.

[45] ibid., p. 68.

[46] Cupitt, *The World to Come*, (London: SCM Press, 1982), p. xiii.; *What Is a Story?*, op. cit., p. 15.

[47] Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, op. cit., pp. 154-155.

be carried out for its own sake, creating an attitude to life rather than seeking external reward.[48] Even religious realists, Cupitt suggests, are unhappy explaining the effectiveness of prayer in terms of supernatural intervention. Prayer, they argue, is a way of aligning our will with the will of God.[49] Such an explanation, Cupitt notes, indicates a movement "toward a purely expressivist view of intercession. ... [P]raying for someone," he adds, "is not a quasi-technical operation, but a ritual expression of love and hope and concern."[50] However, in that the realist attitude to prayer remains heteronomously orientated and is conceived of in terms of an 'animistic dialogue', it will be necessary "to discourage the practice altogether"[51] as harmful to the religious life and the psychology of the religious person. Harmful in the first respect because, according to Cupitt, it encourages the attitude that regards the religious life as a superstitious technology. Harmful in the second respect, because it encourages an introspective, guilt-ridden personality stifled of creativity and defined against the absolute selfhood of an objective, all-seeing God.[52]

If, however, we avoid the idea of prayer as a dialogue with an objective supernatural being and if we also avoid "any suggestion that our real life is the inner life,"[53] we can continue the practice of prayer. In non-realist terms prayer, meditation, reading quietly, and thinking reflectively are fundamental religious activities that "help us with our real life, which is our life with others."[54] Like D.Z. Phillips, Cupitt believes that private prayer makes sense only in the context of the public prayers of the religious community."[55] Prayer, for the non-realist, is a means by which the community of religious believers create value out of life's transience and contingency. As such, "the discipline of the void [is] the prayer of the future."[56]

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[48] ibid., pp. 130, 132.
[49] ibid., p. 52.
[50] ibid., p. 53.
[51] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 137.
[52] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., pp. 90 ff.
[53] ibid., p. 91.
[54] ibid., p. 91.
[55] ibid., p. 91 and D.Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 135.
[56] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 145.

That is, prayer is seen as a training in the realisation of value and an acceptance of the contingency and transience of life.[57] Such an understanding of prayer, non-realists believe, is more religiously satisfying than the realist's understanding and hence is itself reason for being non-realist rather than realist in matters of religious practice.

3.2d. Doctrines: Fourth, not only the practices but also the central beliefs of Christianity are shown by Cupitt to be incompatible with religious realism. In Cupitt's early account of non-realism, belief in a realist God is inimical to religion because, "religion forbids that there should be any extra-religious reality to God."[58] If God were real, the freedom essential to the spiritual life would be lost.[59] Cupitt writes:

> The religious requirement is not an objectively-existing individual being quite distinct from myself. It is a judgement upon myself and a way to salvation that I have freely invoked upon myself and for myself.[60]

This is not to be understood as an expression of egoism[61] but an indication of the pure disinterested love of the religious demand.[62] Unless, God is conceived as the

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[57] In Cupitt's earlier non-realist account of prayer he argued that prayer is "closely tied to moral endeavour" (*Taking Leave of God*, op. cit., p. 130), and is "about people's relation to moral and spiritual values" (ibid., p. 132). He also exhibited a view of the self's relation to the religious ideal that now, in his later account of non realism, he repudiates. He wrote in *Taking Leave of God*:
> Talking to God most beautifully expresses our wish to be rid of our own wickedness, our desire for spiritual rebirth, our aspiration after various infinitely-precious moral and religious values, our sense of human solidarity, and—above all else—our sense that life is short and we are dust ...
But then, contrary to his later account of religious non-realism, Cupitt adds:
> ... that the religious standard is eternal and its demand upon us measurelessly great and awesome.
ibid., pp. 132-133. However, the 'eternal measureless and awesome' religious standard is as likely as the realist picture of God to create the type of religious personality that Cupitt wishes to avoid. Now, for Cupitt, the religious demand is to joyfully accept the void, uncertainty, contingency, transience and nihility so that we are able to create value and meaning in the world. Prayer is a means by which we can do this. It teaches us to value and accept what is, and strengthens us to create for ourselves ever new meanings and values. *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 145.
[58] Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, op. cit., p. 96.
[59] ibid., pp. 68-69, 107.
[60] ibid., p. 87.
[61] Cupitt writes: "Egoism is kept under control by constant meditation upon the illlusoriness of one's own self and the nothingness, or insubstantiality and impermanence, that pervades all existence." *Only Human*, op. cit., pp. 190-191.; Also see *The World To Come*, op. cit., pp. xiii-xiv.; *Taking Leave of God*, op. cit., p. 68.

symbolic personification of this love and the divine attributes further symbolic expressions of the religious requirement, God would hinder our religious freedom and the religious attitude of pure disinterested love. Thus, for Cupitt, "[t]he only religiously adequate God cannot exist."[63] Belief in a realist God leads to a heteronomous faith that cannot be genuinely religious and is further impoverished by dubious attempts to prove God's existence.[64]

In Cupitt's later account of non-realism the religious requirement is not an autonomously internalised *a priori* principle but the demand to value life. This demand is symbolically expressed in the doctrine of the incarnation. Cupitt writes:

> The Word has become flesh, so that the fleshy, the corruptible, the transient is now the religious object.[65]

In the Christian story of the incarnation, "God enters into contingency, 'God' dies, and now everything that lives is holy."[66] God is identified with all that is contingent and transient. Further, in the symbolism of the spirit, the Christian God is dispersed and disseminated completely into the world.[67] God and the world are inseparably united. Henceforth, this world is the divine kingdom and the religious demand world-affirming rather than world-denying.[68] The genuine religious impulse is to value our material, contingent world and all that is fleeting and transient. Such an impulse does not derive from some objective transcendent source but from a

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[62] Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, op. cit., pp. 69, 117.

[63] ibid., p. 113.

[64] ibid., p. 12 and chapters 2 and 6. Cupitt points out that different proofs seem to produce different conceptions of God, most of which have little resemblance to the pre-philosophical God of biblical witness. None of the proofs provided sufficiently substantiate God's reality and merely threaten "the principle of the autonomy of religion." ibid., p. 84.

[65] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 145.

[66] Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, op. cit., p. 75.

[67] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., pp. 87-89.

[68] Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, op. cit., p. 162.; *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., p. 167.; *The Time Being*, op. cit., p. 4. This means that religion must be "fully committed to the here and now." *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 97.

creative and affirmative valuation of life. When we recognise the utter contingency and fleetingness of our life, everything becomes gracious.[69]

For Cupitt, the world is affirmed "by saving it from all invidious comparisons with supposedly better worlds elsewhere"[70] and life is affirmed when we accept that this one life is all we have.[71] However, the realist persists in thinking that there is some different, special, more truthful, eternal, antecedently existent and independently ordered realm, other than that which human religious belief creates. For Cupitt, such an idea is unintelligible because it depends on language in order to be stated and "language is only human."[72]

Religious realism, like religious non-realism is a product of human language and human creativity but realism is anti-life, anti-world-affirming and thus anti-religious.[73] Religion, for Cupitt, should be a celebration of our transience, and not a quest that looks to salvation in another world. As long as Christianity remains committed to that quest, Cupitt believes, it will continue to ignore the implication of the incarnation and fail to be a religion of redemption that values life. Cupitt argues, a religion of redemption, the incarnation suggests, is "not release from the human condition, not deliverance from the world, but the return into the human condition ..."[74] A religion of redemption must be completely this-worldly and concerned with valuing and re-valuing everyday life.

Only a non-realist view of Christianity, Cupitt argues, makes Christianity a religion of salvation. The salvation Christianity offers is salvation from the desire to escape the contingency, transience and the fleetingness of this world to some illusory eternal absolute world beyond. Our redemption is to accept this world, and

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[69] This is one of the significant themes of Cupitt's later account of non-realism. His book *The Time Being*, op. cit., can be seen as an extended theological meditation on this theme. "God becomes human, heaven becomes earth ... [both] ... a way of saying yes, now." ibid., p. 139.
[70] Cupitt, *The Time Being*, op. cit., p. 138.
[71] ibid., p. 143.
[72] ibid., pp. 48–49.
[73] ibid., pp. 142-143; Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., pp. 101-102.
[74] Cupitt, *The Time Being*, op. cit., p. 182.

to continually pour ourselves out into the activity of valuing and re-valuing life.[75] For Cupitt, we can love God, imitate Christ, live in the spirit, realise eternal life, and experience salvation[76] when we drop the realist illusion of a supernatural world beyond our own gloriously contingent and graciously transient[77] unique life here and now in our natural and only home. Whereas the realist picture of God "deals death,"[78] by under-valuing life in favour of an illusory world beyond, the non-realist will want to tell stories about God that affirm life. Such affirmation brings redemption by curing us of the time-hating, anxiety-ridden and other-worldliness of traditional realist religious belief.[79] Cupitt writes:

> There can be no other way to salvation except by saying yes to time, language, the passions and death—in short, to just about everything that our religions hitherto have been in flight from.[80]

The realist's religious fictions are now, Cupitt believes, clearly seen to be contrary to the genuine religious impulse. He writes:

> True religion now consists not in grabbing at such fictions, but in being cured of the need for them. Selflessly to love the transient and let it go: that is beatitude.[81]

Religious realism is now, Cupitt believes, religiously alienating. Our true religious happiness is created "when we stop pretending that we don't really belong here, and learn instead to identify ourselves completely with the flux of our own lives."[82] In short, Cupitt notes:

> ... realism is itself a disorder of which we need to be cured.[83]

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[75] Cupitt, *Creation out of Nothing*, op. cit., pp. 91, 155.

[76] 'Love God': Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., p. 68; 'Imitate Christ': ibid., pp. 130-131; 'live in the spirit': *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 88; 'realise eternal life': *The Long Legged Fly*, op. cit., p. 81; 'experience salvation': ibid., pp. 85, 162.

[77] Cupitt, *The Last Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 77.; *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 99.

[78] Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, op. cit., p. 159.

[79] Cupitt, *The Time Being*, op. cit., Ch. 7.

[80] ibid., p. 142.

[81] Cupitt, *After All*, op. cit., p. 92.

[82] Cupitt, *The Last Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 76. Elsewhere, Cupitt notes, "Religion is just for the sake of our this-worldly life and activity, for we have nothing else." *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 134.

[83] Cupitt, *The Time Being*, op. cit., p. 121.

By allowing us to say a full 'yes' to life, religious non-realism supplies this cure. Thus, for Cupitt, and those religious believers who think like him:

> ... an education in non-realism is the path to religious liberation.[84]

The religious liberation that non-realism brings also heralds the kingdom of God. "A world in which people have become active creators of religious value," Cupitt writes, "is what I mean by the kingdom of God."[85] A non-realist religion of the kingdom is the therapeutic cure for religious realism. Cupitt not only describes this non-realist religion, "glad to be *only human*,"[86] as a Christ-centred theology in the sense that it is implied by the Christian story of the incarnation; he is also prepared to ascribe it to Jesus himself. "Antirealism," notes Cupitt, "is ... what Jesus called the kingdom of God."[87]

In Cupitt's early account of non-realism Jesus' prophetic teaching about the kingdom is regarded as a symbolic call to live by an absolute standard of religiosity that is internal to the consciousness of the believer.[88] This standard projects a new world and a new humanity. This new world, Cupitt notes, will replace the old world "in which ordinary worldly people live ..."[89] This account tells us that the kingdom is still to be realised. There is a world to come that is better than the present everyday world.[90] In Cupitt's later account of non-realism this 'old world—new world' model of the kingdom is abandoned. Now, Cupitt notes, "[r]eligion is not a vision of another world, but a re-vision of this world,"[91] The old world, of everyday life, *is* the kingdom of God. Cupitt notes:

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[84] ibid., p. 134.

[85] Cupitt, *The World to Come*, op. cit., p. xiii.

[86] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., pp. 134-135.

[87] Cupitt, *After All*, op. cit., p. 113. Despite some perceptive individuals, Cupitt believes that this is a message that the church succeeded in hiding from Christians for over 1900 years. *The Last Philosophy*, op. cit., pp. 126-130. [N.B.: It should be remembered that although Cupitt makes at least two attempts to distinguish antirealism from non-realism (in *Creation out of Nothing*, op. cit., pp. 92-105 and *The Last Philosophy*, op. cit., pp. 148-149), he tends to use them synonymously.].

[88] Cupitt, *The World to Come*, op. cit., pp. 63-65.

[89] Cupitt, 'A Tale of Two Cities: The World to Come' in J. A. T. Robinson, *Where Three Ways Meet*, (London: SCM Press, 1987), p. 30.

[90] This 'new world-old world' view was still held by Cupitt in *The Sea of Faith*, op. cit., p. 119.

[91] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 86.

> To say that the kingdom has come, then, is simply to say that we now recognize that everydayness is all there is.[92]

The kingdom theology which Jesus taught[93] is now seen by Cupitt as a prophetic pronouncement that salvation arrives when we are no longer alienated from the 'old', everyday world, that is our only true home. This world, he believes, is our last world and in it the age of the church is drawing to a close. The church's task has been achieved: "the divine has become fully resolved down into the human."[94] The church can disappear. Christianity, in the kingdom of God, is transformed from the alienating 'between time' of its ecclesiastical structures, into post-Christianity.[95] This has not happened by means of an apocalyptic ending of history but, Cupitt suggests, has happened as part of a general "transition from modernism to post-modernism, which in a certain sense is indeed occurring at the end of history ..."[96] Cupitt interprets post-modernism as telling us that history as progress, in terms of a linear movement from origin to *teleos*, is no longer possible. We no longer have the fixed points against which such a progressive linear movement can be defined.[97] Thus Cupitt believes:

> A time of fulfilment has come, and it is in many ways rather like the long promised 'kingdom of God' hoped for by the rabbis of antiquity.[98]

St. Augustine's vision of heaven, Cupitt suggests, is now found here on earth.[99] This is the message contained in a non-realist's re-visioning and re-valuing of the

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[92] Cupitt, *The Last Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 131.
[93] Significant aspects of this teaching Cupitt takes to be: 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath' [Mk. 2:27]; 'Take no thought for the morrow' [Matt. 6:34]; 'The kingdom of God is within, or among you' [Lk. 17:21]. *The Time Being*, op. cit., p. 150.
[94] Cupitt, *After All*, op. cit., p. 23.
[95] ibid., pp. 22-23.
[96] ibid., p. 25.
[97] Specifically Cupitt refers to the work of Jean Baudrillard in this respect. See *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., pp. 147 ff. and p. 177 n. 17.
[98] Cupitt, *After All*, op. cit., p. 115. Jesus, Cupitt writes, was the "prophet of post-Christianity" (ibid., p. 25) whose teaching of the kingdom both precedes and succeeds the church (ibid., p. 5). And Cupitt notes the themes of post-modernism are also the themes of this post-Christian kingdom theology. He writes:
> ... the end of history, the coming of the kingdom of God, the death of God, the outpouring of God's spirit in human hearts, and the final liberation of humanity are ideas all interlinked and briefly glimpsed in the first forty years or so of Christian history.
The Last Philosophy, op. cit., p. 126.

Christian story. It is a re-visioning which attempts to make Jesus' message relevant for our time and a re-valuing that attempts to show that a realist mentality is now anti-religious. In Cupitt's words it attempts to show that:

> God takes up his throne in the human heart: ... or, to put it another way, Jesus' view of what God will show himself to be is *non-realist*.[100]

This creative re-visioning of the Christian story is certainly not without its critics, but it nevertheless shows, I believe, that it is not possible to dismiss the non-realist approach to faith as non-Christian. I have identified four facets of modern believing: religious pluralism, the problem of evil, the nature of prayer and doctrines about God, Christ and salvation, which non-realists like Cupitt believe make a non-realist religious faith, rather than a realist religious faith, a genuine religious inheritor of the Christian tradition. To conclude, Cupitt writes:

> Supernatural theologies cannot cope with the problem of evil, cannot on their own premises explain the vast diversity of religions and their human history, and do not even do a very good job of explaining the contents of their own scriptures. So there is plenty of scope for religious naturalism to do a better job of explaining religion and showing why it always has mattered and still matters so much to us.[101]

3.3. The Incompatibility of Ethical Belief and Practice With Realism:

As well as suggesting the incompatibility of realism with religious belief on purely religious grounds, Cupitt also raises a variety of moral and ethical arguments which further suggest the incompatibility of realism with religious belief. For John Hick, the ultimate issue between religious realists and religious non-realists is one that pertains to the moral structure of the universe. On the grounds of a realist theistic faith life is more than a struggle for survival. The majority of people who have had little opportunity to fulfil their potential are assured by a moral and spiritual hope. Non-realism cannot offer this hope. It offers a religion only for the minority of

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[99] Cupitt, *The Time Being*, op. cit., pp. 77-82.
[100] Cupitt, *The Last Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 126. (Cupitt's emphasis).
[101] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 119.

human beings who are able to feel fulfilled in this life. Religious non-realism is therefore religion for the elite and "bad news for ordinary struggling humanity."[102] If religious non-realism is only a religion for the elite, it is also likely to be a religion for those with a stake in maintaining the social status quo and thus for those less willing to bring about the type of changes that might meliorate economic and spiritual poverty.[103] Cupitt's talk of the 'kingdom of God' on earth may then be understood at best as misguided, and at worst, a cynical attempt to protect the privileges of the fortunate few at the expense of the religious aspirations that the world's religions have held for the majority of unfulfilled humanity. Cupitt's response is that it is unfulfillable theistic expectations that lead to nihilism and despair and that religious salvation occurs when we accept the contingency and transience of all things and yet continue to create value and meaning in the hope of achieving a better imagined future.

In his book *Solar Ethics,* Cupitt draws a distinction between 'the moral' (codes and laws) and 'the ethical' (practices and lifestyles).[104] Morality is based upon a socially constituted code of contingent rules and norms governing human activity backed up by publicly approved sanctions. As long as these rules and norms work they will be upheld; when they fail to work they will be reformed or simply dropped in favour of another set of rules and norms. Morality thus needs no "deep supernatural or philosophical justification."[105] It is not a "matter of obeying or conforming to antecedently existing moral realities."[106] Our religious beliefs and moral codes are our own responsibility.[107] Morality is continually being re-invented by us. Nevertheless, our more long-lasting and generally agreed moral norms

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[102] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion,* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 208.
[103] Rowan Williams, 'Religious Realism: On Not Quite Agreeing with Don Cupitt', in *Modern Theology,* Vol. 1, 1984. pp. 21-22.
[104] Cupitt, *Solar Ethics,* op. cit., Ch. 2. This distinction mirrors Cupitt's earlier distinction between culture and desire in *The Long Legged Fly,* and closely resembles the distinction drawn by Richard Rorty between public solidarity and private self-creation.
[105] Cupitt, *Solar Ethics,* op. cit., p. 11.
[106] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church,* op. cit., p. 158.
[107] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics,* op. cit., p. 126.

warrant a strong degree of commitment. Our commitment to some of these norms, Cupitt believes, is incompatible with religious realism. Realism is detrimental to human dignity, human freedom, human creativity and human well-being, creating a slavish mentality of blind obedience to authority from which the ecclesiastical elite benefit.[108] The church is so bound to this mentality, Cupitt argues, that it automatically finds non-realism unacceptable. Cupitt writes:

> The liberals reject it because they need their vague but optimistic version of theological realism. The conservatives reject it, because they need their demanding, moralistic, threatening sort of God to keep themselves in order. But at this point radicals become very troubled, because along with all pastors and therapists they regard that particular realistic God as extremely damaging. The more realistic your God, the more punitive your morality, the more damaged your psychology and the more blinkered your outlook.[109]

For Cupitt, traditional realist religious belief contravenes current conventional standards of morality because it is a hierarchical, power-led, self-serving, alienating piece of sexist ideology. It damages our mental health and stifles creativity.[110] Thankfully, Cupitt points out, we tend now not to live as if such a God existed, although religious worship and theological rhetoric still evokes such a God.[111] The

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[108] Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, op. cit., p. 159.; *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., pp. 1-5, 10, 17. Cupitt writes:
> ... the task of realism is always the same: to justify the power and privileges of the elite who are the custodians of the currently most-prestigious knowledge-system.
After All, op. cit., p. 110.

[109] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., pp. 167-168.

[110] Religious realism contradicts morality. It is hierarchical and patriarchal (ibid., pp. 5, 92-95.) and therefore sexist (ibid., pp. 45-47, 78, 86, 92-93, 153-154.), a front for power-hungry men (ibid., pp. 3, 17, 56, 65, 74.), it is a religion of the ego rather than of the dying Christ (ibid., p. 62.). It produces guilt-ridden, angry, prejudiced and emotionally crippled individuals (ibid., p. 87.). It is designed not for our well-being but to give us a fright (ibid., p. 164.). It inspires a mentality of dependence, impotence, instability and weakness in the majority so that the religious elite can provide strong government (ibid., pp. 63, 74.). It is authoritarian, not open to question, uncritical and repressive (ibid., p. 64.). It downplays friendship in favour of radical inequalities (ibid., pp. 90-91.) and mistakes psychological damage for piety (ibid., p. 92.). It produces a religion in which subjection rather than liberation dominates (ibid., p. 93.). Realism encourages a pessimistic, melancholic, anxious and disenchanted attitude to life (*The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., pp. 101-102.). It is irredeemably dualistic, unworkable, self-contradictory and unaware of its own human historical origin (ibid., pp. 45-50.). It is "psychological terrorism" (ibid., p. 59; also p. 73.) and a form of illusory death avoidance (ibid., p. 117.). It fails to allow for genuine human creativity, 'drive', 'ambition' or 'innovation' (ibid., pp. 4, 23.).

[111] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., pp. 74, 132-135.

church thereby does moral damage to itself. It instils in its members, and benefits from, "an unconscious yearning to be ruled and told what is right and good ..."[112] But this moral mentality, Cupitt believes, is "reactive and repressive"[113] and should be exposed for the illusion it is. On the basis of our commitment to human freedom, equality, creativity and other conventional moral goals, religious realism, Cupitt believes, should be assigned to the bygone age from which it emerged.[114]

The valuelessness of religious and moral realism is most clearly stated when we actually have to face personal moral dilemmas. Cupitt sites the case of a woman who discovered, just before her wedding, that she had contracted HIV, having suffered rape two years earlier. Her family background and that of her fiancé was such that disclosure of either the rape or the HIV would risk her being shunned. Should she go ahead with the marriage? For Cupitt, "[t]he case shows ... the obnoxiousness and uselessness of moral realism ... for ... moral decision making."[115] A counsellor, Cupitt notes, would advise on scientific and medical knowledge, talk through facts, feelings and consequences and help the woman live with the decision she makes. "No other approach," Cupitt comments, "is humanly tolerable."[116] There is no right answer already laid down, no moral command to which anyone could appeal. The dilemma has to be lived through. In our daily lives we face such dilemmas, at varying levels of intensity, all the time. We thus need to turn from the norms and laws of morality toward the practices and lifestyles of ethics.

Unlike morality, Cupitt suggests, ethics is concerned with action rather than codes. To act ethically is to "act creatively, giving value to our life and to each other ..."[117] To have an ethic is to have a form of self-expression.[118] In what Cupitt

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[112] ibid., p. 16.
[113] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., p. 167.
[114] Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, op. cit., p. 1.
[115] Cupitt, *The Time Being*, op. cit., p. 169.
[116] ibid., p. 169.
[117] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., p. 23.
[118] Cupitt, *Solar Ethics*, op. cit., pp. 12-13.

called the 'New Christian Ethics', and now calls 'Solar Ethics', we express ourselves

through our activity and are thus automatically ethical, value-producing beings. We

should be heedless creators of those very values of love, freedom, service, friendship

etc. which the realist framework was supposed to supply from some extra-human

source.[119] Thus Cupitt writes:

> If we want a Christian ethics for now, we have got to invent it now.[120]

All the paraphernalia of religion and ethics are created by us.[121] In that Christianity

has not recognise this in the past, Cupitt argues, there has never been any Christian

ethics to speak of.[122] Cupitt writes:

> Inheriting from Plato a dualism which located all value in the inert ideal
> world above and little or none in the sensuous life-world below, ...
> Christianity could hardly be anything else but a religion of death. The
> human being and the life-world were without intrinsic value. To find
> value one had to reject life. The ethical was opposed to life and the ideal
> was opposed to the actual. All goodness came from above only.[123]

So long as God is understood in these terms and so long as the fear of sin and

punishment drives human ethical practice we will remain with a life-denying,

alienating ethic. We now need to see creative human ethical activity for what it

is—only human.[124] Christianity itself must now be seen as being created and re-

created by our own activity. The new Christian ethics, for Cupitt, must be a form of

religious naturalism. It must say 'Yes' to life, be practical, expressive and directed at

the creative realisation of value rather than driven by fear of sin.[125] The church

must now be seen as a resource of creative value; a "nursery of new lifestyles."[126] In

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[119] ibid., p. 45. Cupitt refers to the new Christian ethic as solar because it "commands you to live as the sun does, expanding yourself in communicative self-exteriorisation." ibid., p. 26.
[120] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., p. 40.
[121] ibid., p. 125.
[122] ibid., pp. 14-15, 59.
[123] ibid., p. 101.
[124] Cupitt, 'Anti Religious Faith' in Runzo (ed.) *Is God Real?*, op. cit., p. 55.
[125] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., pp. 58-60.
[126] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 169.

such an ethic, a non-realist understanding of Christ and the self are employed and non-realism is shown to be a solution to nihilism.

Christ despised and glorified and Christ as God incarnate are, for Cupitt, resonate symbols of the new Christian ethic. The truth Christianity relays in its story of Christ is that "to conquer death we must before death die to death and to the self."[127] We do this by *kenosis*. To be emptied out is to give up egoistic fantasies about 'the soul' or 'life after death' and instead to gain a vision of redemption through the outpouring of our life energies into the world in all our valuative activity.[128] Cupitt writes:

> To become inwardly emptied out is the only way to a pure love of life and our neighbour.[129]

To pour ourselves out in this way is to live ethically in the imitation of Christ,[130] and is to achieve our objective immortality. Cupitt writes:

> The purpose of moral action is not to make myself into a self, but to lose myself.[131]

I lose myself by pouring my energies into life, into the public common objective world of our shared language and life. All that I say and do constitutes my objective immortality.

This represents a reversal of Cupitt's earlier non-realist view of the religious self. Then the religious demand was conceived as an *a priori* principle which we had to internalise. Now the religious demand is to externalise.[132] Cupitt writes:

> I am merely the sum of my social relations. My life-task is not to save my soul but to lose it. I need to forget about myself and to pour out my life into the human world.[133]

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127 ibid., p. 67.
128 ibid., p. 68.
129 ibid., p. 68.
130 ibid., p. 88. Cupitt advises: "like Christ, die into your work. Accept self-scattering and self-loss." (ibid., p. 27.).
131 ibid., p. 117.
132 ibid., pp. 75, 166-170.; *Solar Ethics*, op. cit., pp. 17, 37.
133 Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., p. 129.

To pour oneself out into the world is an explicit life-affirming act of ethical valuation. In self-exteriorisation we express the will to value.[134] We do this in many ways and Cupitt gives four examples.[135] We can have a specialist enthusiasm for an aspect of life, like teaching or croquet.[136] We can offer metaphorical redescriptions of currently derogatory metaphorical terminology. We can show loving attentiveness to those people and things which we care for most and we can engage in the activities of Christian revolutionary re-valuation in which the image of Christ, despised and glorified, is applied to a poorly valued person or aspect of life, in order to enlist a higher valuation. In each, we put a little more value into an aspect of the world. However, such valuative activity does not occur in a linguistic or cultural vacuum. Cupitt writes:

> ... in my action I have to go out into a public language that is already laden with values and persuasions, ... that [are] ... before me and will be after me. ... I want to change it, but I can do so only by ... going out into publicness so as to become available to others.[137]

Our attempts at change by re-valuation will be piecemeal and will occur by acting toward and speaking about people, events and aspects of life more affirmatively as we daily pour ourselves out into life.[138] Cupitt admits that this seems to turn Christian ethics into a form of secular humanism but he points out that in the Christian story, God "has chosen to become human in the world."[139] In the process, Christ gives religious value to the poor, the outcast and the wicked. Now Christian ethics must be a scrutinised creative re-valuing of all that currently lacks value.[140]

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[134] ibid., p. 137.

[135] ibid., pp. 135-136. Also see *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 154.

[136] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., p. 155.

[137] ibid., p. 117.

[138] This notion leads Cupitt to reconceive the traditional nature-grace distinction. Nature becomes the cultural evaluation we inherit in our language and practices which we need to perfect through grace. For Cupitt:

> 'Grace' is the Christian's constructive attempt to improve the score by loving the worthless and neglected and raising their value-gradings.

ibid., p. 134.

[139] ibid., p. 136.

[140] ibid., pp. 154, 167.

The incarnation means that we love God by loving our neighbour and we love our neighbour by valuing them through our own self-outpouring love which is also the way of salvation.[141] To lead the Christian life now means to be absorbed in the work of valuing the ordinary and the everyday world. The self is not defined subjectively, as a substantial inner space, but 'objectively' in the sense of our continual outpouring actively and linguistic expression. It is always something we define in the things we do. It is the stories we tell of our own activity and the stories other people tell of us. The self is a literary effect. Cupitt writes:

> We exist in, and only *as*, the performance we are giving and the show we are putting on. We have no being apart from our life. We become ourselves only in passing and in passing away.[142]

Life is not something ready-made and complete. We have to make life by living it, we have to make our soul by losing it, we have to make a world of value by pouring our life into it, and we have to create God by valuing our life, our community and our world.[143]

Alongside a non-realist account of Christ's salvific work and a non-realist account of the self, Cupitt's 'new Christian ethics' also provides a defence against nihilism. Cupitt writes:

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[141] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 155.

[142] Cupitt, *Solar Ethics*, op. cit., p. 14. According to Cupitt the self must now be understood as "a literary product, a privatization of culture made of and by stories." (*What Is a Story?*, op. cit., p. 56.). It is only surface, we have no inside or depth. My reading of the surface is my inside; your reading of my surface is my outside. (ibid., p. 60.). "Our subjectivity ... [our] inner life is a special kind of cultural artefact made of linguistic idioms and nothing else. Mind is a cultural fiction." (*The Time Being*, op. cit., p. 25.). My self coincides with the 'time of my life'. Life will be worthy if a plausible story can be told about it. (ibid., p. 145.) We are the life we live. We are the sum of our 'transactions with our milieu.' (*The Last Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 72.) "A person is a dramatic effect produced over time: no more than that." (ibid., p. 72.) There is no pre-existent self for me to realise. I must expend myself; only then do I have the material for a story of my life. What the non-realist sees that the realist cannot accept, is that we must now consciously make ourselves. (*The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., pp. 74-75, 98.). The self is a by-product of my language and my actions (*Solar Ethics*, op. cit., p. 23.). "Your soul is your role! ... [and this role is] ... communicative action and collaborative world-building with other people." (ibid., p. 26.). The self is in front of you, not inside you (ibid., p. 39.). The longer you live, the more you are objectified, that is, the more of life's energy has flowed out of you. (ibid., p. 55.) To exteriorise consciously is to love the world and to live ethically. It is to affirm life and to accept loss, transience and death at the same time. (ibid. p. 4.)

[143] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., pp. 6, 63, 68, 107, 154.

> We have to redeem our life from absurdity by creating value, by making good, by doing the work of God.[144]

We do this first and foremost by affirming the precious worth of life, its transience and its contingency. In that realists persist in believing in an absolute, life-transcending realm beyond the human worldly abode, existing antecedent to, and independent of, its creation in language by human beings, (we might want to know the extent to which that 'reality' was initially independent of us), they will tend to see the decline of belief in such an antecedently existing divine realm as evidence for the move toward nihilism.[145] The danger is that with the demise of the idea of pre-existent meanings, the realist comes to see life as worthless. In this sense nihilism is realism's own dark side. As Cupitt notes: "realism ... when pressed to its logical conclusion itself topples unexpectedly into nihilism."[146] A nihilistic emptiness appears at the centre of the religious life when the original is thought to be lost to us.[147] Given the realist's premises about divine reality and its communication to us, we come to see our own importance in the scheme of things and gain a sense of purpose.[148] However, if we begin to suspect that life does not live up to this sense of purpose we may begin to feel cheated. Everyday life appears as a fraudulent deception to what our religious heritage has led us to expect. By leading us to expect too much of religion, realists are themselves led to under-value what religion can actually do for us when conceived of as only human.[149] For those influenced by realism, the collapse of belief in a realist God may lead to a life-denying nihilistic picture of the world, in which human power is the only value in a meaningless universe. Cupitt writes:

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[144] ibid., p. 98.

[145] ibid., p.118.

[146] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 169. One might say that for Cupitt realism is to nihilism what Mr. Hyde is to Dr. Jekyll. The Dr. Jekylls of this world swallow realism whole and are gradually transformed into life-denying, world-hating monsters: unable to see that the values they instil are the consequence of their own creativity; also, ibid., p.153.

[147] ibid., pp. 159-165.

[148] Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, op. cit., p. 151.

[149] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p.84.

> For them, there is no intermediate position; the end of dogmatism is the beginning of nihilism. They are terrified by the thought of a world without certainties.[150]

Non-realists on the other hand are untroubled by nihilism.[151] They have no imaginary perfect world against which our everyday world looks bad and second rate. For them the function of religion is to combat nihilism and despair by helping us to create meanings and values by which we can live. Thus Cupitt writes:

> Religion is a here-and-now conquering of nihilism and a re-creation of our world out of nothing by continually generating new metaphors and new interpretations. ... [R]eligion is a kind of creative art by which we make ourselves and our world. ... Religion is only human, but no culture survives long without it. Life's meaningfulness and worthwhileness are not given but have to be made, and that making is religion.[152]

Elsewhere, Cupitt notes:

> The best way to conquer nihilism would be to replace a church that sees its job as guarding the past with one that is confident it can create the future[153]

For non-realists, the new Christian ethics provides another cluster of ideas that indicate the preferability of non-realism over realism in matters of religious belief. A non-realist account avoids the potential life-denying nihilistic tendency of realist belief. It presents a view of the self that does more justice to a post-Cartesian philosophy of mind and calls upon a soterological interpretation of the Christian story of Jesus that can be applied pragmatically without being understood dogmatically as history or as revelation. There are, therefore, according to Cupitt, ample religious and ethical reasons for adopting religious non-realism.

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[150] Cupitt, 'Anti-Realist Faith' in Runzo (ed.) *Is God Real?*, op. cit., p. 49.

[151] Cupitt, *Solar Ethics*, op. cit., p. 50.

[152] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., pp. 96-97. Also see *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., p. 130. Cupitt suggests that Nietzsche was so influenced by realism when he presented his nihilistic philosophy that he was unable to see the creative role that religion could play in creating meaning and value. *The World to Come*, op. cit., p. xiv.; *Solar Ethics*, op. cit., pp. 50-52.

[153] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., pp. 165-166.

3.4 Conclusion:

My aim in this chapter has been to summarise certain pressures within religious belief and ethical practice that now make a non-realist, rather than a realist religious faith, the religious inheritor of the Christian tradition. Just as the intellectual heritage of western thought bequeaths to contemporary religious belief the possibility of a non-realist religious identity, so too do these pressures internal to religion and ethics. However, the decline of religious realism does not necessarily mean the decline of religious belief. For the non-realists, religious belief will continue for as long as it remains of some significant use to us. For the religious non-realist, religion remains a useful, meaning-generating, comfort-providing, life-enhancing, community-creating source of human flourishing that gives expression to human spiritual insight and ethical creativity. Religion is yet to be surpassed by any other humanly created set of practices and beliefs, but it is now inimical to realist presuppositions. Given these presuppositions, non-realists like Cupitt believe realism in religion to be intellectually, morally and religiously undesirable.

CHAPTER FOUR

RELIGIOUS NON-REALISM AND PRAGMATISM

4.1. Introduction:

In the first three chapters of this thesis I have summarised the non-realist religious beliefs of Don Cupitt and other writers belonging to the 'Sea of Faith' network. I have tried to show why they find non-realism in matters of religious belief appealing. Our intellectual heritage and the contemporary philosophy of language, suggest the possibility of reinterpreting Christian faith in a way that abandons belief in a divine reality independent of, and antecedent to, human creativity while avoiding an atheistic mentality by allowing for a continued commitment to Christianity's traditional vocabulary and practices. This approach to religious belief has been referred to as "improper" and "morally repugnant."[1] But, according to the American religious pragmatist J. Wesley Robbins, this is merely to say that an unusual expression of religious belief is being formulated in ways unlikely to find favour within the limits of a more traditional expression. There is nothing necessarily 'improper' about this. "The move from realism to non-realism," Robbins writes, "may be ill advised [but] ... bucking tradition to correct a mistake is not an act of dishonesty."[2] In a pragmatic context, Robbins argues, a non-realist religious faith can be held with integrity if it can suggest a new and enlightening picture of our religious future, an alternative vision that side-steps previous problematic religious ideas and practices. Pragmatism, I have suggested, best articulates the religious and intellectual terrain that religious non-realists should ideally aim to inhabit. In this chapter, I shall develop this pragmatic theme through a critique of some aspects of Cupitt's account of religious non-realism. In doing so I shall draw

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[1] Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Ocean of Truth: A Defence of Objective Theism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 142.
[2] J. Wesley Robbins, 'When Christians Become Naturalists' in *Religious Studies* Vol. 28, p. 201.

upon a distinction between 'explanation' and 'justification' outlined in the work of the contemporary American pragmatist Richard Rorty.

4.2. A Critique of Cupitt and Sea of Faith Religious Non-Realism:

The religious non-realism outlined by Cupitt is open to a number of criticisms. I indicated some of these at the end of chapter two when I discussed Brian Hebblethwaite's response to Cupitt's work.[3] An objective God is crucial to any adequate account of Christian belief. If Christian revelation, providential care and the efficacy of prayer are to be taken seriously, and morality is to have firm foundations, God must be a reality independent of human creativity. Scott Cowdell claims that Cupitt's religious non-realism "undervalues developed dogma" and highlights the creative element of religious experience at the expense of dependency and grace. It makes little attempt to assess alternative positions with any degree of seriousness and is itself not ideologically pure but reliant upon its own quasi-foundationalism.[4]

Cupitt is reluctant to respond to such criticisms because, as he notes, by the time the criticisms arrive, he has moved on to something else.[5] Nevertheless, in Cupitt's defence we might point out that there is no mutually agreed definition of what counts as 'adequately religious'. We saw in chapter three that he believes religious non-realism to be a proper inheritor of the Christian tradition. This is an alternative vision of such inheritance to that of Hebblethwaite's and the difference between them cannot be resolved by appeal to some neutral criteria. Because of this, all but the last of Cowdell's criticisms have little impact. Cupitt sees the closure of dogmatic faith and an emphasis upon human religious creativity as a description of what he hopes to achieve rather than a criticism of the position he

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[3] For similar criticisms see David L. Edwards, *Tradition and Truth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), pp. 68-97. Keith Ward, *Holding Fast to God* (London: S.P.C.K., 1982).

[4] Scott Cowdell, *Atheist Priest? Don Cupitt and Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1988), pp. 83-84.

[5] ibid., p. ix. However, in that Cupitt admits that he now recants his attempt to define religion in terms of the autonomous internalised religious consciousness and that he prefers Davidson to Derrida, it is likely that this shift of emphasis has been encouraged by the kind of concerns and criticisms offered by critics such as Ward and Williams.

holds. Equally, while it is the case that he often dismisses alternative realist positions by means of bold assertions and overstatement, and may be guilty of over-simplifying what realists are claiming in order to make them look less plausible than they do to themselves, it is nonetheless the case, that however subtle their arguments, religious realists will in the end want to make some basic claim about God's reality with which Cupitt fundamentally disagrees. According to Stephen Ross White, this disagreement follows from Cupitt's failure to appreciate the subtle arguments about the relation of language to reality expressed by critical realists like Janet Martin Soskice.[6] However, I will suggest in the last chapter that the critical realist position that Soskice represents does not answer the type of questions that Cupitt raises against religious realism. Cupitt may simplify realist arguments, but it is not the case that he does not consider the points they make.[7] Nevertheless, Cowdell's final criticism deserve more attention as it highlights the problematic nature of religious non-realism when it strays from a pragmatic context. Therefore, I shall concentrate on these here. By identifying Cupitt's own quasi-foundational assumptions it will be easier to separate the pragmatic wheat of religious non-realism from its modernist and post-modernist chaff.

There is a sense in which religious non-realists take themselves to be ideologically pure. Anthony Freeman, for example, regards religious non-realism as "the most authentic form of Christianity which can be held today."[8] This, however,

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[6] Stephen Ross White, *Don Cupitt and the Future of Christian Doctrine*. (London: SCM Press, 1994), pp. 179-181, 195-197. See also Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), Ch. 7 and Ch. 8.

[7] See, for example, Cupitt's discussion of Maurice Wiles in *The World to Come*, (London: SCM Press, 1982), pp. 33-38, and Dennis Nineham in *Life Lines*, (London: SCM Press, 1986), pp. 94-104. *Life Lines* itself summarises a number of versions of realist faith. And while he only gives brief consideration to the views of theologians like Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, J.A.T. Robinson and Richard Swinburne, it is not the case that he ignores them completely. His view of realism may be coloured by a particular interpretation of Plato and Descartes (see for example Don Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1989), p. 40 and *Creation Out of Nothing*, (London: SCM Press, 1990), pp. 54-60) but he argues that any subtle version of theistic realism can in the end not but rely upon a dualistic or hierarchical mentality that, in Hick's words, requires "a response to a greater reality". (Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* , ibid., p. 202). Such a notion is one that Cupitt abjures. Don Cupitt, 'A Response to Brian Hebblethwaite', in Joseph Runzo, *Is God Real?*, (London: Macmillan 1993) , pp. 149-150..

[8] Anthony Freeman, *God in Us*, (London: SCM Press, 1993), p. 10.

is to assume that there is some Archimedean point from which authenticity can be judged. If this point is not an objective God then for non-realists, Anthony Thiselton argues, it must be the omnipresent human self.[9] As Cupitt notes in his early account of religious non-realism, it is "the modern concern for the autonomy of the individual,"[10] and particularly a concern for the purity of religious autonomy, which makes the realist picture of God impossible. In Cupitt's work of the mid-1980's it is no longer the self but the void that is presented as a 'real' backdrop against which religious notions are projected. The void takes on the quality of a quasi-foundational 'given' which has "run up against the limits of language."[11] In *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, however, the void is itself encompassed within language. It becomes seen as a term defining the contingency and transience of life, which Cupitt wants to embrace rather than overcome.[12] Yet, he still sees the void as doing some of the old theological work of God, making "us realize our own utter transience and imperfection,"[13] but, importantly, he argues:

> I am not advocating a purely humanist religion, an idolatry of the human. And I am not advocating a religion directed towards a supposed metaphysical void that surrounds human life. ... But I am advocating a religion of life in the sense of a spiritual discipline that enables us to accept and say yes to our life as it is, baseless, brief, pointless and utterly contingent, and yet in its very nihility beautiful, ethically-demanding, solemn and final.[14]

To avoid the charge of quasi-foundationalism, Cupitt might be advised to drop terms like 'the void' from his non-realist vocabulary and talk instead of the contingency of life and language.

However, in *Creation Out of Nothing* Cupitt again lapses into quasi-foundational discourse. Here, language, rather than the autonomous self, "stands

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[9] Anthony C. Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*, (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1995), pp. 81-117.
[10] Don Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, (London: SCM Press, 1980), p. 85.
[11] Cupitt, *Life Lines*, op. cit., p. 131.
[12] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., pp. 42-43.
[13] ibid., p. 111.
[14] ibid., pp. 142-143.

between us and the void."[15] Language performs the role of medium, as though reality (the void) has a quasi-foundational role as that "in which we live and move and have our being."[16] A biblical allusion such as this highlights the ambiguity in Cupitt's texts of the 1980s. Despite his best efforts, his attempt to 'take leave' of a realist God often gives the impression of reasserting some divine double that might continue the fill the space that God once filled. In *Creation Out of Nothing* the divine space is filled by the unmasterable creative and destructive power of language.[17] Here Cupitt attempts to combine both pragmatic and deconstructive accounts of language. On the pragmatic side, Cupitt notes that language "is just a lot of human habits,"[18] in which "[w]e narrate the world."[19] On the deconstructive side, the world disappears. Language is defined as a *medium* that hides both things-in-themselves and God from us, making them inaccessible.[20] This tension between these two understandings of language destabilises Cupitt's account of religious non-realism. In his works of the 1980's, Cupitt increasingly gives the impression of having discovered in the postmodern flux of signs, images and narratives a key to the accurate depiction of reality. Deconstruction, Cupitt notes, reveals to us "the true character of language."[21] Everything is, and always has been, in flux,[22] so that the only possible conclusion about reality is that there is no conclusion. Whereas in *Only Human*, Cupitt had noted that both realism and anti-realism were both non-things,[23] he is now prepared to abandon non-realism and to make a positive thesis out of anti-realism, which he then mistakenly links to the pragmatic account of language. As a result he believes he is able to talk of anti-realism in pragmatic terms as not undermining the common-sense view of the world, and in postmodern

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[15] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op cit., p. 5.
[16] ibid., p. 4.
[17] ibid., pp. 33, 143, 155, 194.
[18] ibid., p. 73.
[19] ibid., p. 61.
[20] ibid., pp. 80, 148.
[21] Don Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, (London: SCM Press, 1989), p. 112.
[22] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 201.
[23] Cupitt, *Only Human*, (London: SCM Press, 1985),op. cit., p. 51.

terms as the giddy destabilising movement of signs in which everything is lost in the nihil and remains only as it is produced from the flux of language.[24] This leaves him free to redefine non-realism as the liberal attempt to demythologise religious language. He is then found to write that "a non-realist interpretation of mainline religion will not serve as an answer to today's needs."[25] Unlike the liberal, Cupitt no longer has a need to demythologise because he has discovered the truth about language. The God of realism may have been silenced,[26] but the voice of God's replacement is as loud as ever. It speaks now of what God *really* always was, namely "life, pouring out in language."[27] Briefly abandoning non-realism, Cupitt merely ends in asserting an anti-realist inversion of realism that shares all the foundational features of realism that he claims to be so damaging to religious faith.

Cupitt's whole discussion in *Creation Out of Nothing* is set in the context of his own anxiety about metaphysics and the desire to avoid Plato. He admits to being unable to find ways of expressing the religious insight he wishes to express without drawing upon the old Platonic contrasts of appearance and reality.[28] Consequently truth is asserted to be an illusion and illusions becomes the truth.[29] Cupitt's own metaphysical anxiety, I believe, exhibits a loss of nerve in his pragmatic desire to abandon both realism and anti-realism. Despite Cupitt's claim to the contrary, it is his adoption of deconstructive postmodernism that allows realism to reassert itself in his very attempt to deny it. Cupitt hoped that deconstruction would offer a theory of language and a theory of God—a grand theory of everything. The result was that God re-emerged as the "dance of signs" and the "power of language".[30] Reality re-emerges as flux, or the void. As Cupitt self-mockingly recognises, the "transient is

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[24] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., pp. 105-107, 110-111, 194.
[25] ibid., p. 92.
[26] ibid., p. 70.
[27] ibid., p. 127.
[28] ibid., p. 88.
[29] ibid., p. 31.
[30] Quotes respectively from Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 88, and *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 171.

the necessary. Back into Plato again."[31] However, in pragmatic mode, he is less concerned with a theory of language and more concerned with the work language does in everyday life. Metaphysics can be left at the level of 'useful stories' which help us to achieve our various purposes.[32] Language is not here conceived on the basis of an anti-realist metaphysics in which everything must first become unreal,[33] but rather as an 'actform', Cupitt's term for a "unit of skill-knowledge" which constitutes "a temporary-extended pattern or form of action."[34] This enables Cupitt to develop an integrated or holistic account of language, life and reality so that language no longer hides reality from us but brings us into direct contact with it.[35] Language, Cupitt comments, "presupposes and produces a world ...."[36] Here, religious non-realism is not built around a cluster of postmodern dialectical paradoxes about language but around those circumstances that are ordinarily presupposed by what counts as successful communication. In other words, what Cupitt wanted to say in *Creation Out of Nothing*, namely that "[h]uman life coincides with the movement of the world of signs as a whole, and has no outside,"[37] is said more appropriately within a pragmatic (Davidsonian-cum-Rortyan) account of language, where there is no longer any deep concern about dialectical paradoxes, rather than within a deconstructionist account. [38] Indeed, Cupitt recognised this himself, but not explicitly, in *Creation Out of Nothing*.[39]

I am suggesting that in turning from the autonomous internalised religious consciousness to a postmodern account of language, Cupitt may have been guilty of replacing the foundational monolithic domination of the God of religious realism with the monolithic domination of the self and then the monolithic domination of

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[31] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 89.
[32] Don Cupitt, *After All*, (London: SCM Press, 1993), p. 66.
[33] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., pp. 187-188.
[34] Don Cupitt, *What Is a Story?*, (London: SCM Press, 1991), p. xii.
[35] Don Cupitt, *The Time Being*, (London: SCM Press, 1992), p. 71.
[36] ibid., p. 121.
[37] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 106.
[38] Don Cupitt, *The Last Philosophy*, (London: SCM Press, 1995), p. 25.
[39] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., pp. 72-73, 206 no. 17.

language. An unfortunate corollary of this replacement strategy is that a vocabulary about God is sometimes unnecessarily evacuated by religious non-realists, from contexts in which it is most suitably applicable. For example, while Freeman has a personal preference for more traditional, detached styles of worship as opposed to a charismatic style, he balks at liturgical expressions that emphasise the personal aspect of God.[40] In so doing he risks being interpreted as a secular humanist who rejects the meaningfulness of a vocabulary about God because it lacks any resonance with his own personal preference for 'modern' modes of thought. Equally, when David Hart approvingly quotes Coleridge's phrase 'the willing suspension of disbelief' as characterising the non-realist approach to worship[41] he runs the risk of giving the impression that Christian non-realists are actually secular atheists who 'get a kick' out of attending Church and so, for that period only, suspend their atheism. Hart is wrong, I believe, when he asserts that "worship is not ... primarily 'about' God."[42] We don't offer our prayers to the sum of our goals and values, or to the religious community around us. Rather, prayer, as D.Z. Phillips has consistently argued, is bound to a vocabulary about God. "In prayer," Phillips notes, "what is said can only be said directly to God."[43] However, for Phillips this makes no assumptions about the question of God's reality independent of the context of prayer. The value of Phillips' work for religious non-realists is its understanding of God in relation to prayer and worship that does not rely upon the metaphysical assumption shared by realists and anti-realists, nor by modernists who want to reconstruct a self-

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[40] Anthony Freeman, *God in Us*, op cit., pp. 52-57.

[41] David A. Hart, *Faith in Doubt*, (London: Mowbrays, 1993), p. 78.

[42] ibid., p. 91.

[43] D.Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 52. Indeed, while I have not got time to argue the point here a strong case can be made for linking D.Z. Phillips' account of religious belief with that of a pragmatically orientated 'Sea of Faith' religious non-realism. For while Phillips is critical of some aspects of the work of pragmatists like Richard Rorty, his emphasis upon the significance of practice and his recognition of the pragmatic element within Wittgenstein's work do make interesting comparisons possible. For Phillips' critique of Rorty see D.Z. Phillips, 'Reclaiming the Conversation of Mankind', in *Philosophy*, Vol. 69, 1994, pp. 35-53. For Phillips' critique of both religious realism and religious non-realism see D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993), Ch. 4; and for his pragmatic account of Wittgenstein see Ch. 15 of the same book.

asserting self, and by postmodernists who want to deconstruct both God and the self by asserting the continual flux of linguistic meaning.

A further corollary of this replacement mentality is a confusion about the criteria upon which the religious non-realist's alternative to religious realism is asserted. This confusion is correctly rounded on by Thiselton.[44] Is religious non-realism dependent upon the modern replacement of God by the self or the postmodern replacement of God by language? Thiselton points out that religious non-realists like Freeman and Hart hardly seem to recognise that Cupitt's shift to language undermines their own confident assertions about modernity's attitude to the depth of human spirituality and the need to continually demythologise Christian doctrine in order to uncover its truth. Hart, for example, wants to demythologise the resurrection narratives and does so by drawing upon four representatives of twentieth century art: Stanley Spencer, Leo Tolstoy, W.H. Auden and Gustav Mahler. For each, according to Hart, the resurrection is a symbol of spiritual and moral openness to the future: a triumphant life-giving force which wins through pain, death and apparent closure; a creative human acceptance of times of trial, which, in Hart's words, produces "hope for the re-emergence of new and life-giving meanings within desperate human situations."[45] But by suggesting that these representatives of twentieth century art see the resurrection as a 'symbolic' expression of a continual hope drawn from the wellspring of spiritual life,[46] Hart comes close to also suggesting that such an interpretation provides what always has been the *essential* meaning of resurrection faith; a dissatisfaction with current conditions and creative acceptance that points a way beyond these conditions. But is this the case? Perhaps it would be more honest to recognise that such an account of the meaning of resurrection faith is held by some people in our current secular

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[44] Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*, op. cit., pp. 111-117.
[45] Hart, *Faith in Doubt*, op. cit., pp. 37-38.
[46] ibid., p. 47.

culture because they find it meaningful and useful as an expression of their religious belief. But theirs is not the definitive meaning of that resurrection faith.

Hart also sometimes gives the impression of allowing modernity to justify religious non-realism. On the basis of modern understandings of science, Hart believes, we ought to affirm that the being of God is "an illusory projection of human ideals."[47] However, in Cupitt's later postmodern view, it is not clear what power in modernity enables us to speak of such projections as illusory other than a different projection. Writers like Freeman and Hart, Thiselton argues, are caught between this modern and postmodern critique of religious realism.

The successful element in each stage of the development of Cupitt's thought, I am suggesting, is the pragmatism they share. In the pragmatic account, the self does not disappear into a postmodern 'puff of smoke' but neither is it the basis of a 'modern' religious affirmation. Rather, the self is constituted in every moment of its practical activity. On this account, Cupitt can agree with Hebblethwaite that in everyday life we are not cut off from the world,[48] not because in everyday life we are able to bridge epistemological or ontological dualisms, but because our situatedness in language and in life gives us immediate contact with the world. Thiselton also asserts the significance of our situatedness, but for him such a situatedness must be ontologically relativised in the context of "God's larger purposes".[49] For him, only a context of a narrative about God and God's purposes can ensure a hermeneutic recovery of the self, dissipated in its temporal situatedness. For the pragmatist, however, our situatedness is a consequence of our embodiment in the practical activity of everyday life. Here a further hermeneutic recovery, centred in 'God's larger purposes', is beside the point: the self is already embodied and this gives it a unified meaning within the context of the daily life and activity of the individual in question. According to Thiselton, this ignores biblical

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[47] ibid., p. 88.
[48] Hebblethwaite, *The Ocean of Truth*, op. cit., p. 84.
[49] Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*, op. cit., p. 151.

revelation and the need to place human life within a narrative of divine promise. Such a narrative avoids the manipulative and rhetorical strategies of religious non-realism which only mask a bid for power. However, it is by no means obvious why his own position is any less a bid for power than that suggested by Cupitt.[50] Thiselton's own creative misreading of Cupitt's account of evasive and deceptive strategies for contemporary church reform is itself a manipulative narrative in which he attempts to mould a critique of Cupitt in which Cupitt is falsely depicted as demanding church reform, not for the church's sake, but for his own.[51]

Thiselton correctly notes that Cupitt's position is consistent with the pragmatism of Richard Rorty, but I will argue later that the self-destructive consequences that Thiselton sees in pragmatism and the social despair he believes it engenders are not necessary features of a pragmatic outlook. However, Thiselton is correct in pointing to the quasi-foundationalism that results when Cupitt attempts to link postmodernism with pragmatism and he will have done religious non-realism a service if his critique succeeds in getting Cupitt to drop any remaining notion he has of language as a medium that simultaneously hides and creates reality.

A further unfortunate consequence of maintaining the link between pragmatism and postmodernism is the ambiguity that results in relation to the religious non-realist's attitude to those religious believers who persist with religious realism. As Thiselton again points out, a position consistent with *Life Lines* and *The Time Being* would be a live-and-let-live attitude to religious realism,[52] but Cupitt, as we have seen, also wants to mount a virulent attack on religious realism. The danger of such an attack is that it gives the impression that there is some foundational basis upon which it can be sustained. On the one hand, Cupitt notes that the type of "authentic postmodern Christianity [*sic*]" he hopes to promote should be "plural enough to allow one to choose against it,"[53] and that there are many alternative ways of being

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[50] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 111.
[51] Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*, op. cit., pp. 111-117.
[52] ibid., p. 114.
[53] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 77 (both quotes).

religious.[54] On the other hand, he also notes that trying to maintain some version of a reiterated supernaturalism will lead believers to a faith that tries to offer more comfort than can reasonably be expected. As a result it breeds "dishonesty and dissatisfaction."[55] Realism in religion, for Cupitt, is anti-religious and damaging to human psychic health. It might be possible to make sense of this ambiguity by seeing Cupitt's rejection of a reiterated religious realism not as the result of some depth analysis and critique of realism that reveals its 'hidden' dangers and inherent destructiveness, but rather the result of a comparison with his alternative vision of religious non-realism against which religious realism looks second best.

One reason why Cupitt has not, until recently, begun to clarify this ambiguity also explains why at various stages in his religious pilgrimage he has made different quasi-foundational claims about the self, the void or about language. This reason is the desire for certainty that he often seems to exhibit. This is a desire that runs throughout the various stages of his work. In *The Leap of Reason* Cupitt wrote:

> ... the religious quest is an attempt to free oneself from illusions, and to make true for oneself only what is true in itself.[56]

In that book, illusion arises when subjective, rather than objective truth has priority. In later works, however, illusion and certainty are defined in terms of the particular stage Cupitt's religious pilgrimage has reached. In *Taking Leave of God,* where objective truth becomes a "betrayal of the distinctively modern spiritual achievement,"[57] religious truth becomes "a matter of the will."[58] Claims involving religious objectivity are to be seen as illusory desires for comfort and happiness which are harmful to human spiritual growth.[59] To be free from illusion here is to recognise the self-asserting religious projections of the will without extraneous comfort. A eudaemonistic religious faith, for Cupitt at this stage, is something that

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[54] ibid., p. 98.
[55] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing,* op. cit., p. 61.
[56] Don Cupitt, *The Leap of Reason,* (London: SCM Press, 1976), p. 26.
[57] Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God,* op. cit., p. 136.
[58] ibid., p. 130.
[59] ibid., p. 134.

the religious person should attempt to abandon.[60] In Cupitt's second account of religious non-realism the source of religious certainty, against which everything else is seen to be illusory, is the creative power of language. 'Objectivity', 'immutability', 'unity' and 'obligations' are described by Cupitt as the four illusions of realism. No longer blinded by them, "the truth becomes obvious."[61] This truth is that life energy is given meaning only as it flows into and receives expression in language. Nevertheless, I have argued, Cupitt maintains a distinctively pragmatic account of faith. Religious belief is always practical, always known and judged by the effects it produces and always providing goals for us to live by.

The point of criticism I am offering here is not that Cupitt still uses terms like 'true', 'right', 'wrong', 'good' and 'bad' to describe various religious positions. Such terms can be employed pragmatically. Rather, my criticism is aimed at Cupitt's depiction of alternative religious positions as illusions from which we should seek to free ourselves as though there is a source of religious certainty 'true in itself' which directs our attention, when correctly attuned, away from these illusions. In *The New Christian Ethics*, for example, Cupitt argues that it is "clear to anyone who reflects on the way thought is transacted in language"[62] that ideas of transcendence and extra-historical truth are illusory. In *Radicals and the Future of the Church* and *Creation Out of Nothing* Cupitt cannot tolerate illusions.[63] The postmodern account of language provides, as nothing else does, a certainty that exposes the illusion of realism.[64] Rather than inhabiting a fictitious fantasy, religious faith must be coherent with "the here and now world of signs, the world of communication."[65] For only that which is 'true in itself' can be the source of genuine and illusion-free religious faith.

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[60] Cupitt, *The World to Come*, op. cit., pp. xi, 146.

[61] Don Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, (London: SCM Press, 1987), p. 43.

[62] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., p. 168.

[63] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 168.

[64] ibid., pp. 41, 97, 101, 138; Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p.181.

[65] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 97.

However, in *What is a Story?*, Cupitt gives the impression of someone who recognises that his own quest for certainty is itself a hopeless illusion but one that cannot be relinquished.[66] He is consciously aware that he wants to assert that religion is only human but also aware of the narrativity of such an assertion. This situation remains paradoxical for him in that he still has a residual desire for certainty beyond narrativity. But in this work, and those from *The Time Being* onwards, a significant shift in his position has occurred. The assertion of religion as a human creation, once based upon the certainty of the autonomous internalised religious consciousness or upon the postmodernist account of language, is now offered simply as an alternative proposal to religious realism: one that holds out a better prospect for our religious happiness. Here, a non-realist religious faith is eudaemonic rather than disinterested.[67] Cupitt still talks of objective reality as an illusion but this is not because it is being compared to something real, but because it is "a serious threat to our happiness."[68] Consequently, the 'true in itself' has recently disappeared from Cupitt's work and a new tolerance of illusion has begun to emerge. He writes:

> ... our truths are those illusions without which we cannot live, the illusions we have fallen in love with and want to be made to believe.[69]

In this respect, the reiteration of realist religious belief also emerges as a possible pragmatic source for orientating one's life. Cupitt allows, for example, that religious realism is:

> ... an ideal realism, a humanly-fictioned realism ... heuristically or pragmatically useful and valuable to us humans for various of our human and practical purposes, but utterly irrelevant to philosophy.[70]

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[66] Cupitt, *What Is a Story?*, op. cit., pp. 138-139.
[67] Cupitt, *The Last Philosophy*, op. cit., pp. 9-12. Rowan Williams suggests that there has always been an undercurrent of eudaemonianism even in Cupitt's early account of religious non-realism. Rowan Williams, 'Religious Realism: On Not Quite Agreeing with Don Cupitt', op. cit., p. 11. See Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, op. cit., p. 161.
[68] Cupitt, *The Last Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 74.
[69] Cupitt, *After All*, op. cit., p. 18.
[70] Cupitt, *The Last Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 102.

It is this pragmatic strand in Cupitt's work that I now wish to emphasise. It is pragmatism, I believe, that best articulates the type of religious mentality that Cupitt and the 'Sea of Faith' religious non-realists wish to propose. Such an articulation would imply neither a quasi-foundationalism nor participation in the quest for certainty.

4.3. Cupitt's Religious Non-Realism and Pragmatism:

In Cupitt's early and later accounts of non-realism religion is to be understood as a human activity that we engage in pragmatically rather than dogmatically.[71] For the non-realist "the daily practice of religion becomes itself the only goal of religion."[72] The meaning of our religious beliefs and practices derive from us language-using humans and these beliefs and practices are employed for purposes that fit our human needs. An awareness of this pragmatic account of religious belief is for Cupitt a source of spiritual liberation.[73] Cupitt is convinced that metaphysical religious realism has collapsed. It now needs to be replaced by something like "an American-style pragmatic humanism,"[74] which refuses to believe in any antecedent grounding to truth and meaning. In this view, religious belief is truthful as long as it remains life-enhancing and since the definition of what is 'life-enhancing' will be plural and ambiguous, religion will also be plural and ambiguous. The traditional realist notion of truth does not help in this context.[75] For Cupitt, what is life-enhancing and liberating is the affirmation of life's transience and contingency. For others, it may be life-enhancing and liberating to re-state traditional realist accounts of belief. But if so, they are stated as fictions we can live by.[76] As Cupitt notes, "truth is fiction,"[77] a story about what works. What worked for religious belief in the past

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[71] Cupitt, *Only Human*, op. cit., p. 211.
[72] Cupitt, *The Time Being*, op. cit., p. 126.
[73] ibid., p. 66.
[74] ibid., p. 33.
[75] Cupitt, *What Is a Story?*, op. cit., pp. 135, 139-140, 153-154.
[76] Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, op. cit., p. 144.; *The Time Being*, op. cit., p. 117.
[77] Cupitt, *The Long Legged Fly*, op. cit., p. 144. Since realism is a fiction that denies fiction it is self-referentially incoherent, whereas the belief that realism is a fiction is itself a fiction, and is true merely as a fiction, is not self-referentially incoherent because such a notion of the fictive nature of truth is

may not now be at all useful to our needs. Now we need non-realist religious fictions. This does not mean that 'truth', in the old realist sense, is now defined as 'what works' as though 'workability' is an antecedently definable criterion of truth. Rather, the notion of defining truth in this realist sense is now, Cupitt believes, no longer useful.[78] For Cupitt, a non-realist account of religious belief:

> ... doesn't tell us any new and great Truth. All it does is help us to become happy with things as they are. It is therapy ...[79]

We should understand religion "in terms of the part it can play in our lives,"[80] not in terms of the pictures it conjures up for us. In that Cupitt does talk of truth in various contexts, he does so without its realist connotations. For Cupitt, there are many small 't', local, consensual, plural, rhetorical truths; useful temporary stations in the process of human endeavour that deserve our respect and commitment. Such respect is functional rather than ontological and such commitment is regulative rather than dogmatic.[81] Truths, in the non-realist sense, are not antecedently existing qualities determining the validity or non-validity of various human endeavours; they are rather qualities that we humans have to make, like skills we have to develop.[82] They function in the conventional human world of everyday life.

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one which itself arises primarily not from reflection that would produce a series of fictional justifications of fictive accounts of truth *ad infinitum*, but rather arises from within the very contingent practices of everyday life and the language of everyday use which non-realists believe it is liberating for us to affirm. *The Time Being*, op. cit., p. 183.; *What Is a Story?*, op. cit., pp. 100-103, 151-154. Also see *The Long Legged Fly*, op. cit., p. 12.

[78] Cupitt, *After All*, op. cit., p. 103. However, Cupitt's rhetoric against the illusion of supernaturalism does not always give the impression of consistency on this point.

[79] Cupitt, *The Last Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 47.

[80] Cupitt, 'Anti-Realist Faith' in Runzo (ed.) *Is God Real?*, op. cit., p. 150.

[81] White, *Don Cupitt and the Future of Christian Doctrine*, op. cit., pp. 55, 85.; Cupitt, *The World to Come*, op. cit., p. 64.; *Life Lines*, op. cit., p. 134.; *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 15.; *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., pp. 22, 45.; *The Time Being*, op. cit., pp. 32, 170.; *Solar Ethics*, (London: SCM Press, 1995), p. 64.

[82] Cupitt writes:

> ... truth is a matter of study, arguments, literary strategies, ambiguities, disputes about interpretation, thinking up objections and so forth. It is a creative work of tracing, manipulating and constructing, all done with signs, and the conclusion's content is just, and no more than, the work that has gone before it and has led up to it.

The Long Legged Fly, op. cit., p. 154.

This is how we are to understand Cupitt's reference to 'the six truths' in *The Time Being* and his attempt in *After All* to sketch a "not untruthful" account of religious belief.[83] Religion, writes Cupitt, "can have an art-truth and it can have a pragmatic truth, but it cannot have the old objective sort of Truth-truth."[84] In what comes close to a paean of praise to the pragmatic account of truth Cupitt writes:

> ... the pragmatist theory of truth, of which we have already given a hint, marks a real advance. It ... acknowledge[s] that the true for us has to be what it is good for us to hold, and it suits a period of rapid change because it allows us to think that beliefs and truths may have only a limited period of serviceability. We should regard ... [them] ... like disposable tools, and simply pick up the ones that will best serve our current purposes. ... [W]e might claim that religious beliefs are true in the sense that they work out well in our lives—and no more than that can be said or need be said, for we have no standpoint outside our own lives from which to conduct any other test of our beliefs.
> ... [W]ith pragmatism we have already come to the end of Truth.[85]

Cupitt's religious non-realism, then, coincides with a pragmatic account of truth. Indeed 'pragmatism' informs Cupitt's attitude generally to art, science, philosophy and morality. This, I suggest, also informs the non-realist's attitude towards the epistemological status of the pressures internal to religious belief and ethical practice, discussed in the last chapter, and the intellectual heritage, discussed in chapter two. For while Cupitt and the other Sea of Faith writers may want to 'explain' why they accept religious non-realism they will not, at their pragmatic best, seek to 'justify' the non-realist or naturalistic approach to religious belief as though it were eternally valid and exclusively accurate approach to religion. Cupitt notes:

> ... it is a mistake to suppose that religion needs to be justified from outside by being set upon a firm foundation of metaphysics and epistemology. Religion no more needs that sort of justification than does art.[86]

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[83] Cupitt, *The Time Being*, op. cit., pp. 35-41, 164.; *After All*, op. cit., pp. 39, 46-47, 122.
[84] Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 159.
[85] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 44.
[86] Cupitt, *The World to Come*, op. cit., p. 36.

Any such justification of religious non-realism would merely engage the realist on the realist's own terms.[87] Rather, in pragmatic mood, Cupitt attempts to explain why one set of human religious beliefs (ones of a broadly realist nature) have been replaced, or should now be replaced by another set of human religious beliefs (ones of a broadly non-realist nature).[88] Religious non-realists, who are also pragmatists, should not attempt to ground their non-realism in some supposedly privileged metaphysical position over realism, but rather aim to inculcate in religious believers a sense of the groundlessness of the decision to be religious. That is, its ungroundedness in anything that is not already bound by the natural, linguistic and environmental conditions that make us human.[89] Chosen gratuitously, religious faith in its various forms is to "be assessed and compared only immanently and pragmatically."[90] Cupitt is prepared to suggest reasons why he believes that a non-realist account of religious belief is today preferable to a realist or supernaturalistic account of religious belief, but in doing so, he utilises the distinction between the role these reasons have as explanation, and the role they have as justification. While these reasons may 'explain' why a non-realist approach to religious belief is now preferable to a realist approach, these reasons should not be understood as providing grounds upon which a theologian or philosopher could 'justify' the truth of religious non-realism over that of realism. To suggest that these reasons do this, is to predicate non-realism in religion upon a realist or foundationalist account of truth which non-realists like Cupitt claim to want to set aside. As Cupitt notes:

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[87] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., pp. 9-17.; *The Long Legged Fly*, op. cit., p. 86.

[88] It will mark, in Cupitt's words, the replacement of one "obsolete bunch of cultural fictions", with a new bunch Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., p. 120. This also means, for Cupitt that any metaphysical argument will be a rhetorical and heuristic. He writes:
> ... a bold metaphysical assertion is a rhetorical device used in the hope of persuading people to change the habitual order of their thoughts.

Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 49.

[89] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., pp. 121-123. These conditions include space, time, body and society and each are understood only inside particular uses of language. See Cupitt, *After All*, op. cit., pp. 110-117.

[90] Cupitt, *Only Human*, op cit., p. 9.

No world-view, faith or ideology whatever is objectively anchored in and guaranteed by the nature of things, in the sense that human beings once believed in, for there is no such nature of things. But it does not follow that none of our beliefs is more rational than any other; only, that we must now test our beliefs immanently in terms of their coherence with each other, the way they work out in life, the sense they enable us to make of life, and their fecundity—the extent to which they open up new hypotheses and creative possibilities.[91]

For Cupitt, the question of justification is simply a matter of going over the history and the argument and seeing the differences that alternative approaches to religion make to people's lives. We will then either acknowledge these alternatives or we will not.[92] As Cupitt notes, "the pursuit of the religious ideals needs no extraneous justification and cannot be given one."[93] We must not seek to turn understanding and explanation into justification.[94] He notes, "[w]e don't seek to *justify* knowledge-claims. We merely contextualize them."[95]

In his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Richard Rorty also refers to this distinction between explanation and justification.[96] For Rorty, 'explanation' is simply a "natural quest for understanding" while 'justification' is an "unnatural quest for certainty."[97] The former is a pragmatic strategy which facilitates our coping with the world we live in. The latter is a pointless attempt to ground our current understandings in something external and unchanging. Appeal to such grounds makes no sense because they merely reinforce sceptical worries concerning our knowledge of the world rather than relieving them.[98] "Nobody," writes Rorty, "would want 'human knowledge' ... justified unless he had been [like Locke] frightened by scepticism."[99] For Rorty, if we are to talk of 'justification' at all we should see it as pointing to the social context that directs our methods of knowing

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[91] ibid., p. 9.
[92] Cupitt, *The New Christian Ethics*, op. cit., p. 37.
[93] Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*, op. cit., p. 121.
[94] Cupitt, *Life Lines*, op. cit., p. 209.
[95] Cupitt, *Radicals And the Future of the Church*, op. cit., p. 42.
[96] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), pp. 139-148, 178, 192.
[97] ibid., p. 228.
[98] ibid., p. 178.
[99] ibid., p. 229.

rather than to some "special relation between ideas (or words) and objects"[100] or some privileged inner representation that enables us to divide one branch of social knowledge as 'purely given' (i.e. science) from another as 'purely conceptual'[101] (i.e. religion). To argue that we can explain "rationality and epistemic authority by reference to what society lets us say"[102] is merely to argue that the *social* function of the term 'justify' is the only appropriate one. As a result, Rorty writes, the pragmatist will:

> ... abandon the notion of philosophy as a discipline which adjudicates the claims of science and religion, mathematics or poetry, reason and sentiment, allocating an appropriate place to each.[103]

If we cease to understand 'explanation' as 'justification' and see 'justification' sociologically rather than as a term designed to segregate some privileged interpretation or truth from our other human endeavours, we need not then object to knowledge as explanation.[104] We can offer explanations of why Christian non-realism has developed *without* allowing these explanations to be taken as justifying Christian non-realism. Having said this, however, we may allow that if these explanations are accepted within a specified society, belief in a realist God may become less plausible to those in that society, and a non-realist conception of God or atheism or agnosticism or a total disinterest in this set of religious issues may come to predominate. None of these positions, however, would be said to be justified by these explanations. As Rorty points out, the claim that the atheist, in appealing to enlightenment thought is "appealing to reason, whereas the religious are being irrational, is hokum."[105] Rather, for Rorty, the whole idea of appealing to such deeper justifying sources for our religious or atheistic vocabularies is an idea we

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[100] ibid., p. 170.

[101] ibid., pp. 170, 210.

[102] ibid., p. 174. This is an attitude that Rorty claims to have in common with both Dewey and Wittgenstein.

[103] ibid., p. 212.

[104] ibid., p. 210.

[105] Richard Rorty, 'Religion as a Conversation Stopper', in *Common Knowledge*, Vol. 3, 1994. p. 4.

would do well to drop.[106] By dropping that notion, our acceptance or rejection of religious belief and practice becomes a pragmatic matter. In the words of J. Wesley Robbins:

> A pragmatist is going to advise ... religious humanists to deflect questions about the authorization of their re-definition of 'God' with a response like "Let's try it, and see how it works."[107]

This pragmatic advice, I have been suggesting, is perhaps best taken when it comes to accounting for the reasons that Cupitt and others employ to explain their non-realist conception of religious belief. As Cupitt confirms, his non-realism is explored and promoted on the basis that "it is the point of view we would do well to adopt, because it is the one that works best."[108] From this perspective, Cupitt's more dogmatic statements in defence of non-realism, statements which are often made in a style which appears to *justify* rather than *explain* the motivating factors behind a non-realist understanding of Christian faith, become statements which cogently affirm that a non-realist approach to religious belief might be one worth trying for. This, however, is not to say that a philosophy called 'pragmatism' provides the basis on which we can be religious today, after realism has been accepted as incompatible with religious belief and practice.

4.4. Conclusion:

In this chapter I have developed the pragmatic theme in religious non-realism. Pragmatism helps to articulate the context in which the explanations for the appeal of religious non-realism, outlined in the last two chapters, might best be understood. The realist critics of religious non-realism will have a valid point to make if non-realists stray from this pragmatic context. Pragmatism does not aim to replace the assertion of a realist dogma about the nature and content of truth with another, non-realist, dogma. Rather it aims to present an account of human endeavours in which

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[106] ibid., p. 5.

[107] J. Wesley Robbins, 'Pragmatism, Democracy and God', in *The American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* Vol. 14, 1993. p. 282.

[108] Cupitt, *After All*, op. cit., p. 112.

such dogmas are replaced by the development and use of various strategies for coping with the world we live in. To make this point, and to confirm the parallels that I have been intimating between religious non-realism and pragmatism, it will be helpful to consider the religious thought of John Dewey.

CHAPTER FIVE

JOHN DEWEY, AND RELIGIOUS NON-REALISM

5.1. Introduction:

Although some theologians, like the American pragmatist J. Wesley Robbins, have

pointed to a number of "similarities between Cupitt's Christian humanism and

Deweyan religious naturalism,"[1] the association of ideas between John Dewey's

comments on religious belief in his book *A Common Faith* with 'Sea of Faith'

religious non-realism is rarely remarked upon. In this chapter, therefore, I shall

summarise Dewey's account of religious belief and in the process I shall indicate its

close affinities with the features of 'Sea of Faith' non-realism which I discussed in

chapter one.

5.2. The Development of Dewey's Understanding of God:

The Nineteen-Nineties have seen a revival of interest in the work of John Dewey.

This revival is evidenced by the publication of three major biographies since 1991:

Robert B. Westbrook's, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, Alan Ryan's *John*

Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism and Steven C. Rockefeller's, *John*

Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism,[2] The latter, as the title

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[1] J. Wesley Robbins, 'When Christians Become Naturalists' in *Religious Studies*, Vol. 28, 1992, p. 200. Also see David Ray Griffin, *God and Religion in the Postmodern World*, (Albany: SUNY Press 1989). p. 60. John Hick, 'Religious Realism and Non-realism: Defining the Issue' in Joseph Runzo (ed) *Is God Real?* (London: Macmillan 1993) p. 8.

[2] Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). Alan Ryan's *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York, W. W. Norton, 1996). Steven C. Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). Also see: J. Wesley Robbins, 'A Common Faith Revisited' in *Religious Humanism* Vol. 28, 1994 pp. 22-33. William L, Rowe, 'Religion Within the Bounds of Naturalism: Dewey and Wieman' in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* Vol. 38, 1995 pp. 17-36. Douglas R. Anderson 'Smith and Dewey on the Religious Dimension of Experience: Dealing With Dewey's Half-God' in *The American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* Vol. 14, 1993 pp. 161-176. P. Eddy Wilson, 'Emerson and Dewey on Natural Piety' in *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 75, 1995 pp. 329-346. William M. Shea, 'On John Dewey's Spiritual Life' in *American Journal of Education*, Vol. 101, 1992 pp. 71-81. Michael J. Rockler, 'Russell vs. Dewey on Religion' in *Free Inquiry* Vol. 15, 1995 pp. 36-38. Marvin C. Shaw, 'Wieman's Misunderstanding of Dewey: The *Christian Century* Discussion' in *Zygon*, Vol. 22, 1987 pp. 7-19. Steven C. Rockefeller, 'John Dewey, Spiritual Democracy and the Human Future' in *Cross Currents*, Vol. 39, 1989 pp. 300-321.

suggests, concentrates on Dewey's philosophy in the light of his sensibility to religious belief. It provides a comprehensive guide to Dewey's thought on theological matters and to Dewey's own personal religious development.

Rockefeller distinguishes six stages in the development of Dewey's religious thinking. First, from an early age, until the late 1870's, Dewey belonged to his local Vermont Congregational Church, although without sharing a whole-hearted commitment to its doctrinal beliefs. Second, from 1878-1892, Dewey was introduced to Vermont transcendentalism, a blend of Kant's practical reason and Wordsworthian romanticism. At this stage Dewey gained a lifelong regard for the religious dimension of experience which he conceived as the sense of awe and wonder, dependence, peace and joy that come with a mystical appreciation of oneself and one's community integrated within the whole that constitutes the universe. Dewey claims to have had such an experience himself at this stage and although he attributed it to aspects of his own psychology, he found it significant nonetheless. Talking about the experience fifty years later, Dewey claimed that after it, he no longer had any doubts about the value and meaning of life and thus no need of beliefs either.[3] The third stage (1882-1887) coincides with Dewey's early teaching career during which he was heavily influenced by absolute idealism. Hegelian philosophy appeared to offer an understanding of the individual in relation to the whole which did not require belief in external revelation, disruption of natural processes or assent to ossified timeless dogma. It appealed to Dewey's desire for a unified method of knowledge and spoke of the 'absolute' without the trappings of Christian doctrine to which Dewey could not give his full assent. In this third stage, characterised by his book *Psychology* published in 1887, Dewey attempted to create a synthesis between Hegelian rationalism and the method of scientific inquiry that derived knowledge from experience. In human psychology the absolute personality of Hegel's system is united with the individual inquiring scientific personality. At

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[3] A report of a conversation of Dewey with Max Eastman quoted in Max Eastman, 'John Dewey', in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 168, 1941, p. 673.

this stage, Rockefeller notes, Dewey "identifies the reality of God with God's realization in a being like man and rejects any notion that God is an eternal static being existing wholly apart from the world of time, process, and becoming."[4] However, because for Dewey, time and history exist within the absolute, God remains in some unspecified way, an individual centre of consciousness distinct from human personality. Nevertheless, the idea of the realisation of the absolute in the human, enabled Dewey to unite human scientific and experimental inquiry with rational philosophy and to assert the union of the actual inquiring self, that is the individual person, with the ideal rational self, that is, the perfect personality of God. Since, for Dewey, both the inquiring self and the perfect self had Truth, Goodness, Beauty and Being as their guiding objects, the self's union with the divine is to be seen as occurring through human endeavours in science, art, social relations and religion. Religion makes this union manifest and leads us, Dewey writes "[to] belief and trust that God is in all our life, and is all around us and about us."[5] At this stage, the reality of God is the source of all human action and the ground of personality. Whereas moral action, for Dewey, tried to conform the actual to the ideal, "religious action is action directed at the embodiment of the ideal in the actual."[6] and truth conceived in terms of the use that such action has.

The fourth stage in Dewey's account of the reality of God is marked by three major developments in his thought, first, his increasing use of Darwinian rather than Hegelian terminology to explain the relation of humankind to its environment; second, as a result of his Darwinism, a shift from absolute to ethical idealism; and third, his increasing use of the pragmatic test of truth. At this stage Dewey drops the notion of the absolute Will and instead attempts to reconcile Christianity to modern culture by de-mythologising the transcendent God of the Bible in terms of the goods of human social life, democracy, open unfettered inquiry and education. In this

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[4] Steven C. Rockefeller, *John Dewey*, op. cit., p. 96.
[5] John Dewey, 'The relation of Morality and Religion' quoted in Rockefeller *John Dewey*, op. cit., p. 112.
[6] John Dewey, *Psychology*, quoted in Rockerfeller *John Dewey*, op. cit., p. 113.

period, God's reality is no longer viewed as the absolute of neo-Hegelian idealism, but 'the organic unity of the world' interchangeable with nature and the immanent life of personality. At this stage, Rockefeller comments:

> [D]ivine revelation [for Dewey] is the disclosure of truth in general, ... the Incarnation is the presence of God in all persons and society; ... [while]... the true church and kingdom of God are to be identified with the democratic community[.][7]

However, Dewey's increasing acceptance of naturalism and pragmatism and his move to Chicago that cut his ties with the institutional church of his youth, also led to the abandonment of this liberal theology. In the fifth stage, from 1894-1928, Dewey is mostly silent on religious matters. In essays which later constituted his book *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy*[8] Dewey explains that he rejected idealism because it was pragmatically useless. Instead he affirms a naturalism which does not reduce to materialism but asserts the natural origins of science as well as art, philosophy as well as religion, human experience as well as human imagination. At this fifth stage, Dewey's earlier Hegelian panentheism has slipped into a 'natural piety' in which God is now to be viewed as a projection of human values. At this stage Dewey can be seen as America's Feuerbach.[9] Doctrinal religion is no longer the most appropriate vehicle of this 'natural piety'. Rather it is expressed in a "creed of life implicit in democracy and science."[10] Dewey writes:

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[7] Rockefeller, *John Dewey*, op. cit., pp. 214-215. See here, John Dewey, 'Christianity and Democracy,' in *The Early Works of John Dewey. 1882-1898*, Vol. 4. (ed. Jo Anne Boydston, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971) pp. 3-10 (henceforth, sited as *Early Works*). Such demythologising of the gospel in terms of democracy, as William M. Shea points out, suggests a similarity of method with that of Bultmann. Shea 'On John Dewey's spiritual Life', in *American Journal of Education*, op. cit., p. 75.

[8] John Dewey, *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965 edition). Esp. pp. 1-45.

[9] Rockefeller, *John Dewey*, op. cit., p. 216.

[10] John Dewey, 'Religion and our Schools'. in *Hibbert Journal*, Vol. 7, 1908. p. 799. Until Dewey abandoned his Neo-Hegelianism in the mid 1890's he was inclined to regard the democratic spirit as the manifestation of absolute spirit once manifested in religion. As a result his early work on religion had an important influence on his understanding of the nature of democracy and scientific inquiry. This influence survives his abandonment of Hegelianism in favour of naturalism and is developed in his later religious naturalism. In a work that stands at the point of his departure from Hegelianism Dewey writes:

We measure the change from the standpoint of the supernatural and we call it irreligious. Possibly if we measured it from the standpoint of the natural piety it is fostering, ... it would appear as the growth of religion.[11]

For Dewey, science and democracy represent growth in the religious dimension of human experience. Supernaturalism impedes this growth. It is a hindrance to "the recognition of that type of religion which will be the fine flower of the modern spirit's achievement."[12]

However, Dewey had not dispensed with the idea of God. In the sixth stage, Dewey combines the social concern of the de-mythologised gospel of his fourth stage, the union of the Ideal in the actual of the third stage, and the emphasis upon experience which had dominated his thought since the second stage. He then views them in the light of the imaginative projection of his fifth stage. The result was his naturalistic religious humanism to which he gives expression in his book *A Common*

The significance of democracy as revelation is that it enables us to get truths in a natural, everyday and practical sense which otherwise could be grasped only in a somewhat unnatural or sentimental sense. ... If God is, as Christ taught, at the root of life, incarnate in man, then democracy has a spiritual meaning which it behoves us not to pass by. ... The spiritual unification of humanity, the realization of the brotherhood of all man, all that Christ called the Kingdom of God is but the further expression of this [democracy]. ... It is no accident that the growing organization of democracy coincides with the rise of science. ... Democracy thus appears as the means by which the revelation of truth is carried on. It is in democracy, the community of ideas and interest through community of action, that the incarnation of God in man (man, that is to say, as organ of universal truth) becomes a living, present thing having its ordinary and natural sense.

Dewey, 'Christianity and Democracy', 1893 essay in *Early Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 8-9. In another article published in the same year Dewey wrote:

The next religious prophet who will have a permanent and real influence on men's lives will be the man who succeeds in pointing out the religious meaning of democracy ... It is the question of doing what Jesus did for his time.

John Dewey, 'The Relation of Philosophy to Theology' in *Early Works* Vol. 4. op. cit., p. 36. According to Rockefeller, Dewey's ethics of democracy, recalling its Christian origins, was an ethics of love. "By love," Rockefeller notes, "[Dewey] means wholehearted interest in those objects, ends, and ideals which the process of experimental moral evaluation recognizes as good." Rockefeller adds:

Love so defined is the way of freedom and growth for the individual and the community. It is the perfection of democracy as a creative way of personal life. (...) [O]ne finds here in Dewey a theory of what might be called a secular democratic form of spiritual practice.

Rockefeller, 'John Dewey, Spiritual Democracy and the Human Future', op cit., p. 314.

[11] Dewey, 'Religion and our Schools'. op. cit., p. 808.

[12] ibid., p. 809. Dewey did not have a materialistic or reductive view of science,. Science is not final. It is the method of inquiry guided by intelligence. Its conclusions are always open to revision. See the final chapter of his *The Quest for Certainty*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1930). Also see John Dewey, 'Religion and the Intellectuals', in *Partisan Review*, Vol. 17, 1950. pp. 129-133.

Faith. Condemning both supernatural theism and atheism, he adumbrates, in this sixth stage what Rockefeller describes as "a major alternative way of being religious open to modern men and women."[13]

5.3. Dewey, the Reality of God and Religion As a Human Creation:

5.3a. Religion and the Religious: In *A Common Faith*, Dewey makes a distinction between the noun 'religion' and the adjective 'religious'. Whereas the noun denotes the doctrines, practices and the 'supernatural encumbrances' that have grown up around religious faith through the ossification of historic and culturally specific dogmas, the adjective denotes a certain human experience of unseen powers.[14] For Dewey, these unseen powers are those ideal ends that are projected in the human imagination and arise within the natural conditions and processes of human living. The imagination provides a unified notion of the self with the universe, and has a moral and religious function giving guidance to our contingent and transient practices by directing them toward the ideal ends that we currently envision. Such ideal ends, for Dewey, are not to be understood as "already embedded in the existent frame of things"[15] To think that they are is to display a lack of moral faith in the need to strive for moral ends.[16] When, however, we maintain moral faith in ideal ends in a way that suggests their total inclusiveness, we move from a merely moral faith to the faith that is religious.[17] The religious attitude is defined by Dewey as one that seeks:

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[13] Rockefeller, *John Dewey,* op. cit., p. 22.

[14] John Dewey, *A Common Faith,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), p. 6.

[15] ibid., p. 21.

[16] "Faith that something *should be* in existence as far as lies in our power," writes Dewey, is then "changed into the intellectual belief that *it is already* in existence." ibid., pp. 21-22 (my italics). But when experience and observation fail to bear out the existence of such ideals they are either rejected or made metaphysical. Moral faith becomes a hopeless illusion (as in atheism) or it becomes supernatural (as in traditional theism). Either way it becomes alienated from its natural origin in the human imagination and from that endeavour which is the human responsibility to pursue. When moral faith turns supernatural it becomes a source of refuge for the weak and the source of fanaticism in the strong. Those who dissent are pitied by the first group converted through force by the second. ibid., p. 22.

[17] ibid., p. 23.

the unification of the self through allegiance to inclusive ideal ends, which imagination presents to us and to which the human will responds as worthy of controlling our desires and choices.[18]

The ideal ends of religious faith are not to be viewed as being either antecedently realised or guaranteed to prevail, for then dogmatism would replace the open pursuit of ideal ends and possible future goods would be closed off by the fixation of religious ideals into credal formulae.[19] Free from such supernatural encumbrances, Dewey suggests:

> Any activity pursued on behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss, because of conviction of its general and enduring value, is religious in quality.[20]

Thus the religious dimension of experience is potentially available within every human activity and not restricted to a single privileged set of doctrinal formulations which claim to evoke an entity in whom ideal values are already realised. Dewey writes:

> What I have been criticizing is the *identification* of the ideal with a particular Being, especially when that identification makes necessary the conclusion that this Being is outside of nature.[21]

5.3b. Human Imagination and Experience: For Dewey, the ideals that stimulate religious experience are imaginative human constructs. However, Dewey does not mean that religious experience is illusory simply because ideal ends are apprehended through the imagination. For Dewey, the imagination does not constitute a mere garnish to human experience but provides it with future possibilities which shape our current realities. Even facts, argues Dewey, "are usually observed with reference to some practical end and purpose, and that end is presented only imaginatively."[22] For Dewey, the imagination supplies the *teleological* element to experience and is conceived *holistically*. These are two

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[18] ibid., p. 33.
[19] ibid., p. 22.
[20] ibid., p. 27.
[21] ibid., p. 48.
[22] ibid., p. 18.

crucial elements in Dewey's account of the unseen powers that clarify the sense in which, for Dewey, religious faith is a human creation. I will, therefore, consider these two elements in a little more detail.

Firstly, in relation to teleology, Dewey accepts William James' use of a distinction between material and theistic conceptions of the world. If the world is complete, according to James, then whether we choose to describe its *cause* in terms of a theistic vocabulary or a materialistic vocabulary is purely arbitrary since the world, as complete, would remain exactly the same. But, writes Dewey:

> It is entirely different if we take the future into account. God then has the meaning of a power concerned with assuring the final triumph of ideal and spiritual values and matter becomes a power indifferent to the triumph or defeat of these values. And our life takes a different direction according[ly] as we adopt one or other of these alternatives.[23]

It is more beneficial, more pragmatically useful to human flourishing, to reach out for ideal values projected by the imagination by adopting a theistic perspective than by adopting a materialistic one. As James writes:

> If theological ideas prove to have a value for concrete life, they will be true, for pragmatism, in the sense of being good for so much.[24]

But, he adds, whatever other truth theological ideas will have will depend entirely on how they cohere with other truths we recognise. For Dewey, pragmatism "does not insist upon antecedent phenomena but upon consequent phenomena; not upon the precedents but upon the possibilities of action."[25] By putting imaginative ideas into action the world is changed without these ideas having necessarily been realised in some antecedently existing entity.[26]

The second element in understanding Dewey's account of the imagination and its projection of the unseen powers is his holism. In Dewey's pragmatism, the

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[23] John Dewey, 'The Development of American Pragmatism' in H.S. Thayer (ed.) *Pragmatism: The Classic Writings*, (Hackett: Indianapolis, 1982 edition), p. 28.
[24] William James, 'What Pragmatism Means' in H.S. Thayer (ed.), ibid., p. 222.
[25] Dewey, 'The Development of American Pragmatism', op. cit., pp. 32-33.
[26] ibid., p. 33.

imagination unifies human experience as a whole. Human mental activity, therefore, cannot be considered in isolation either from human action or from the environment at large and, according to Dewey, we understand the notions of 'selfhood' and 'universe' "only through imaginative extension."[27] It is in this imaginative extension that the self and the universe are harmonised. Thus, writes Dewey:

> The self is always directed toward something beyond itself and so its own unification depends upon the idea of the integration of the shifting scenes of the world into that imaginative totality we call the Universe.[28]

This means that a purely voluntaristic account of our imaginative projection of the self will be incomplete. It needs to be holistically integrated with our understanding of the world to do full justice to the ideal ends envisioned by religious faith. Dewey writes:

> The essentially unreligious attitude is that which attributes human achievement and purpose to man in isolation from the world of physical nature and his fellows. Our successes are dependent upon the cooperation of nature. The sense of the dignity of human nature is as religious as is the sense of awe and reverence when it rests upon a sense of human nature as a cooperating part of a larger whole.[29]

It is this holistic reluctance to "isolate man either individually or collectively from nature"[30] that characterises a Deweyan account of imaginative projection. Indeed, Dewey's understanding of 'experience' is predicated upon a rejection of dualistic metaphysics that divides subject from object and spirit from nature. Like every experience, the religious dimension of experience "is an interaction of environing conditions and an organism."[31] Dewey's, then, is not a subjectivist account of experience. Neither, however, does he maintain an objectivist account of

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[27] Dewey, *A Common Faith*, op. cit., pp. 18-19.
[28] ibid., p. 19.
[29] ibid., p. 25.
[30] ibid., p. 46.
[31] John Dewey, 'Experience, Knowledge and Value', in Paul Arthur Schilpp and Lewis Edwin Hahn (ed) *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, (1939 and 1951) 1989 edition), p. 544.

experience, as if our scientific inquiry provided an immutable or absolute account of supposedly fixed realities.[32] Rather, his is an instrumental account of experience in which the acquisition of practical skills helps an organism to foster a better adjustment toward its environment. For Dewey, experience is the direct and immediate encounter of an organism with its environment. In a collaborative work with Arthur Bentley, *Knowing and the Known*, Dewey writes:

> We reject the 'no man's land' of words imagined to lie between the organism and its environmental objects ... and require, instead, definite locations for all naming behaviors as organic-environmental transactions.[33]

Scientific inquiry arises only when this encounter becomes problematic in some way. In this context, what Dewey asks of scientific inquiry is that it "be fruitful in giving direction to [our] observations and reasonings."[34] The aim of such inquiry is always to return a problematic situation back into the direct and primary experience of our immediate, everyday contact with the world. By emphasising the immediacy of our contact with our environment, Dewey attempts to weave a path between idealism and realism. He writes:

> If the things of experience are produced, as they are according to my theory, by interaction of organism and environing conditions, then as Nature's own foreground they are not a barrier mysteriously set up between us and nature.[35]

In *The Quest for Certainty*, Dewey indicates his preference for the Greek understanding of experience over that of 18th century empiricism. According to Dewey, experience for the Greeks was a matter of practical skill; the acquisition of

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[32] John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1930). p. 295.

[33] John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley, *Knowing and the Known*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949), p. 121.

[34] Dewey, 'Experience, Knowledge, and Value', op. cit., p. 576. Dewey writes:
> ... any aspect, phase, or element of experience as *mine* is not a description of its direct existence but a description of experience with respect to some special problem for some special purpose, one which needs to be specified.

ibid., p. 532.

For a good brief account of Dewey's metaphysics of experience, to be discussed in Chapter 6, see Rockefeller, *John Dewey*, op. cit., pp. 362-371

[35] Dewey, 'Experience, Knowledge and Value', op. cit., p. 532.

habits and actions in performing instrumental tasks. The fact that they depreciated the natural world of experience in favour of a higher, formal, theoretical realm that was more certain and therefore more real, did not prevent the instrumental from becoming part of the general inheritance of the Western understanding of experience conveyed by the spread Christian theology.[36] Unfortunately, Dewey notes, theology also conveyed:

> ... the notion, which has ruled philosophy ever since the time of the Greeks, that the office of knowledge is to uncover the antecedently real, rather than, as is the case with our practical judgments, to gain the kind of understanding which is necessary to deal with problems as they arise. (...) [such a notion] diverted thought from inquiring into the purposes which experience of actual conditions suggests and from concrete means of their actualization. It translated into a rational form the doctrine of escape from the vicissitudes of existence by means of measures which do not demand an active coping with conditions. (...) This deliverance was an intellectual, a theoretical affair, constituted by a knowledge to be attained apart from practical activity.[37]

Such knowledge provided the ontological justification for the deprecation of practice which, as contingent, could never aspire to the certainty of the fixed eternal realms of theoretical knowledge attained through rational contemplation.[38] According to Dewey, the traditional quest for certainty is the source of "all the characteristic problems of modern philosophy."[39] It sets up the dualism between mind and nature found in both 17th century rationalism and 18th century empiricism, and which in Kant divided around the rational and practical will as well as around the phenomenal and noumenal world. The dualisms between subject and object, mind and nature, and value and fact, thus became enshrined as the

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[36] Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, op. cit., pp. 52-53.

[37] ibid., p. 20.

[38] ibid., pp. 22-24. Dewey writes:

> ... the valid status of all the highest values, the good, true and beautiful, was bound up with their being properties of ultimate and supreme Being, namely, God. All went well as long as what passed for natural science gave no offence to this conception. Trouble began when science ceased to disclose in the objects of knowledge the possession of any such properties. Then some roundabout method had to be devised for substantiating them.

ibid., pp. 43-44

[39] ibid., p. 54.

problematic outcome of the quest for certainty upon which philosophy predicated itself. For Dewey, a reconstruction of philosophy is required if it is to extricate itself from these traditional, unfruitful dualisms. Such reconstruction necessitates the closure of the traditional quest for certainty in terms of a fixed, transcendent, eternal realm called the 'reality of things'.[40] Such a quest, given the contingencies of human experience, may have been useful to human beings in need of courage and confidence, living in a hazardous world, but it is not one upon which we should reconstruct philosophy. Rather, according to Dewey, we need to drop dualistic thinking that separates values into a hierarchy of higher and lower, and instead "regard practice as the only means (other than accident) by which whatever is judged to be honourable, admirable, approvable can be kept in concrete experienceable existence,"[41] so that, as Dewey adds later, the "standards and tests of validity are found in the consequences of overt activity, not in what is fixed prior to it and independently of it."[42] The values once sought in a transcendent, antecedently existing realm, are now to be found in the natural conditions of experience and the subject matter of scientific enquiry. It is a mistake for science to become entangled in metaphysical notions of reality as if its objects of reference were more than that with which we deal in our daily encounters with our natural and social environment and the endeavours of our instrumental, scientific enquiry. Dewey hopes to "reintegrate human knowledge and activity in the general framework of reality and

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[40] According to Rockefeller, Dewey offers three arguments against such a transcendental notion. Firstly, it contradicts naturalism, in that it denies the interconnectedness of all events in the one world open to scientific enquiry. Secondly, a genetic analysis of such transcendental notions reveals their origin in the natural conditions of human interests and emotional needs. Thirdly, transcendental notions are not helpful to the problem of reconstructing philosophy which aims to see human values shared and enjoyed by everyone. Rockefeller writes:
> The quest for assurance and certainty regarding the reality of God and the identity of the ideal and the real, which is the heart of the transcendentalists' agenda, is of no practical value in solving this problem and often serves as an obstacle.
Rockefeller, *John Dewey*, op. cit., p. 375. For Dewey, to seek the solution to the problem elsewhere in natural ends is not, however, to reduce spirit to nature.
[41] Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, op. cit., p. 34.
[42] ibid., p. 72.

natural processes."[43] Rather than relying upon the quest for certainty, the religious

dimension of experience, should also have this relation to nature . Dewey writes:

> Religious faith which attaches itself to the possibilities of nature and
> associated living would, with its devotion to the ideal, manifest piety
> toward the actual. (...) Nature may not be worshipped as divine even in
> the sense of the intellectual love of Spinoza. But nature, including
> humanity, with all its defects and imperfections, may evoke heartfelt piety
> as the source of ideals, of possibilities, of aspiration in their behalf, and as
> the eventual abode of all attained goods and excellencies.[44]

However, Dewey is not concerned in *A Common Faith* to provide a new

argument for God's existence based upon his re-interpretation of religious

experience. Such arguments prove only that the person affected by such experience

has imbibed a certain culture associated with the supernatural dogmas of a

religion.[45] For Dewey :

> The actual religious quality in the experience described is the *effect*
> produced, the better adjustment in life and its conditions, not the manner
> and cause of its production.[46]

By emphasising the reality of the effect rather than the causes of religious

experience, Dewey believes that the faith that is religious can be emancipated from

the beliefs and practices which constitute religion.

Although Dewey's terminology appears to suggest an analogy of kernel and

husk, a better analogy to express his position would be that of birth and growth, the

bringing to life of something new. For Dewey there is no unchanging central core or

essence to religious faith. Neither does Dewey allow much time for the idea that the

term 'religion' denotes a single essence of which the various world religions are

multiple expressions.[47] Rather, the religious dimension of experience is as natural

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[43] This quotation is from Dominique Parody and is approvingly referred to by Dewey as the best short summary of his whole philosophical enterprise. Dewey, 'Experience, Knowledge, and Value', op. cit., p. 597.

[44] Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, op. cit., pp. 290-291.

[45] Dewey, *A Common Faith*, op. cit.., p. 13.

[46] ibid., p. 14.

[47] ibid., pp. 7-8.

to those human beings who practice a religion as it is to those who do not.[48] Again, Dewey's notion of ideal ends does not imply a further distinction between means and ends. Ideal ends are not ends in themselves, but are part of a plurality of goods manifest in the natural conditions of human experience and in the imaginative projection of possibilities for growth.[49] They are not to be viewed as final goals to be aimed at as if they were limits to be attained, but point toward directions of change in the ongoing process of life and growth. Thus, Dewey's understanding of the religious dimension of experience pays little heed to the traditional distinctions between kernel and husk, essence and existence or ends and means.

However, Dewey still believes that it is useful to continue to employ the word 'God' in his religious vocabulary, not 'God' defined in terms of some antecedently existing supernatural being but in terms of ideal ends. Such ideal ends are not simply mental, for while they have no embodied existence, they are rooted in the material conditions of life — in nature, action, character and personality.[50] It is the active unity of our imaginatively projected ideal ends with the natural conditions that promote their actualisation that provides, for Dewey, the meaning of the term 'God'[51]. Dewey's use of the term adumbrates a 'natural piety' in which human endeavour is conceived in its whole relation to natural and moral ends, community goals and individual aspirations as these are influenced by the inheritance

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[48] ibid., p. 12.

[49] For Dewey, "there is nothing to which growth is relative save more growth." John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, (New York: Macmillan, 1922), pp. 59-60. Also see, John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1920 and 1948 enlarged edition), p. 177.

[50] Dewey, *A Common Faith*, op. cit., 48. Dewey writes: "the ideals that move us are ... not made out of imaginary stuff. They are made out of the hard stuff of the world of physical and social experience." ibid., p. 49.

[51] Dewey writes, "It is the *active* relation between ideal and actual to which I would give the name 'God'." ibid., p. 51. In an attempt to clarify what he meant by using the term 'God', Dewey wrote in a letter to Corliss Lamont in 1935, that he regretted the use of the word "would" in this sentence for it gave the impression to some interpreters that he had a theistic or realist notion of God in the back of his mind. In that letter Dewey attempted to correct this impression. He wrote: "The meaning in my mind was essentially: if the word 'God' is used, this is what it *should* stand for; ...". John Dewey, quoted in Corliss Lamont, 'Again, John Dewey is Not a Theist' in *The Humanist*, Vol. 50, 1990, p. 13.

bequeathed by history, and is employed by him because he felt that people "would feel a loss if they could not speak of God"[52]

The main difference between Dewey and Feuerbach however is Dewey's appropriation of Darwin.[53] For Feuerbach the human spirit found its fulfilment in the return of the projected alienated absolute spirit of humanity back into itself. For the pragmatist, Darwin's account of human evolution means that the human spirit is intimately linked with nature and has no pre-determined purpose or pattern of achievement that has been worked out in advance. Everything becomes a product of time and chance.[54] In the light of this contingency, pragmatists like Dewey, believe we should aim to further the processes of growth by actualising in our lives the ideal values that the imagination presents to us.

In a summation of his position on religious faith Dewey asks:

> What would be lost if it were ... admitted that they [the objects of religion] have authoritative claims upon conduct just because they are ideal? The assumption that these objects of religion exist already in some realm of Being seems to add nothing to their force, while it weakens their claim over us as ideals, in so far as it bases that claim upon matters that are intellectually dubious.[55]

For both Dewey and the 'Sea of Faith' non-realists, a naturalistic account of religious belief is thought to be more credible and more appropriate to religious sensibilities than a supernaturalistic account of belief.

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[52] Dewey in a conversation with Sidney Hook noted in Rockefeller, *John Dewey*, op. cit., p. 522.

[53] Dewey, *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy*, op. cit., pp. 1-19. Also see: John P. Murphy, *Pragmatism from Peirce to Davidson*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), p. 63.

[54] Dewey writes:

> A thoroughgoing evolution must by the nature of the case abolish all fixed limits, beginnings, origins, forces, laws, gods. If there is evolution, all these also evolve, and are what they are as points of origin and of distinction relative to some special portion of evolution. They are to be defined in terms of the process, the process that now and always is, not the process in terms of them.

John Dewey, 'The Philosophic World of Herbert Spencer', quoted in Rockefeller, *John Dewey*, op. cit., p. 384.

[55] Dewey, *A Common Faith*, op. cit., p. 41.

5.4. Dewey and Religious Non-Realism:

There are many parallels between Dewey's pragmatic religious naturalism and 'Sea of Faith' religious non-realism. Like Cupitt, Dewey believes that supernatural or realist understanding of religious belief to be intellectually dubious because of advances made in the last few hundred years in many branches of human inquiry. These advances help explain why dogmatic religion no longer has the intellectual authority it once did.[56] Taken together, they constitute a revolution in our way of thinking. After this revolution, Dewey believes, human spiritual aspirations and experience will best be served by a form of religious naturalism rather than dogmatic or supernatural religion. Religion is now just one among many aspects in human experience calling for our allegiance in what is manifestly a human abode.[57] It no longer dominates our lives as it once did. Rather than being born into a culture saturated by religion we now have to choose to be religious.[58] No matter how committed we may be to the doctrines of a religion, our actual day-to-day lives are now profoundly secular and organised upon secular presuppositions drawn from those advances that constitute the revolutionary shift in intellectual authority.

For Dewey, in the current cultural situation, individuals may still carry their affiliation to a religion across to their other secular activity but it needs to be acknowledged that such activity "is a matter of personal choice and resolution on the part of individuals, not of the very nature of social organization."[59] Yet Dewey's 'religious faith', attempts to break down the secular/religious distinction by completely filling this secular space with values and ideal ends that characterise the religious dimension of experience.[60] The aim of *A Common Faith* Dewey notes:

> ... was addressed to those who have abandoned supernaturalism, and who on that account are reproached by traditionalists for having turned their backs on everything religious. The book was an attempt to show such

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[56] ibid., p. 31.
[57] ibid., pp. 59-61.
[58] ibid., pp. 65-66., As Cupitt colourfully puts it "[t]he role of 'practising Christian' is now a character part, not a leading role any more." Don Cupitt, *What is a Story?*, (London: SCM Press, 1991) p.63.
[59] Dewey, *A Common Faith*, op. cit., p. 66.
[60] ibid., p. 66.

persons that they still have within their experience all the elements which give the religious attitude its value.[61]

Although Dewey regards democracy and scientific inquiry as elements of this religious attitude, he is not primarily concerned in *A Common Faith* to accommodate religious belief to modern ideas of democracy or science. Indeed, like the religious non-realists, Dewey, has little time in *A Common Faith* for the accommodationism of liberal theology.[62] The issue, for Dewey, is not one of accommodating specific doctrines or beliefs into an acceptable modern form, but a radical re-adjustment which is itself the mark of the faith that is religious.[63] The religious liberal, for Dewey, stands in no-man's-land looking on the one side, to the old supernatural account of religious belief and on the other side to a more naturalistic account of religious belief. Like Thomas Mann, quoted in David Hart's book, Dewey allows that the fundamental issue of religious faith "is more definitely seen by fundamentalists [religious conservatives] than by liberals."[64] This issue is not about accommodating items of faith to the modern world or dropping some of them as inessential to the true faith, "but centers in the question of the method by which any and every item of intellectual belief is to be arrived at and justified"[65] For Dewey, as for religious non-realists, what is required is not liberal accommodation but a radical vision that will help to reconstruct our understanding of what it means to have religious belief. This radical vision may have its origin in liberal theology and may share some of its themes, but it will demur from the intent and the method of that theology.

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[61] John Dewey, 'Experience, Knowledge and Value', op. cit., p. 597.

[62] Dewey writes:

> The modern liberal version of the intellectual content of Christianity seems to the modern mind to be more rational than some of the earlier doctrines that have been reacted against. Such is not the case in fact. The theological philosophers of the Middle Ages had no greater difficulty in giving rational form to all the doctrines of the Roman church than has the liberal today in formulating and justifying intellectually the doctrines he entertains.

Dewey, *A Common Faith*, op. cit., pp. 33-34. Also p. 40.

[63] ibid., pp. 14-16.

[64] ibid., p. 32.

[65] ibid., p. 32. Dewey's criticism of liberal theology is noted by Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, op. cit., p. 424.

In agreement with the religious non-realists, Dewey's reconstruction of religious faith does not require the support of ultimate or transcendent meaning. What it does require is a trust in the value of our pursuit of ideal ends.[66] Concerned with growth rather than the attainment of absolute truth, this pursuit needs to be followed through with a degree of humility.[67] Dewey indicates that while we must "strive to direct natural and social forces to human ends ... unqualified absolutistic statements about the omnipotence of such endeavours reflect egoism rather than intelligent courage."[68] For Dewey, to suggest that philosophy can say something about 'ultimate reality' is to have a view of philosophy which sets it apart from the natural conditions of inquiry with which science is concerned[69]

Equally, Dewey recognises and affirms the transience and contingence of existence both in the sense of its unpredictability and its incompleteness. His acceptance of change and process is best revealed in his understanding of science. Dewey writes:

> Science is not constituted by any particular body of subject-matter. ...
> There is no special subject-matter of belief that is sacrosanct. The
> identification of science with a particular set of beliefs and ideas is itself a
> hold-over of ancient and still current dogmatic habits of thought.[70]

Such habits of thought are as unwelcome in religion as they are in science.[71] Instead, change should be regarded as an opportunity for renewal rather than a sign of irreversible decline.[72] In the new introduction to his *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey indicated that 'Being', 'Nature' 'Reality' 'Truth' and other such terms "had one thing in common: they were used to designate something taken to be

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[66] Dewey, *A Common Faith*, op. cit., p. 26. Westbrook notes that:
   Dewey could never satisfy those who believed that there were absolute, certain,
   'hierarchised' values that could and should guide the moral life - such a stance, in his view,
   betrayed a woeful misunderstanding of human experience.
Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, op. cit., pp. 402-403.
[67] Dewey, *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy*, op. cit., pp. 17-19.
[68] Dewey, *A Common Faith*, op. cit., pp. 24-25.
[69] Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, op. cit., pp. 295-296.
[70] Dewey, *A Common Faith*, op. cit., pp. 38-39.
[71] ibid., p. 26.
[72] ibid., p. 83.

fixed, immutable and therefore out of time; that is eternal," but he adds, "science is forced by its own development to abandon the assumption of fixity and to recognise that what for it is actually 'universal', is process..."[73] This process, however, has no ultimate or absolute purpose. It is humans working within the natural conditions of experience that make life have meaning and value.[74]

I have already indicated that it is a mistake to understand Dewey's attempt to emancipate religious faith from the encumbrances of religion in terms of the kernel/husk analogy, and when Dewey insists that the union of ideal and actual "has in fact been attached to the conception of God'in all the religions that have a spiritual content,"[75] it is important to realise that Dewey is not thereby suggesting the existence of an unchanging common core that constitutes the essence of religious faith. "Religious qualities and values," writes Dewey, "are not bound up with any single item of intellectual assent, not even that of the existence of the God of theism."[76] As a consequence, Dewey notes, "no discovery in any branch of knowledge and inquiry could then disturb the faith that is religious."[77] Religious faith is thus inoculated from the sense of incredulity suffered by the religions following progress made in other areas of inquiry within culture, such as physics or biology. But, for Dewey, the fact that religious faith is less susceptible to decay than is supernatural religion, does not mean that religious belief is immune from change. Indeed, changes in the active relation of ideal and actual, mutually respond to and are constitutive of changes in the general cultural scene.[78] Consequently, for Dewey, religious faith cannot be isolated from the rest of culture. The religious attitude, Dewey argues, "does not shut religious values up within a particular compartment, nor assume that a particular form of association bears a unique

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[73] Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, op. cit., pp. xii and xiii.
[74] John Dewey, 'Is Nature Good?: A Conversation', *Hibbert Journal*, Vol. 7, 1909. pp. 842-843.
[75] Dewey, *A Common Faith*, op. cit., p. 52.
[76] ibid., p. 32.
[77] ibid., p. 33.
[78] ibid., p. 50.

relation to it."[79]   Changes in the religious dimension of experience interact with changes in the general movements of cultural activities, as these activities seek new ideal ends and expand on ideal ends already imaginatively conceived.

Dewey's pragmatic reconstruction of religious faith not only attempts to liberate religious faith from the doctrines of religion, but also the human spirit, by the removal of responsibility for ideal ends from antecedently existing supernatural entities back into the hands of human endeavour.   Like Graham Shaw, Dewey argues that "supernaturalism ... stands in the way of an effective realization of the sweep and depth of the implications of natural human relations."[80]   For Dewey, the association of our values with "a supernatural and otherworldly locus has obscured their real nature and has weakened their force."[81]   Our human values become seen "as dangerous rivals of higher values; as offering temptations to be resisted; as usurpations by flesh of the authority of the spirit; as revolts of the human against the divine."[82]   Our own ideal ends thus become devalued and human endeavour seems impotent to bring about significant social change.[83]

However, this does not lead Dewey to atheism. He is as opposed to atheism as are the 'Sea of Faith' religious non-realists. Dewey writes:

> One reason why personally I think it fitting to use the word 'God' to denote that uniting of the ideal and actual ... lies in the fact that aggressive atheism seems to me to have something in common with traditional supernaturalism.[84]

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[79] ibid., pp. 66-67.

[80] ibid., p. 80.

[81] ibid., p. 71.

[82] ibid., pp. 71-72.

[83] ibid., p. 57. Elsewhere, Dewey writes that by giving up apologetic supernaturalism:
> The energy which is ... diverted into defence of positions that have in time to be surrendered would be released for positive activity in behalf of the security of the underlying possibilities of actual life.   More important still would be liberation from attachment to dogmas framed in conditions very unlike those in which we live, and the substitution of a disposition to turn to constructive account the results of knowledge.
Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, op. cit., pp. 289-290.

[84] Dewey, *A Common Faith*, op. cit., p. 52.

Both atheism and supernaturalism are rejected by Dewey because they appear to him to deny that 'natural piety' which constitutes the religious dimension of experience and which refuses to isolate human beings from the rest of nature.[85] Nevertheless, it is the issue of atheism that has focused much of the recent debate about Dewey's understanding of religious faith, and it this that I shall consider in the last section of this chapter.

5.5: Dewey, Neither a Theist Nor an Atheist:

For Dewey atheism lacks that 'natural piety' which prevents us from regarding the world as hostile and indifferent. In the religious faith Dewey commends

> Use of the word 'God' ... to convey the union of actual with ideal [,] may protect man from a sense of isolation and from consequent despair or defiance.[86]

Further, Dewey opposes atheism because it does not fulfil the purposes of "conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received."[87] This sense of tradition is best conveyed within the practices of religious faith. It reminds us of our connection to past generations as well as of our responsibility to the future. It also reminds us, in Dewey's words, that:

> The things in civilization we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link.[88]

Despite Dewey's opposition to atheism, John K. Roth has argued that Dewey's critique of supernatural religion does not touch upon more subtle versions of theistic faith exemplified in the work of William James; and secondly, that Dewey is offering nothing more substantial to theology than that offered by the 'death-of-God' theologians.[89] Both points, I believe, are mistaken. In relation to the first point, it

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[85] ibid., p. 53.
[86] ibid., p. 53.
[87] ibid., p. 87.
[88] ibid., p. 87.
[89] John K. Roth, 'William James, John Dewey, and the 'Death-of-God', in *Religious Studies*, Vol. 7, 1971, pp. 53-61. Roth writes:

has been noted by William Dean that James' understanding of God is ambiguous, both in respect to his account of God in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and in respect to a comparison with his later account of God in *A Pluralistic Universe*. Here James is expressly critical of the God of theism in favour of a historical and local God. James writes of his finite God:

> Having an environment, being in time, and working out a history just like ourselves, he escapes from the foreignness from all that is human, of the static timeless perfect absolute.[90]

However, James carried over from his previous work the hypothesis that the goodness of such a God could only function if human religious experience was more than psychology. Such experience, he argues, brings us into contact "with a wider spiritual environment"[91]. But the idea of such an environment does not fit at all comfortably with the idea James has of God as a finite "Superhuman" in whom the plurality of ideals are already evident and waiting to be communicated to us.[92] Indeed, this idea of God may not even be of much assistance to James' other desire to 'naturalise' the foreign God of theism. For Dean, the value of James is not his theistic subtlety but that, like Dewey, he tells us that "one can be religious without leaving history."[93] Roth's argument, in that case, can be seen as gaining its

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Dewey and the 'death-of-God' theologians tend to equate theism in general with one particular view of God. ... [T]hey cast theism out in favour of an ethical perspective oriented around either human ideals in general or the man Jesus.
ibid., p. 60.

[90] William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1916) p.318.

[91] ibid., pp. 299-300,

[92] ibid., pp. 124-125, 307.

[93] William Dean, *The Religious Critic in American Culture*, (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 82. Dean suggests that the only way in which James could conceive of God's pragmatic utility together with God's goodness, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, was to present a view of divine involvement that "would violate natural processes." (ibid., p. 75). His "willingness to invest God with supernatural powers ... [placed] ... God beyond the workings of natural history." (ibid., p. 79). God becomes an exception in James' philosophical system. To rectify this, Dean notes that James developed, in *A Pluralistic Universe*, a notion of God as finite. "A finite God cannot escape the limits of natural history or act supernaturally." (ibid., p. 81). The naturalism and historicism that Roth condemns in Dewey is also, therefore, principally a feature of James' understanding of God. If this is the case, then the question is whether we follow James, Wieman, Hartshorne, Whitehead and others in asserting that in some form or another nature and history, properly understood, provide access to some antecedently existing reality about which we may employ the word 'God'; or whether we follow

contrastive force from the fact that he confuses ambiguity in James' position with theistic subtlety and then offers an overly atheistic account of Dewey's religious naturalism.

This brings us to Roth's second point. Contra Roth, Dewey's understanding of the faith that is religious is not a matter of 'man come of age' but a matter of the lack of pragmatic utility and possibilities for human growth in notions of an antecedently existing divine reality. The experience that is religious is now more fruitfully understood in naturalistic terms. According to William Rowe, not only is Dewey "a naturalist who advances and defends a version of religious humanism,"[94] he may also be described, again contra Roth, as "a humanistic theist"[95]. While the use of the term 'theist' is not one I would use to describe Dewey, the suggestion that it is possible should make us think twice about any easy association of Dewey's ideas with those of the 'death-of-God' theologians.

There are further reasons why the label 'atheist' is inappropriate when applied to Dewey. Firstly, there is his own mystic experience that he reports having had while in his early twenties and secondly, there is in Dewey a sense of personal loss that would accrue if he dropped the term God from his vocabulary. In particular, as Rockefeller shows, a vocabulary about God is movingly manifest in Dewey's own poetry.[96] At this personal level, one might say at the level of prayer, Rockefeller

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Dewey in rejecting such antecedent realities in favour of the union of ideal and actual. Dewey's is a clear position and is held against even the most subtle forms of theistic realism. Thus, while it may be the case that the 'death-of-God' theologians leave untouched alternative theistic positions, to suggest this of Dewey is, I believe, not founded.

[94] William L. Rowe, 'Religion within the bounds of naturalism: Dewey and Wieman', op. cit., p. 19.

[95] ibid., p. 24. P. Eddy Wilson employs the term 'theistic naturalist' to describe Dewey. P. Eddy Wilson, 'Emerson and Dewey on Natural Piety', op. cit., p. 335. Equally, Michael J. Rockler reluctantly admits that:

> ... while Bertrand Russell belongs on the roll of great secular humanists, John Dewey must be excluded from it. ... In the end the language of John Dewey is the language of religion, and Dewey ... must be considered a religious and not a secular humanist.

Michael J. Rockler, 'Russell vs. Dewey on Religion', op. cit., p. 38. And William Shea goes as far as to say that "Dewey's little book [*A Common Faith*] amounts to a secularized version of Billy Graham's *How to Be Born Again.*" William Shea, 'On John Dewey's Spiritual Life', op. cit., p. 76.

[96] In a poem about the way he experienced the death of two of his sons, Gordon and Morris, Dewey writes:

argues that Dewey "never did entirely abandon the idea of God."[97]   Indeed, Rockefeller asserts that:

> His poetry as well as the tenor of his discussion of God in *A Common Faith* indicate that he himself got a certain personal satisfaction and consolation in being able to speak about God or the divine within the framework of his naturalism.[98]

This does not mean, however, that we have warrant to follow the argument put forward by Stanley Grean, that Dewey's religious faith presupposed a set of ultimate values which are not "adequately justified in the context of the naturalistic universe that he postulates."[99]   Grean wants to suggest that if Dewey recognised the appeal to transcendence in his own philosophy, he would be more prepared to allow "that the 'religious' necessarily transcends the natural, while at the same time participating in the natural".[100]   This argument presupposes that in some aspects of his philosophy Dewey does unwittingly appeal to transcendence.   In presenting this argument, Grean accepts that on Dewey's own terms, Dewey's use of a religious vocabulary did not involve an explicit appeal to transcendence.   Rather, referring to Henry

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> To us you came from out of dark
> To take the place of him who went—
> Quenched that glimmering joyous spark—
> Not ours you were, but lent.
>
> To us you came from out of light
> Brightest of lights that ever shone
> To make dark life sweet and white;
> Not ours you were, but God's own loan.
>
> With us a little while, our light, you dwelt—
> And did we fail to care or did we care too much?
> Again we saw a dying light to darkness melt
> While our aching arms vainly strove to touch
> And hold our own
> God's blessed loan.

Quoted in Rockefeller, *John Dewey*, op. cit., p. 231.

[97] ibid., p. 231.

[98] ibid., p. 522.

[99] Stanley Grean, 'Elements of Transcendence in Dewey's Naturalistic Humanism', in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 52, 1984, p. 264.

[100] ibid., p. 264.

Wieman's review of *A Common Faith* and the ensuing debate in the journal *The Christian Century*, Grean suggests that such an appeal to transcendence was implicit. *The Christian Century* debate that followed on from *A Common Faith* resembled a similar debate in 1933. In that first debate, Dewey made his naturalistic position clear. He wrote:

> ... all of the things which traditional religionists prize and which they connect exclusively with their own conception of God can be had equally well in the ordinary course of human experience in our relations to the natural world and to one another as human beings related in the family, friendship, industry, art, science, and citizenship. *Either then the concept of God can be dropped out as far as genuinely religious experience is concerned, or it must be framed wholly in terms of natural and human relationship involved in our straightaway human experience.*[101]

In Wieman's theistic naturalism, however, all those forces in nature directed at human well-being are viewed, in their various relations, as adumbrating a matrix that constitutes the 'greatest good' to which the label 'God' is best attached. Dewey, however, responded by pointing out that nothing in Wieman's matrix of natural relations constituting the 'greatest good' demands that we see 'God' as the 'greatest good'.[102] For Dewey, concrete examples of natural goodness is not furthered by its shift into divine goodness. Indeed, Dewey suggests that natural goodness would be hampered because we might be tempted to ignore the "indispensable connection between 'God' so defined and human desire and devotion ...".[103]

In the later debate in *The Christian Century*, Dewey's response confirmed that he had no sense of transcendence in mind when talking of God, neither a natural nor a supernatural transcendence. He agreed with Edwin Aubrey's critique of Wieman's review of *A Common Faith*.[104] Aubrey, pointed to a number of passages in Dewey's book that clearly made the point that Dewey did not intend by his use of a religious

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[101] John Dewey, 'A God or The God? Dr. Dewey Replies' in *The Later Works of John Dewey: 1925-1953*, Vol. 9, (ed. Jo Anne Boydston, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985) p. 224. (Italics in original text). (Henceforth cited as *Later Works*).
[102] ibid., pp. 225-226.
[103] ibid., p. 226.
[104] John Dewey, 'Reply to Aubrey and Wieman', in *Later Works*, ibid., pp. 294-295; pp. 435-437.

vocabulary to gratify realist intuitions. Grean, however, sides with Wieman's conclusion that Dewey's notion of the union of ideal ends with actual conditions, remains vacuous without them being grounded in the realities of the universe that account for their formation and development and he insists that resources within Dewey's work as a whole make such grounding implicit. Thus, Grean suggests that Dewey treats religious experience differently from other experiences. He makes this point in two ways. Firstly, he notes that, for Dewey, the veracity of religious experience is undermined, as scientific experiences are not, by human interpretations and the cultural conditioning that constitute it. Dewey therefore, according to Grean, unnecessarily evaluates the veracity of scientific and philosophical experiences higher than religious experiences. However, a glance through *The Quest for Certainty* and *Reconstruction in Philosophy* would reveal that Dewey is as hard on the notion of antecedently existing entities in science and philosophy as he is in religion. The second way Grean makes his point is to note that if Dewey is, as he claims to be, really only concerned with the *effect* of experience, then whether the cause is derived from an antecedent reality or not is a question with which he should not be too unduly concerned. Unfortunately, however, Grean fails to see that, for Dewey, an understanding of the causes of an experience will itself have an effect upon the way we respond to such an experience. Dewey is concerned to show that concentration upon transcendent, supernatural or antecedently existing entities is more detrimental to human growth than looking for causes that come within the natural remit of human interaction with the environing surrounds.

However, Grean does have a point if we consider Dewey's more detailed attempts to work out an alternative to the subject-object account of experience and knowledge. Dewey's account of experience is ambiguous because it requires alternative distinctions to be drawn between, for example, experience as knowledge and experience as appreciation of the immediate quality of things; and between nature's foreground and nature's background. In both cases, Dewey sees these

distinctions in terms of a whole, integrated account of an organism's immediate encounter with its environment. Yet these further distinctions hinder his aim of articulating this encounter.[105] One consequence of these distinctions is that Dewey maintains yet another metaphysical distinction between appearance and reality, at least where knowledge is concerned. At the level of knowledge, an economy of representational realism continues to exist in Dewey's philosophy in order to differentiate science from fantasy.[106] In Grean's words, Dewey gives the impression of offering "an ultimate methodological commitment"[107] According to Richard Rorty, a more consistent pragmatism would regard the distinction between fantasy and science as that between different practices we have, and not a matter of an epistemological ability to distinguish appearances from reality. Rorty shows how we might rid ourselves of the subject-object account of knowledge while not needing to embark upon a description of experience that gives the impression of assuming transcendental metaphysical principles. He wants to take the residue of metaphysics out of Dewey's philosophy of experience: a residue which Dewey did not intend but which sometimes is suggested by his philosophy of experience if not his treatment of religious belief. Dewey's intention in developing his notion of the immediate qualities of experience and his non-reductive naturalism with its emphasis on the imagination does not, as Grean suggests, depend upon, an unrecognised acceptance of transcendence.[108] For Dewey the pragmatist, neither values nor religious experience require the existence of a supernatural or transcendent entity in order to validate their effectiveness within human life. Such an entity would be detrimental to our active pursuit of ideal values.

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[105] John Dewey, 'Half-Hearted Naturalism', in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 24, 1927, pp. 57-64. Here, for example, he indicates that despite the distinction between nature's foreground and nature's background, the former does not conceal but conducts us into the latter. ibid., p. 60. On Rorty's reading this distinction is a necessary feature of an unnecessary metaphysics of experience. To drop the metaphysics would dissolve the point of making the distinction while not hindering one jot our immediate contact with our environment.

[106] Dewey, 'Experience, Knowledge and Value', op. cit., pp. 541-542.

[107] Grean, 'Elements of Transcendence in Dewey's Naturalistic Humanism', op. cit., pp. 268, 269-273.

[108] J. Wesley Robbins, 'Pragmatism, Democracy, and God: A Reply to Rockefeller', in *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, Vol. 14, 1993, p. 282.

Contra Grean, Richard Bernstein suggests that the parallel between Dewey's account of religious belief and the rest of his philosophy are so strong that he believes, "Dewey's treatment of the religious attitude and quality is the culmination of his entire philosophy. We discover here how the pieces 'add up,' and how Dewey viewed man in relation to the universe that he encounters."[109] For Dewey the pragmatic attitude to religious belief requires an active, lived faith in which we attempt to develop, sustain and realise ideal values as they are imaginatively constructed and integrated with a positive valuation of our surrounding environment. The ground for such a pragmatic faith is the decision to act in accordance with a vision of possible future human flourishing with the aim "of bringing about a better, deeper and enduring adjustment in life ..."[110] while remaining rooted in the present conditions of living.[111] The Divine, he suggests, is not just a term of human choice but also a guide and assistance to human aspirations.[112] Religious faith, he argues, should be a resource rather than a refuge.[113] Interpreted pragmatically the invisible powers of religion, Dewey notes:

> take on the meaning of all the conditions of nature and human association that support and deepen the sense of value which carry one through periods of darkness and despair.[114]

Democracy and science are human activities that now substantially help to facilitate the religious dimension of experience.

Dewey's rejection of any transcendent or antecedently existing religious entity is seen by his critics as undermining rather than upholding the religious dimension of experience. Why, they ask, can't Dewey be more like James in matters or religious belief? They then seek either, like Grean, to show how in fact he was unwittingly

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[109] Richard J. Bernstein, *John Dewey*, (Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1966), p. 161.
[110] Dewey, *A Common Faith*, op. cit., p. 14.
[111] ibid., pp. 48-49.
[112] ibid., p.54.
[113] Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, op. cit., p. 290.
[114] Dewey, *A Common Faith*, op. cit., p. 14.

more like James by appealing to other elements in his philosophy[115]; or, like Roth, they suggest that Dewey, compared to James, had an incomplete understanding of what counts as religious belief.[116] Indeed, even Rockefeller suggests that Dewey's account of religious belief has implications for our understanding of ultimate reality that Dewey does not fully articulate. Rockefeller writes:

> Unless there be some eternal truth beyond or within the nothingness, the source or foundation of ultimate meaning is not made intelligible. The point is that Dewey's own experience of cosmic trust and meaning seems to point to participation in some such dimension of reality, but he avoids articulating such a notion.[117]

As a result Rockefeller attempts a reconstruction of Dewey's understanding of God which allows for both this realist intuition and Dewey's own critique of the old dualisms.[118] He tries to do this by viewing Dewey as a mystical naturalist for whom God is to be accepted as "the eternal One ... identified as the ground of personality and the wellspring of human goodness and ultimate meaning".[119] In this reconstruction, Dewey's talk of God gains the feel of transcendence which it otherwise lacks. According to Rockerfeller, this feel of transcendence would enable Dewey to do greater justice to people's outward, symbolic and ritualistic expression of religious experience than he does, while maintaining the distance he wanted between the religious dimension of experience and institutional religion. Rockefeller notes:

> Dewey was so intent upon integrating fully the energies of the religious life with the democratic life that he had little use for what seemed to him to be religious beliefs and practices associated with earlier forms of social life and utterly separate from the affairs of contemporary civilization. [...]

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[115] Grean, 'Elements of Transcendence in Dewey's Naturalistic Humanism', op. cit., pp. 272-273, 285. Also Nancy Frankenberry, *Religion and Radical Empiricism*, (Albany: SUNY. Press, 1987), pp. 109-111.

[116] As well as Roth, this view is held by among others Milton Konvitz, Douglas Anderson, William Rowe, P. Eddy Wilson, Marvin Shaw and William Shea. They all argue in various ways that without the kind of realist intuition that motivated James which connects religious experience to some form of ultimate reality or meaning, religious sensibilities will not be dealt with in a complete or satisfactory manner.

[117] Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism*, op. cit., p. 533.

[118] ibid., pp. 536-538.

[119] ibid., p. 538.

However, in many human beings there is a natural impulse to express their religious feelings in rituals with symbols. In religious rituals, social and moral as well as aesthetic and mystical sensitivities are at work. Furthermore, religious rituals may under the right circumstances intensify a person's religious consciousness. Dewey did not wish to deny this, but he did not explore fully the ritual aspect of the religious life as a natural. mode of expression and sharing and the ways in which it may become part of the democratic life.[120]

This criticism seems to me to be valid. One of the strengths of 'Sea of Faith' religious non-realism is that it maintains this vital connection with human symbolic and ritualistic expression. However, I also agree with Rockefeller, when he notes the danger of offering a reconstruction of Dewey's understanding of God. J. Wesley Robbins is, I believe, correct in seeing Rockefeller's reconstruction as a misguided attempt to put new wine into old wineskins. Robbins is critical of Rockefeller's attempt to turn Dewey's religious naturalism and its emphasis upon the union of imaginative ideal ends with actual conditions of experience, into a mystical, theistic naturalism that attributes to this union a sense of transcendence and ultimate meaning.[121] He argues that the desire for ultimacy in matters of religious belief and the association of Dewey with this desire is mistaken. Dewey would not be comfortable with the dualism between the ultimate One and the penultimate Many which Rockefeller's reconstruction begins to open. Robbins notes that Dewey wanted to move away from questions of ultimacy that limited innovation and change, and instead move on to questions motivated by intelligent enquiry leading to the melioration of harsh social conditions. The notion of ultimacy is irrelevant to the practical concerns of the latter type of question.[122] It also, Robbins adds, goes against Dewey's concern for growth and innovation, by suggesting that genuine human religiosity has been defined once and for all time. In taking up and using a

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[120] ibid., p. 539.

[121] Robbins, 'Pragmatism, Democracy, and God: A Reply to Rockefeller', op. cit., p. 282.

[122] J. Wesley Robbins, 'A Common Faith Revisited', in *Religious Humanism*, Vol. 28, 1994, p. 26. As Dewey notes:

> *The question whether there is some physical or metaphysical, some existential, extraneous power working for the realization of moral demands and ideals, is totally irrelevant.*

[Italics in original text]. Dewey, *The Later Works*, Vol. 9, p. 218.

religious vocabulary, Dewey did not see himself as bound by traditional faith. Rather, Robbins notes, Dewey "was in the middle of inventing something new: a new way of talking about the traditional Christian fruits of the Spirit, love, joy, and peace, as well as about the Spirit that produces those fruits."[123] Above all, Rockefeller's reconstruction would not appeal to Dewey because, according to Robbins, "it gives too much aid and comfort to religious fundamentalists".[124] The fundamentalist is Dewey's religious conservative. Such people, Robbins argues, like to think that ultimate meaning and value is in tune with their conception of it. They therefore see themselves as the privileged spokespersons within the life of the community. Whether this community is concerned with religion, science, philosophy or politics, Dewey denies the question of ultimacy and thus the possibility of various privileged social priesthoods. Robbins summarises:

> Dewey's theological vocabulary involves ... a lowering of expectations from our being instruments of the universe, and some eternal truth therein, to our being, in Rorty's words, 'just one more species doing its best.'[125]

The mention of Rorty here is timely, for according to Robbins, grounding genuine religious responses around the question of ultimacy of meaning, as Rockefeller and Dewey's other religious critics do, is to exhibit the very philosophical presuppositions about representationalism that Rorty, following Dewey, has done most to undermine. If Robbins is correct in thinking that the realist intuition about genuine religious belief rests upon a representational account of knowledge, then the

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[123] Robbins, 'A Common Faith Revisited', op. cit., p. 30.

[124] Robbins, 'Pragmatism, Democracy, and God: A Reply to Rockefeller', op. cit., p. 285. Robbins adds:
> Rockefeller certainly does not agree with the Pat Robertsons of this world as to who the spokespersons for 'the elusive, awe-inspiring mystery, and holiness of the God who is at once no God' are, or as to the sort of vocabulary that is appropriate for them to use. He does, however, agree that there are such spokespersons and that they occupy a privileged position in communal life, including that of a democratic community, because it is in and through their activities that the deeper meaning of democracy, and its revelatory status, becomes explicit.

ibid., p. 285.

[125] ibid., p. 284.

question between Dewey and Rockefeller or between non-realists and religious realists, can be stated as a question of whether an idiosyncratic usage of a religious vocabulary should be assessed by its adequacy to some fixed religious criteria, such as belief in the reality of God antecedent to human imaginative constructions, or whether, to quote Robbins, such an idiosyncratic usage should be "compared with other actual and possible forms of life in human communities in order to find out, experimentally as it were, whether it is an improvement over past ways of being religious."[126] Dewey, and the religious non-realists, believe the latter. The religious dimension of experience is worth pursuing, without connections to notions of an antecedent, transcendence or ultimacy of meaning.

5.6. Conclusion:

In this chapter I have summarised the religious thought of John Dewey and indicated its affinities with the religious thought of non-realists associated with the 'Sea of Faith network'. Although it is Rorty's account of pragmatism, rather than that of Dewey's, to which Cupitt and other 'Sea of Faith' writers tend to appeal, an understanding of Dewey's account of religious belief is crucial if a specifically religious connection is to be forged between Rorty's pragmatism and religious non-realism. In the next three chapters I will not go as far as Robbins in arguing that Rorty is a Deweyan *religious* thinker,[127] but I will show that, despite his rejection of religious belief, Rorty's work can be appropriated by religious non-realists and offers them a vocabulary which might help to articulate the position they aim to defend.

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[126] Robbins, 'A Common Faith Revisited', op. cit., p. 26.
[127] Robbins, 'When Christians Become Naturalists', op. cit., p. 197.

CHAPTER SIX

RICHARD RORTY, PRAGMATISM AND TRUTH

6.1. Introduction:

The parallels between the account of religious belief in John Dewey's book *A Common Faith* and the religious thought of various writers belonging to the 'Sea of Faith Network' suggest that the latter may be appropriately understood within the context of ideas associated with the pragmatism of the former. Like Dewey, those writers, emphasise the human creation of religious belief without descending into the vocabulary of atheism. Like Dewey, they radicalise liberal theology, emphasise change, transience and contingency and deny the existence of absolute, fixed and antecedent religious and moral truths independent of human imagination and growth. Dewey's account of religious faith, like that of Cupitt's, emphasises the imaginative projection of ideals and their externalisation in the actual conditions of existence. Both reject the metaphysics of religious realism; its correspondence notion of truth, its dualistic account of inquiry and experience and its assertion of a fixed antecedently existing realm of 'ultimate reality'. Like Dewey, Cupitt asserts a biological naturalism that does not simply reduce human life to the material conditions of existence; and significantly, their understanding of the meaning and value of religious belief and practice to human life is couched within the shared context of a philosophical pragmatism. Pragmatism offers a philosophical articulation of the type of religious faith that non-realists would wish to promote.[1] However, pragmatism covers a wide spectrum of opinion[2] and while Cupitt does refer to Dewey's religious naturalism as helping "to explain the sense in which a

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[1] This distinction between 'back-up' and 'articulation' is drawn by Rorty in relation to Dewey's understanding of liberal democracy. Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume One*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 178.

[2] See Richard J. Bernstein, 'American Pragmatism: The Conflict of Narratives', in Herman J. Saatkamp Jr., *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995), pp. 54-67.

modern person may still have a religious attitude to life"[3] his appeal is directed at its radical wing associated particularly with the work of Richard Rorty.[4] This is because Rorty, unlike Dewey, is a contemporary of the linguistic turn in philosophy. Cupitt was thus initially less willing to appeal to Dewey when asserting his unpragmatic desire to construct a postmodern, linguistic understanding of God and now, having given up on this desire, finds such appeal unnecessary given that Rorty's radical Davidsonian stance provides all the pragmatic articulation his theology requires. If Cupitt unnecessarily neglects Dewey's understanding of religious belief, he is nevertheless correct to emphasise the work of Rorty. Rorty's understanding of the relation of language to the world, I shall argue, not only undermines a metaphysical interpretation of Dewey's philosophy of experience, it also helps to articulate aspects religious non-realists' self understanding. However, it is not obvious that linking Rorty's work with religious non-realism is entirely satisfactory. Roger Trigg, for example, recognises the association of ideas between Rorty and Cupitt but sees this more as a reflection of Cupitt's atheistic denial of God, and thus an anti-religious move rather than supportive of a religious point of view.[5] Not only is Rorty an avowed atheist, his pragmatic anti-representationalism has been labelled as radically subjectivist and its political consequences as fascist. According to Frank Farrell, in Rorty's philosophy "all determination will be a self-determining, ... the boundaries a human discourse runs up against will be boundaries that it has set for itself."[6] For Rorty, Farrell notes, "I ... encounter only

[3] Don Cupitt, *Creation out of Nothing*, (London: SCM Press, 1990), p. 120,

[4] For example, Cupitt thinks that Hilary Putnam's version of pragmatism does not go far enough in banishing old philosophical errors. Don Cupitt, *The Time Being*, (London: SCM Press, 1992), p. 33. He also makes it clear that the accounts he offers of Jacques Derrida and Donald Davidson are heavily influenced by Rorty's reading of these philosophers. See respectively, Don Cupitt, 'Anti-Realist Faith', in Joseph Runzo (ed.), *Is God Real?* (London: MacMillan, 1993), p. 50. Don Cupitt, 'A Reply to Rowan Williams', in *Modern Theology*, Vol. 1, 1984, p. 26; and Don Cupitt, *The Last Philosophy* (London: SCM Press, 1995), p. 137.

[5] Roger Trigg, 'Reason and Faith-II', in Martin Warner (ed.), *Religion and Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 33-43.

[6] Frank B. Farrell, *Subjectivity, Realism and Postmodernism: The Recovery of the World in Recent Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 139.

myself in everything I touch."[7] Equally, for Richard Bernstein, "it is hard to see any difference that makes a difference between Rorty's irony and Mussolini's cynicism."[8] In considering Rorty's work in more detail, in this and the next chapter, I shall show that it need not be interpreted in this way. Then, in chapter eight, I shall highlight Rorty's attitude to religious belief. I shall argue that, despite his atheism, not only does Rorty have a use for a religious vocabulary, there is also a sense in which Rorty might be encouraged to adopt a religious vocabulary for himself.

Rorty vigorously pursues the type of antirepresentational non-realist philosophy that Cupitt admires.[9] Representationalism (the view that our minds can represent the world as a mirror represents its image), includes within its compass: essentialism (the view that the world, the self or humanity has an intrinsic nature), universalism (the view that a certain category or principle has overarching relevance to the discussion of every feature of human discourse) and foundationalism (the view that human discourse can be grounded in some stable entity, uncontextualised in language). These are all seen by Rorty as genres of a philosophical narrative that creates the type of philosophical problem that we would now be better advised to abandon. However, Rorty's critics see his alternative narrative of pragmatic anti-representationalism as reducing questions of truth to radically subjective answers and questions of freedom and justice to ultra-conservative and neo-fascist answers. In this chapter therefore, after outlining Rorty's pragmatic antirepresentationalism, my aim will be to consider the development of Rorty's thought in relation to his concern for the question of truth (that is, the question of our epistemological relation to the world). In the next chapter I shall consider the development of Rorty's thought in relation to his social concerns (our relation and responsibility to others). I shall argue that neither radical subjectivism nor a dangerous political ideology

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[7] ibid., p. 138.

[8] Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 283.

[9] Although Rorty prefers the term 'anti-representationalism', he also employs the terms 'non-representationalism' and 'non-realism' to describe the position that he claims to share with Donald Davidson. See Richard Rorty, 'Does Academic Freedom Have Philosophical Presuppositions?' in *Academe* Vol. 80. 1994. p.61.

need necessarily follow from his work and that he himself explicitly denies such associations that have been attributed to him. In refuting these attributions I hope to make an association of ideas between Rorty's pragmatic anti-representationalism and religious non-realism more palatable than it might first appear.

6.2. Rorty's Pragmatic Anti-Representationalism:

Zygmunt Bauman notes that Rorty's work has had a deep and immediate impact on philosophy.[10] Since the publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in 1980, Rorty has consistently worked to deflate the attempts of philosophers to secure a foundation for knowledge. In that book Rorty drew upon the work of W.V.O. Quine, Wilfred Sellars, Donald Davidson, Thomas Kuhn and Hilary Putnam among others. They are taken by Rorty as offering means to an end which, Rorty believes, was shared by Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey; namely, the abandonment of the idea of knowledge as accurate representation.[11] This idea, Rorty suggests, has its origin in such ocular metaphors as 'the mind's eye'. Such metaphors produced what Dewey termed 'the spectator theory of knowledge'[12] and what Rorty calls 'the epistemology of representation'. Shared and developed by Descartes, Locke and Kant, the epistemology of representation has become the paradigm of philosophy and is exhibited in logical and psychological empiricism and various twentieth century philosophies of language.[13] In each case epistemological representationalism is seen to give to philosophy a privileged status as the means by which certain knowledge in any field of inquiry is justified as true and real. Rorty shows how the ocular metaphors helped to invent our idea of the 'mind' as a faculty in its own right, first, for the Greeks, as a faculty of reception in which general truths were known by the internalisation of universals in the same

[10] Zygmunt Bauman, 'Philosophy as the Mirror of Time', in *History and the Human Sciences*, Vol. 5, 1992, pp. 57-58.
[11] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), pp. 6-7.
[12] John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1929), p. 26.
[13] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, op. cit., chapters five and six.

way as the eye grasps particulars;[14] and second, for Descartes, Locke and Kant as a faculty of judgement in which the 'inner eye' reflects upon, and then with Kant, constitutes the representations contained within it. The theory of knowledge and the idea of the mind as the mirror of nature culminate in Kant's transcendental idealism. Epistemological philosophy becomes both the foundation and the constitution of truth and reality.[15] Philosophy since Kant, both in the Anglo-Saxon and the continental traditions, has relied to some extent upon Kantian epistemological foundationalism.[16] Within these traditions, Rorty notes:

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[14] ibid., p. 41. Rorty notes:

> ... in Aristotle's conception intellect is not a mirror inspected by an inner eye. It is both mirror and eye in one. The retinal image is *itself* the model for the 'intellect which becomes all things,' whereas in the Cartesian model, the intellect *inspects* entities modelled on retinal images. The substantial forms of frogness and starness get right into the Aristotelian intellect, and are there in just the same way they are in the frogs and the stars—*not* in the way in which frogs and stars are reflected in mirrors. In Descartes's conception—the one which became the basis for 'modern' epistemology—it is *representations* which are in the 'mind'.

ibid., p. 45. (Italics in original).

[15] Summarising his account of western philosophy, Rorty notes:

> For Plato, that point was reached by escaping from the senses and opening up the faculty of reason—the Eye of the Soul—to the World of Being. For Descartes, it was a matter of turning the Eye of the Mind from the confused inner representations to the clear and distinct ones. With Locke, it was a matter of reversing Descartes's directions and seeing 'singular presentations to sense' as what should 'grip' us—what we cannot and should not wish to escape from.

ibid., p. 159.

For Locke, "all the knowing gets done ... by the Eye which observes the imprinted tablet" (ibid., p. 143) and this imprinting gets done by sense experience. However, Rorty adds, Locke had no room in his system for an inner faculty "which judged the representations rather than merely *had* them" (ibid., p. 144). The Foundation for Knowledge had still to be established if Locke's empiricism was not to turn into Humean scepticism. The Foundation was provided by Kant's transcendental philosophy. The Mind for Kant both has, and judges, representations. Thus, Rorty notes, Locke's confusion between explanation (having knowledge) and justification (judging and providing reasons for which representations are true and real) becomes in Kant a "confusion between predication (saying something about an object) and synthesis (putting representations together in inner space)." (ibid., p. 148). Rorty continues: "For a Kantian transcendental ego to come to believe a sentence to be true is for it to relate ... two radically distinct sorts of representations, concepts on the one hand and intuitions on the other." (ibid., p. 148). He thereby attempted to avoid the reductionism of true representation to either Cartesian rational concepts or Lockean empirical sensation. Rorty notes that in rejecting both, unless combined in synthesis, Kant "was the first to think of the foundations of knowledge as propositions rather than objects. Before Kant, an inquiry into 'the nature and origin of knowledge' had been a search for privileged inner representations. With Kant, it became a search for the rules which the mind had set up for itself." (ibid., p. 160). In this way accurate representation was assured by the transcendental claim that the mind constituted genuine knowledge. Epistemological representation thus became the foundation of knowledge.

[16] Whereas the Anglo-Saxon tradition tended to separate epistemology from psychology, making accuracy of representation a matter of evidential relations and logic, the continental tradition seeing

[It is] agreed that philosophy is a discipline which takes as its study the 'formal' or 'structural' aspects of our beliefs, and that by examining these the philosopher serves the cultural function of keeping the other disciplines honest, limiting their claims to what can be properly 'grounded'.[17]

Rorty's account of intellectual history resembles Dewey's critique of the 'quest for certainty', but unlike Dewey, Rorty no longer sees a substantive role for philosophy to play at the centre of culture. Employing Quine's critique of both reductionism and the necessity/contingency distinction, Sellars' critique of 'the given' and Davidson's critique of the scheme/content distinction,[18] Rorty shows how we might abandon the idea that knowledge is 'constituted' by a confrontation between a given world and representations of it within the mind's eye of a subject: that is, to abandon the idea that accurate representations provide a neutral foundation upon which true knowledge can be justified by those who practice the privileged philosophical disciplines. In place of knowledge as accurate representation, Rorty suggests that we understand knowledge as a historical and social product of various human practices orientated toward our coping with the world. Knowledge is a contingent feature of the 'general conversation of mankind'. Rorty writes:

Once conversation replaces confrontation, the notion of the mind as Mirror of Nature can be discarded. Then the notion of philosophy as the discipline which looks for privileged representations among those constituting the Mirror becomes unintelligible.[19]

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the philosopher as the guardian of human freedom maintained Kant's emphasis on the mind's transcendental constitution of reality. ibid., pp. 161-162.

[17] ibid., p. 162. Three exceptions to this, Rorty adds, were Dewey, the early Heidegger and the latter Wittgenstein.

[18] Rorty sees residual elements of representational metaphysics in both Quine and Sellars but taken together Sellars acts to 'purify' Quine of his residual desire to privilege the scientific over that of other human social practices while Quine purifies Sellars' residual desire to draw distinctions between language and fact of scheme and content. Davidson's own critique of the latter, and the other dogmas of empiricism allows Rorty to see in Davidson the final abandonment of the metaphysics of representation. ibid., pp. 165-212.

[19] ibid., p. 170. Rorty later adds:

... if assertions are justified by society rather than by the character of the inner representations they express, then there is no point in attempting to isolate *privileged* representations.

Explaining rationality and epistemic authority by reference to what society lets us say, rather than the latter by the former, is the essence of what I shall call 'epistemological behaviourism', an attitude common to Dewey and Wittgenstein.

Drawing on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Rorty suggests that hermeneutics is what we are left with when we have abandoned epistemology.[20] In hermeneutics, knowledge becomes a matter of historical and social agreement rather than a matter of subject-to-object relations. The hermeneutic skill is to balance the pragmatic benefits of established, or normal discourse against the possible greater benefits that new or abnormal discourse might provide.[21] Hermeneutics is no successor subject to the epistemology of representation because unlike the latter, the former makes no claim about the privileged status of philosophy. Like Dewey, Rorty wants a holistic account of inquiry which does not reduce the criteria of truth and reality to the domain of a single putatively privileged discipline, nor to the notion of accurate mental representations. Truth is understood as "what it is better for us to believe" rather than as "the accurate representation of reality" [22] and knowledge is anything that helps us cope with the world we live in. Sometimes it will be useful to systematise our knowledge, other times it will not. On those latter occasions, Rorty argues, we will be less concerned with passing out honorific titles such as 'objective' or 'cognitive' upon our various systems of shared knowledge[23] and more ready to listen to what he terms the edifying philosopher. Edifying philosophy aims at keeping human inquiry going rather than finding objectivity. It is abnormal and reactive: "a protest against attempts to close off conversation by [the] proposals ... of some privileged set of descriptions."[24] The edifying philosopher does not build systems of knowledge and, like Dewey, will see growth as the only moral end.[25] Such a philosopher will also want to "keep space open for the sense of wonder which poets sometimes cause."[26] Hermeneutics, then, attempts to balance the desire for edification with the need to construct stable systems of knowledge. Unlike the

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ibid., p. 174.
[20] ibid., p. 325.
[21] ibid., pp. 320, 338-339.
[22] ibid., p. 10.
[23] ibid., p. 355.
[24] ibid., p. 377.
[25] John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), p. 177.
[26] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, op. cit., p. 370.

epistemological systematician, the hermeneutic systematician will not see patterns in normal (agreed) discourse which suggest that their truth consists in their being hooked onto something like Reality, Reason or Truth.[27] The hermeneutic thinker knows of no way to appeal to such notions and is not sure what use they would be in the task of balancing the need for systems of knowledge with edifying discourse. Such a thinker will not try to argue against the realist who insists that genuine knowledge requires the 'truthfulness to reality' connection, but will, rather, attempt to persuade the realist that once the work of the historian and the sociologist has been completed, there is very little left to discover about the justification of knowledge and certainly nothing that would suggest a correspondence of truth to 'the mind of God', 'Platonic forms', or 'the way the world really is'. When Dewey talked of truth as 'warranted assertibility', Rorty argues, he was not defining a new philosophical notion of truth but "making it something you could use instead of something you could merely respect ...".[28] However, it is in respect to the role of such philosophical notions that we find one area in which Rorty's appropriation of Dewey has been questioned; for Dewey, it is argued, still had a place for philosophy and the method of intelligence that it affords to cultural reconstruction and democratic politics.[29] Whereas Dewey thought that philosophy still might have

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[27] ibid., p. 385.

[28] ibid., p. 308.

[29] This point has been made, for example, by Raymond D. Boisvert, 'Rorty, Dewey and Post-Modern Metaphysics', in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 27, 1989, pp. 173-193; James D. Marshall, 'On What We May Hope: Rorty on Dewey and Foucault', in *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, Vol. 13, 1995, pp. 307-323; and James Gouinlock, 'What is the Legacy of Instrumentalism?: Rorty's Interpretation of Dewey', in Herman J. Saatkamp Jr., *Rorty and Pragmatism*, op. cit., pp. 72-90. Boisvert argues that while Dewey was a "reluctant metaphysician", he nevertheless saw the need for a vision of existence that would serve as a ground map for philosophy. Rorty, on the other hand, according to Boisvert, exhibits his debt to positivism by his blanket rejection of metaphysics. Nowhere is this more evident, Boisvert argues, than in the different readings Dewey and Rorty offer of Plato. Rorty is seen as rejecting the entire Platonic tradition of philosophical reflection out of hand whereas Dewey, it is noted, called upon philosophy to return to Plato. However, as Boisvert notes, the Plato that Dewey wished to get back to was "the dramatic, restless, co-operatively inquiring Plato of the dialogues ... whose highest flights of metaphysics always terminated with a social and practical turn." (John Dewey, 'From Absolutism to Experimentalism', in G. P. Adams and W.P. Montague (eds.): *Contemporary American Philosophy*, Vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan, 1930), p. 21. Plato the philosopher and systematician is as unpalatable to Dewey as he is to Rorty (ibid., p. 21 and John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948) Enlarged Edition, Ch. 5). It is difficult to allow, as Boisvert does, that Dewey's Plato remains necessarily "linked indissolubly with

something significant to say about 'the nature of man', 'the meaning of life', and 'the progress of scientific and democratic communities', Rorty believes that such issues become pointless and empty once the quest for certainty is abandoned.[30] However, their differences can be exaggerated, for while Dewey did indeed believe that philosophy was useful in furthering scientific and moral inquiry, he refused to see either the philosopher or the scientist along the lines of a sacred priesthood. Reconstruction is not necessarily the responsibility and task of philosophy but rather

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metaphysics". (Boisvert, 'Rorty, Dewey and Post-Modern Metaphysics', op. cit., p. 176). Dewey wished to divorce the metaphysical Plato from the dramatic and practical Plato and to see in the latter a source of useful reflection on ever-changing human goods. See Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, op. cit., pp. v-xli. Boisvert's point is that political hope is empty without metaphysical grounding and Dewey, but not Rorty, still cherished the idea that a theory of democracy needs to be interwoven with its practice. Dewey shows, according to Boisvert, that metaphysics is possible after the quest for certainty has collapsed. In the hands of a reader more sympathetic to Rorty's position, however, Dewey's appeal to the dramatic Plato is seen as a confirmation of Rorty's reading of Dewey. Konstantin Kolenda writes:

> ... when Rorty recommends delight, [philosophy as play], he picks up a theme in Plato (...). Like Dewey, Rorty looks upon playfulness not as confined to mindless frivolity but as lighting up all wakeful, heedful attentive stretches of life in which creative human capacities come to the surface.

Konstantin Kolenda, *Rorty's Humanistic Pragmatism*, (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1990), p. 113.

[30] Rorty denies the necessity of metaphysics to politics. He writes:

> Dewey never, I think, saw pragmatism in the way in which Marxists saw dialectical materialism—as a philosophical key which unlocks the secrets of history or of society.

Richard Rorty, 'Feminism and Pragmatism', in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Vol. 30, 1991, p. 255, n. 23. Where Dewey does speak of metaphysics, Rorty suggests, he is trying to make his own proposals look 'good' to an audience, to which Dewey himself belongs, that still felt the need of a 'method' that would ground political action. Dewey postured toword such a putative 'method' but in fact never relied upon it in practice. See Rorty's contribution in Saatkamp, *Rorty and Pragmatism*, op. cit., and Richard Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 72-89. Here Rorty argues that Dewey often seems to be claiming to be able to clear away philosophical tradition by means of his own philosophical inventions (ibid., p. 73). If these inventions are aspects of Dewey's pragmatic experimentalism then Rorty sees no reason to equate the things that Dewey tried to do with the things that philosophers in the tradition of Plato have tried to do. If, however, this association between Dewey and the philosophical tradition is made, Rorty is not sure what to make of Dewey's claim about clearing away the philosophical tradition (ibid., pp. 73-74). The importance of Dewey's achievement was not that it provided a new form of philosophical representation, but:

> ... the provocativeness of its suggestions about how to slough off our intellectual past, and about how to treat the past as material for playful experimentation ...

ibid., p. 87. Thus when Rorty claims that "Dewey could have said everything he needed to say if he dropped the term 'scientific method'", he is simply doing to Dewey what Dewey himself had done to the philosophical tradition: philosophising without the residue of the quest for certainty. (Richard Rorty, 'Response to James Gouinlock', in Saatkamp, *Rorty and Pragmatism*, op. cit., p. 94). Perhaps one of the fairest accounts of the similarities and differences between Dewey and Rorty is found in Richard Shusterman, 'Pragmatism and Liberalism Between Dewey and Rorty', in *Political Theory*, Vol. 22, 1994, pp. 391-413. The difference between the two on the relation of philosophy to politics and science, Shusterman argues, may be the result of a general confidence in philosophy that pervaded Dewey's intellectual world but no longer that of Rorty's. ibid., pp. 392, 396.

is a common task of people "drawn from every useful calling."[31] Equally, Rorty still sees a useful role for the philosopher to fulfil, not as a "cultural overseer who knows everyone's common ground" but as "the informed dilettante" who charms hermetic thinkers out of their self-enclosed practices.[32] Such a philosopher will recognise that the objectivity we seek will be "no more and no less than the best ideas we currently have about how to explain what is going on".[33] They will, according to Rorty, follow Hegel in seeing philosophy as one's own 'time grasped in thought'.[34] They will be content with truth as coherence rather than as a relation of correspondence with antecedently existing entities.

Thus, any discontinuity between Rorty and Dewey should not mask their similarities. One such similarity is between Rorty's anti-representationalism, with its denial that philosophical concerns are antecedent to historical human practices, and Dewey's critique of 'religion'. Like Dewey's 'religious' faith, Rorty's pragmatic culture is not concerned with attaining pre-existent truths, but rather is concerned with the proliferation of poetic and scientific vocabularies in the hope of producing new modes of inquiry and a freer society compared with what has gone before. This is a culture in which growth is more important than the attainment of pre-existent goods. The effect of such a culture, Dewey would suggest, while adverse to historic religions, "is not fatal to the religious values in our common experience."[35]

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[31] Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, op. cit., p. xxxv. This view of Dewey's modest account of philosophy's role is confirmed by Richard Bernstein, *John Dewey*, (Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1966), p. 124. In Rorty's terms:

> Dewey offered neither the conservative's philosophical justification of democracy by reference to eternal values nor the radical's justification by reference to decreasing alienation. He did not try to justify democracy at all. He saw democracy not as founded upon the nature of man or reason or reality but as a promising experiment engaged in by a particular herd of a particular species of animal—our species and our herd.

Richard Rorty, 'Education Without Dogma: Truth, Freedom and Our Universities' in *Dissent*, Vol. 36, 1989, p. 201.

[32] Both quotes from Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, op. cit., p. 317.

[33] ibid., p. 385.

[34] Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, op. cit., p. 174.

[35] Dewey, *A Common Faith*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), p. 56.

Nevertheless, under the influence of Donald Davidson, Rorty parts with Dewey's understanding of truth as 'warranted assertibility'.[36] In articles such as 'Davidson, Pragmatism and Truth' and in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Rorty revises his account of anti-representationalism in order to clarify the point that the denial of representationalism does not mean becoming prey to epistemological relativism nor subjectivism and that the denial of truth as correspondence does not, as he had earlier suggested, require the assertion of truth as coherence. I shall consider these points here, then in the next chapter I shall address those concerns of Rorty's critics that relate to what they see as the socio–political implications of his pragmatic anti-representationalism.

6.3. Rorty Language and Truth:

While Raymond Boisvert notes that Dewey, unlike Rorty, continues to speak of a correspondence theory of truth,[37] Dewey makes it clear that in employing the term 'correspondence' he does not subscribe to "the epistemological miracle" by which there is a "pre-established harmony" between knowing and what is known that guarantees the truth of the particular knowledge in question.[38] Because Dewey did not mean what was traditionally meant by correspondence, Rorty believes that he should have given up the term.[39] Boisvert on the other hand believes that Dewey was correct to maintain the term because it highlighted Dewey's opposition to a purely subjectivist account of knowledge that follows from the coherence theory of truth and to which he sees Rorty as especially prone. In my understanding, Dewey *is* trying to assert a new conception of human knowledge that is not drawn into the

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[36] At such times, Rorty notes, we need not Dewey the 'philosopher' but Dewey the 'prophet'. Richard Rorty, 'The Banality of Pragmatism and The Poetry of Justice', in *Southern California Law Review*, Vol. 63, 1990, p. 1815.

[37] Boisvert, 'Rorty, Dewey and Post-Modern Metaphysics', op. cit., p. 182.

[38] John Dewey, *Problems of Men,* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), p. 343.

[39] By using the term, Dewey adumbrates an interpretation based upon his 'metaphysics' of immediate experience. Rorty notes that Dewey appears to be saying:

> Here is something you *could* mean by correspondence, even though it has nothing to do with the meaning used by those who worry about whether truth consists in correspondence.

Rorty, 'Response to James Gouinlock, in Saatkamp, *Rorty and Pragmatism*, op. cit., p. 99.

traditional subject-object dichotomy and that Rorty, in his early account of anti-representationalism, leans too heavily upon the subjectivist side of this dichotomy. In this section, I will show that by developing the philosophy of language associated with Donald Davidson, Rorty is able to drop both coherence and correspondence theories of truth. Although he emphasises the centrality of the creativity of human uses of language, his account of truth, I shall argue, does not reduce to subjectivity alone.[40] Rorty is thus able to fulfil Dewey's desire to abandon the subject-object dichotomy while also dispensing with the metaphysical overtones of Dewey's philosophy of experience and method of inquiry.

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty is careful to clarify that anti-representationalism does not entail idealism. Creating systematic and edifying discourse does not also mean creating the objects of the physical world.[41] He is also careful to show that it does not entail relativism or scepticism either. Only someone who already assumes that something like the transcendental notions of platonic thought already exist, will be troubled by the replacement of knowledge as accuracy of representation with knowledge as strategic diagrams for coping. Only someone troubled by the possibility that different conceptual schemes will lead to different constructs of 'the real' will be troubled by relativism. That is, idealism, scepticism and relativism are problems of representationalism. Once we take up an anti-representational stance and drop the idea that our mental schemes accurately represent some content, that is once we drop the scheme-content distinction, we will have no cause to affirm that truth is either purely scheme-laden as in idealism, or content-laden as in realism.[42] We *will* affirm the existence of nature, but accept that it makes no sense to talk about nature as having a preferred way of being

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[40] As David Hall points out, it is one thing to talk of the self as held together by the beliefs and desire that constitute an individual's creativity; it is another to say that the self is grounded on principles that are transcendent of our contact with nature and other people. David L. Hall, *Richard Rorty: Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism*, (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 17.

[41] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, op. cit., p. 345.

[42] ibid., pp. 299-311, 373-379.

represented.[43]   These ideas Rorty gleans from his interpretation of the work of

Donald Davidson. Quoting Davidson, Rorty notes that:

> In giving up dependence on the concept of an uninterpreted reality,
> something outside all schemes and science, we do not relinquish the
> notion of objective truth—quite the contrary. Given the dogma of a
> dualism of scheme and reality, we get conceptual relativity, and truth
> relative to a scheme. Without the dogma, this kind of relativity goes by
> the board. Of course truth of sentences remains relative to language, but
> that is as objective as can be. In giving up the dualism of scheme and
> world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish *unmediated* touch
> with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions
> true or false.[44]

For Davidson, our beliefs about the world and our desires for ourselves are given to

us within a network of linguistic interactions.[45] This does not mean that such

interactions get in the way of our contact with the world; they *are* our contact with

the world. The world causes us to have beliefs, but this causal relation does not

itself justify our beliefs, only other beliefs do that.[46] In 'A Nice Derangement of

Epitaphs', Davidson further argues that the network of linguistic interactions is not

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[43] Concerning this holistic relation between our beliefs and desires and our knowledge of truth and reality, Rorty has recently written:

> ... if you understand the causal relations between the acquisition of beliefs and the
> environment of the believer you do not also need to ask about representational relations.
> It seems to me that a causal, non-representational account of intentional states—an
> account along Davidsonian lines—gives you every reason in the world to say that 'real
> properties of the object are *registered* in language ... even after you have denied that they
> are *represented* in language. They are registered in the sense that if the object did not
> have those properties you would probably not say what you say, or believe what you
> believe.

Rorty, 'Response to James Gouinlock', op. cit., p. 97. Such registering, Rorty also notes, is like breathing in that "we do not as far as I can see, have any choice about how to form beliefs." Rorty, 'Response to Susan Haack', in Saatkamp, *Rorty and Pragmatism*, op. cit., p. 152.

[44] Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 198.

[45] The whole idea of objective reality, Davidson notes in a conversation with Giovanna Borradori, "depends on our being in communication with other people who are interacting with the same things." Giovanna Borradori, *The American Philosopher*, (E.T. Rosanna Crocitto) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 48.

[46] Donald Davidson, 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge' with 'Afterthoughts, 1987', in Alan Malachowski, *Reading Rorty*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 120-138 esp. pp. 127-128. Davidson writes:

> Sensory stimulations are indeed part of the causal chain that leads to belief, but cannot,
> without confusion, be considered to be evidence, or a source of justification, for the
> stimulated beliefs.

ibid., p. 132.

something that exists antecedently to the particular practical interactions in question, as if a system of language was already in place. If this were the case it would be difficult to integrate new or errant linguistic meanings. The interpretative situation between speaker, listener, and the environment they share is too flexible for any system or theory of language, antecedent to some use. We do have an idea of what we might expect a speaker to mean—what Davidson calls a 'prior theory' of interpretation—but this need not be a shared theory. All the interpretation of a speaker's actual use of language is done through constructing a 'passing theory'. The network of human linguistic interactions is constituted by a continuous series of such contingent 'passing theories'. It is convergence on 'passing theories' that enables us to understand one another.[47] What makes the creation of such 'passing theories' possible in situations where a hearer confronts a 'foreign' speaker (that is, anyone who does not speak in a way that fits a hearer's prior theory) is the application of 'the principle of charity'. This principle, which we employ in the very act of interpretation, tells us that it is pointless to do anything else, in order to get interpretation under way, but to assume that most of a speaker's beliefs are held by the speaker to be true. Charity provides "a *reason* for supposing most of our beliefs are true that is not a form of *evidence*"[48] and "is forced on us; [for] ... if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters."[49] For Davidson the truth of a speaker's utterances is a matter of relating a formal definition of truth, (to the effect (following Alfred Tarski) that 'grass is green' is true *if and only if* grass is green), with the behavioural dispositions of speakers and listeners.[50] Davidson writes:

> The ultimate source of both objectivity and communication is the triangle that, by relating speaker, interpreter, and the world, determines the

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[47] Donald Davidson, 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', in Ernest LePore (ed.) *Truth and Interpretation*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 433–446.

[48] Davidson, 'A Theory of Truth and Knowledge', op. cit., p. 127.

[49] Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, op. cit., p. 197.

[50] Donald Davidson, 'The Structure and Content of Truth', in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 87, 1990, pp. 279-328.

contents of thought and speech. Given this source there is no room for a relativized concept of truth. [Rather truth arises] from the nature of interpersonal understanding ... mutually understood utterances, the contents of which are finally fixed by the patterns and causes of sentences held true ... [T]ruth thus rests in the end on belief and, even more ultimately on the affective attitudes.[51]

For Rorty, Davidson's account of language and truth not only dispenses with the scheme-content distinction, it also dispenses with the distinction between appearance and reality. If there is no non-causal mediation between our beliefs and the world then there is also no basis for separating appearance from reality. That this distinction is made amounts to the exercise of alternative ways of speaking that fulfil different purposes. Davidson's holism enables Rorty to replace the distinction "between sentences which express matter of fact and those which do not, ... by a distinction between sentences which serve a certain purpose and those which serve other purposes." Some sentences may be useful in talking about tables and others about disease or "praising God ... [or] ... writing witty verse etc."[52] In this way Davidsonian holism "takes the curse of naturalism"[53] by refusing to reduce our non-scientific practices to scientific practices.[54]

Rorty considers Davidson's account of language as doing the same kind of thing that Dewey's account of experience tried to do. Both suggest that we are in immediate contact with our environment without giving any aid or comfort to representational realism.[55] Unlike Dewey, however, Davidson does not require a metaphysic of experience or method of inquiry in order to assert this.[56] Davidson

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[51] ibid., pp. 325-326.

[52] Rorty, *Objectivity Relativism and Truth*, op. cit., p.116. (both quotations).

[53] ibid., p. 109.

[54] This is one of the main themes of the essays on Davidson in Rorty's *Objectivity Relativism and Truth*. ibid., pp. 78-156.

[55] Rorty writes:

> Our language ... is not ... something 'merely human' which may hide something which 'transcends human capacities'. ... [Rather, language] is as direct as contact with reality can get.

ibid., pp. 145-146.

[56] Richard Rorty, Dewey Between Hegel and Darwin', in Saatkamp, *Rorty and Pragmatism*, op. cit., pp. 1-15.

merely asks us to consider what is involved in interpreting the linguistic and other behaviour of our interlocutors.[57] Rorty notes:

> I see it as the great virtue of Davidson's linguistification of Dewey's antirepresentationalism that it enables us to get rid of 'experience' as the name of ... an intermediary.[58]

While Davidson's account is "controlled by the nature of objects", its advantage over Dewey's account is that "it makes it unnecessary to worry about whether a full-fledged object of knowledge exists prior to inquiry."[59]

A further advantage that Rorty sees in Davidson's account of the language-world relation is the place it finds for unusual uses of language such as malapropisms and metaphors. By employing a 'passing theory' we can make sense of such uses. Additionally, Rorty argues, such unusual uses of language can become common uses if they enable us to fulfil a purpose better than we now do. Rorty thus sees Davidson as adumbrating a naturalistic account of language usage that does justice to Darwin. Rorty writes:

> Davidson lets us think of the history of language, and thus of culture, as Darwin taught us to think of the history of a coral reef. Old metaphors are constantly dying off into literalness, and then serving as a platform and foil for new metaphors.[60]

In this way our current use of language can be regarded as having taken shape through many contingent linguistic mutations. The metaphorical use of 'ousia', 'agape' and 'gravitas' by Aristotle, St. Paul and Newton respectively, are seen by Rorty as 'marvellous' contingent mutations in the evolution of linguistic usage.[61] Developing Davidson's account of language in this way allows Rorty to propose a

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[57] Rorty notes:
    Davidson's theory seems to me superior to Dewey's in being able to provide definite
    location for all naming behaviors as organic-environmental interaction.
Rorty, 'Response to James Gouinlock', op. cit., p. 97.
[58] ibid., p. 219. n. 10.
[59] ibid., p. 97.
[60] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 16.
[61] ibid., p. 17.

linguistic Darwinism that enables us to redescribe any narrative or constellation of human practices. Once we recognise that language has no goal, that it is not a medium, but a series of random mutations of 'marks and noises'; some of which, turn out to be useful for fulfilling certain practical purposes: once we see that our language and thus also our culture "are as much a contingency, as much a result of thousands of small mutations finding niches (and millions of others finding no niches), as are the orchids and the anthropoids"[62] then, Rorty asserts, we will be in a better position also to recognise ourselves as contingent products of a contingent physical world producing contingent meaning with contingent linguistic tools. In so doing, we will find ourselves able to dismiss a whole raft of philosophical problems that we once thought important. In this Darwinian view, a new set of linguistic descriptions does not emerge after accepting the validity of certain arguments on the basis of some neutral criteria that might act as a benchmark for progress,[63] but rather, through recontextualisation: that is, through a re-weaving of the web of our beliefs and desires, in order to untie some problematic knots. Recontextualisation is marked by a continual proliferation of knowledge that always transgresses any limits which a previous vocabulary might once have held sacred. Recontextualisation is to Rorty, what 'inquiry' was to Dewey.

Explaining the significance of Darwinism to a pragmatic account of inquiry, Rorty writes:

> By 'Darwinism' I mean a story about humans as animals with special organs and abilities: about how certain features of the human throat, hand and brain enabled humans to start developing increasingly complex social practices, by batting increasingly complex noises back and forth. According to this story, these organs and abilities and the practices they make possible, have a lot to do with who we are and what we want, but they no more put us in a *representational* relation to an intrinsic nature of things than do the anteater's snout or the bower-bird's skill at weaving. I see Dewey as having used this story to start freeing us from

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[62] ibid., p.16.
[63] Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, op. cit., pp. XIi-XIiii.

representationalist notions, and I see ... Donald Davidson as continuing this Deweyan initiative.[64]

Dewey and Davidson, follow Darwin and understand that the immediacy of our relation to our environment means that there is no interesting distinction to be drawn between adapting to reality and knowing reality.[65] However, it would be wrong to assume that Rorty is suggesting that a Darwinian position should be held because Darwin has told us how things really are. Rather, for Rorty, Darwin provides us with a self-image which it befits us to try, one that itself found an evolutionary niche created by nineteenth century culture. It is one that suggests that we drop questions about 'how things *really* are' "in the hope of having fewer philosophical problems on our hands."[66] It enables us to see recontextualisation as manipulating linguistic tools that serve some useful purpose and not a matter of representing reality or getting at the truth of things. One recontextualisation of the world is followed by another as new problems arise and new useful vocabularies are created to deal with them. As we get into the habit of using them, these vocabularies, and the metaphors that constitute them, find a niche and become literalised as a 'useful' pragmatic truth. But as with all such vocabularies, "'can be made to look like' ... does not contrast with 'really is'".[67] Everything comes under some description or other. Rorty writes:

> [I]t is never very hard to re-describe anything one likes in terms that are irreducible to, indefinable in the terms of, a previous description of that thing. A pragmatist ... insists ... that there are no such thing as the way the thing is in itself, under no description, apart from any *use* to which human beings might want to put it.[68]

Sometimes redescription will be intentional, other times it will not. Either way, Rorty agrees when Dewey argues that, after Darwin, old philosophical questions are

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[64] Richard Rorty, 'Putnam and the Relativist Menace', in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 90, 1993, pp. 447-448.

[65] Rorty, Dewey Between Hegel and Darwin', op. cit., pp. 1-15.

[66] Rorty, 'Putnam and the Relativist Menace', op. cit., p. 448. Also see Richard Rorty, 'Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality', in *The Yale Review*, Vol. 81, 1993. pp. 8-9.

[67] Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers Volume Two*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) p. 4.

[68] ibid., p .4, (my italics).

not so much solved but abandoned in favour of new questions.[69] When, however, redescriptions are intentional, there may, as Jennifer Herdt argues, be a problem in Rorty's account. If the *use* of a particular redescription is realised only after it has been created, because at the point of its creation it is a non-cognitive unfamiliar use of language, how are we to decide what redescriptions should replace our current ones?[70] To this Rorty would have two replies. The first would be to emphasise, with Dewey, that the type of intentional change Herdt is concerned with will always begin in the imagination. Our current social norms are, Rorty notes, "fossilized products of some past act of imagination."[71] Redescription will always be couched within the confines of some real or imagined alternative. Second, Rorty would note that to get our imaginary products implemented we just ought to give them a try. Things change, Rorty notes, "by somebody proposing a new idiom, its being tried out, and its being found to work better than its predecessor."[72]

To summarise the account of reality that follows from Rorty's adoption of a Davidsonian philosophy (which, I believe, religious non-realists ought to adopt) we might consider the example of 'phlogiston'. For Rorty, the word 'phlogiston' can best be understood as a tool in the chemist's historic vocabulary for which she no longer finds a use. It is no longer helpful to her purposes of prediction and control. Talk of oxidation or the transfer of energy is more helpful for this purpose. That is to say, beliefs concerning oxidation fit the chemist's other beliefs in a way that beliefs about phlogiston do not. For Rorty, "[t]o say that one's previous language was inappropriate for dealing with some segment of the world ... is just to say that one is now, having learned a new language, able to handle that segment more easily."[73]

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[69] John Dewey, *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1910 and 1965), p. 19.

[70] Jennifer A. Herdt, 'Cruelty, Liberalism and the Quarantine of Irony: Rorty and the Disjunction Between Public and Private', in *Soundings*, Vol. 75, 1992, pp. 79-95.

[71] Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, op. cit., p. 186.

[72] Richard Rorty, 'Response to Allen Hance', in Saatkamp, *Rorty and Pragmatism*, op. cit., p. 125.

[73] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* op. cit., p. 14. Also see Rorty, *Objectivity Relativism and Truth*, op. cit., pp. 54-60.

The rationale behind the shift from 'phlogiston' to 'oxidation' is bound up with the relation of certain ordinary beliefs to other ordinary beliefs and not a matter of the relation of ordinary beliefs to non-beliefs. Equally, it serves no useful purpose to understand this rationale as providing us with a separate criterion for why we should say that oxidation is true and phlogiston false, for there is no substantial justificationary work for the notion of 'truth' to do. This is not because talk of truth has no role, but because the truth of our ordinary beliefs is already presupposed. It is not that oxidation corresponds to something in the world which phlogiston does not. The world does not stand to these words in a relation of 'making true'. Rather beliefs about 'oxidation' are holistically, but not too tightly, linked with other beliefs about what counts as an observation of oxidation, in a way which beliefs about phlogiston are not. Rorty notes that "'true' and 'belief' are interlocking concepts"[74] As Davidson points out that, "the agent has only to reflect on what belief is to appreciate that most of his basic beliefs are true."[75]

This is not to be confused with the idealist notion that the physical world is mind dependent. Rorty's pragmatist will still be required to recontextualise while responding to the causal effect that her environment has upon her, to "objects she does not control."[76] The mistake of idealism, Rorty notes, was not the idea that the world has to be contextualised in some linguistic network of beliefs and desires but the idea "that space and time are unreal, that human beings cause the spatio-temporal world to exist".[77] If we accept the first idea, the second idea about the reality or non-reality of the world simply makes no sense. The world we inhabit, the

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[74] Richard Rorty, 'Putnam on Truth' in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 52, 1992. pp. 417.

[75] Donald Davidson, 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge' with 'Afterthoughts 1987' op. cit., p. 133.

[76] Rorty *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, op. cit., p. 101. The pragmatist, Rorty notes:

> is no more free from pressures from outside, no more tempted to be 'arbitrary' than anyone else. She is free from the questions 'are you representing accurately?' and 'are you getting at the way the object really, intrinsically is?' but *not* from questions like 'can you fit the belief that the litmus paper turned red (or that ... your lover has deceived you) with the rest of your beliefs?'

ibid., p. 101.

[77] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, And Solidarity*, op. cit., p. 4.

real world that has a causal effect upon us, is the world our beliefs say it is. In this view the ideas of 'correspondence' or 'representation' play no role in supplying our ordinary beliefs with their truth. Rather, truth and belief come together in the same linguistic package. Language does not mediate between truth, belief or reality.

Since correspondence and representation provide realism with its distinctive hue, dropping the notion of language as a third thing between mind and world also means dropping the main supports of realism. Rather, for the pragmatist and the non-realist, the truth or falsity of the realities with which we deal are holistically related to the practices that we employ. Language, in this view, is not an adequate or an inadequate medium, but a tool with which we can achieve certain purposes. Some of these purposes are assisted by dividing up the world and labelling the bits, other purposes are not. It is a mistake, in this view, to regard truth and reality as distinctively defined by the distinction between label and labelled. Talk of 'phlogiston' may not have labelled anything, but it once held a place within the chemist's network of true beliefs as a sign of an anomalous property of the world's causal relation to us that required what Dewey termed 'inquiry' and what Rorty terms recontextualisation.

We are in direct contact with things like tables but, Rorty argues, it makes no sense to talk of this contact in terms which regard that table as either dependent or independent of the mind. Affirming or denying that correspondence and representation connects minds with tables, makes no actual difference for our direct dealings with the table. Witty verse and God are no exception when it comes to a pragmatic account of truth and reality. It is our practical dealings with such things that leads us to talk about their reality. Therefore, under the influence of his interpretation of Davidson, Rorty does not reject notions like 'truth', 'reality', or 'reason'. What he does reject is the idea that it makes sense to talk about these notions as if they refer to, or are dependent upon, an antecedently existent entity or property which our mind or our language might represent or fail to represent. Such

notions are meaningful in terms of what we do, rather than what we might represent. They are pragmatic terms rather than metaphysical terms. Rorty writes:

> ... nobody ever said there was no such thing as objective truth and validity. What we say is that you gain nothing for the pursuit of such truth by talking about the mind-dependence or mind-independence of reality. All there is to talk about are the procedures we use for bringing about agreement between inquirers.[78]

It is in these pragmatic terms that religious non-realists will find a suitable account of non-realism. It is one that abandons the realist's economy of representation rather than sharing in it through an idealist or anti-realist negation.[79]

However, Rorty did not do enough in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* to prevent himself from being interpreted as a subjectivist. This is an interpretation that he made plausible by linking, rather than swapping, Dewey's account of truth with Davidson's. It is an interpretation given further plausibility by the insufficient attention Rorty gave to distinguishing coherence theories of truth from the holism he shares with Davidson.[80] Rorty regrets having made this interpretation plausible in

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[78] Rorty, 'Does Academic Freedom Have Philosophical Presuppositions?' op. cit., p.56.

[79] According to Rorty, the anti-realism expressed by philosophers like Michael Dummett is predicated upon a representational criteria according to which a proposition might be characterised as either realist if it is established indepentently of our knowing it or anti-realist if its truth or falsity is in some way dependent upon "the sort of thing which we count as evidence for a statement ..." Michael. Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas*, (London: Duckworth, 1978), p. 146. For Dummett, Rorty argues:

> Our inarticulable knowledge of what it is for such a statement ['It is red'] to be true, presumably, is enough to make us realist about redness. For these types of statements we can have a strong sense of 'correspondence to reality' - strong in that we are confident that what makes the statement true is 'reality' rather than merely ourselves. Here we have the empiricist picture, ... according to which language stands as a veil between us and reality, with reality punching its way through (or being known to punch its way through) only at the tips of a few sensory receptors. The farther into the upper storeys we get ... [to statements not limited to these sensory receptors] ... the more doubt there is that we are in touch with the world, and the more temptation to be an 'anti-realist' in regard to certain entities - that is, to adopt a theory of meaning which explains the truth of such statements [quoting Dummett] 'in terms of our capacity to recognise statements as true, and not in terms of a condition which transcend human capacities.'

Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, op. cit., p. 145. Also p. 2.

[80] In the introduction to *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Rorty speaks of "Davidson's holism and coherentism" in the same sentence. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, op. cit., p. xviii. However, Davidson also regrets having used the term 'coherence theory'. He writes:

> My emphasis on coherence was probably just a way of making a negative point, that 'all that counts as evidence or justification for a belief must come from the same totality of belief to which it belongs.'

these ways. In relation to the first regret, Rorty initially saw Dewey's account of truth (as what inquiry takes to be warranted) to be as innocuous as Davidson's—a tool to help us get things done. But on later reflection Rorty sees Dewey's view as driving a wedge between truth on the one hand and the test of warranted assertibility on the other, as if the latter was an independent criterion for judging the reality of the former. For Rorty, as we have seen:

> ... 'true' is not the sort of term which is going to get explained, defined, analyzed, or usefully contrasted with some mighty opposite such as 'assertible'. ... I obscured this Davidsonian point in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* by trying to associate it with the Deweyan claim that truth is warranted assertibility.[81]

Truth needs no definition. To suggest that it does is to engage once more with the scheme-content distinction in which truth is either subjectively imposed or pre-given. Rorty allows that his critics were correct in objecting to his earlier suggestion that we are forced to choose between either a "radical subjectivism in which the self projects schemes out upon a featureless reality ... [or] ... an unknowable noumenon."[82] To associate Dewey with Davidson in this respect; to identify warranted assertibility with a scheme by which we define the criteria of truth, is to undermine the holistic account of knowledge that Davidson and Rorty both wish to affirm. This brings us to Rorty's second regret, his failure to distinguish a coherence view of truth from holism. This failure stems from the residual interest Rorty has in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* for the appearance-reality distinction, manifest in the form of a distinction between correspondence as "transparency to the real"[83] and coherence as coping with the real. Although he never explicitly affirms a

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Davidson, 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge: Afterthoughts, 1987', op. cit., p. 135. Also see Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 174 where Rorty describes the view he wants to assert as holism without idealism.

[81] Richard Rorty, 'A Reply to Six Critics', in *Analyse und Kritik*, Vol. 6, 1984, pp. 96-97.

[82] Richard Rorty, 'A Response to Frank B. Farrell', in Saatkamp, *Rorty and Pragmatism*, op. cit., p. 19.

[83] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, op. cit., pp. 368, 310 no. 41.

coherence theory, he does acquiesce in its instantiation when, for example, he writes of justification:

> that there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence.[84]

Here, truth as coherence will not escape self-referential problems because it will always need to assume a total context which gives to it the truth it claims. Holism on the other hand makes no such claim about truth. It is one thing to say with holism that "you have to understand words and sentences in the context of an entire linguistic practice";[85] it is another thing to say that 'coherence is the only test'. In the holist view there is a closure of the subject-object dichotomy in favour of an 'intersubjective' account of knowledge in which our linguistic and other practices make sense in a context that takes for granted a speaker, a listener and a shared world, enabling us to drop the distinctions between the world itself and our view of it and thus also making "it hard to be either a realist or an anti-realist."[86] In the coherentist view, the subject-object dichotomy is opened up once more by the idea that coherence acts as a test. In this view, the truth of some feature of a particular area of human endeavour is judged not only on how that feature coheres with other features in that endeavour, but also by how it relates to the entire endeavour. The endeavour itself becomes the limit and criterion of the truth for the features that constitute it. When we consider the entirety of human endeavour, a coherence theory of truth necessarily imposes an abstract reality upon inquiry that must somehow encompass in a system all those endeavours that are true. For Spinoza such a system is the mind of God; for Hegel it is the Absolute Will; and for Rorty and Cupitt, their critics argue, it is the self-asserting subject.

This is the main thrust of the critique offered against Rorty by D. Vaden House and Frank B. Farrell. Vaden House argues that rather than transcending the

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[84] ibid., p. 178.

[85] Richard Rorty, 'A Post-Philosophical Politics?: An Interview by Danny Postel', in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 15, 1989, p. 199.

[86] Rorty, 'Response to Frank B. Farrell', op. cit., p. 191.

problems of realism, Rorty simply inverts them in the form of a neo-Nietzschean affirmation of the self. Despite the care that Vaden House recognises Rorty takes to avoid scepticism and idealism, his position cannot avoid making truth and reality a matter of the self-assertion of the knowing human subject. While Vaden House admires much of Rorty's critique of representationalism, in the end he sees Rorty as dispensing with the indispensable, namely the idea that the truth or falsity of our vocabularies do depend upon the world's own nature.[87] To avoid this error, Vaden House argues, Rorty needs to recover "a sense of the world as creation and human life as response."[88] I have tried to argue here that Rorty has made this recovery but without the implications that Vaden House thinks are required for an adequate account of truth and falsity. Vaden House understands Rorty incorrectly as saying that "it makes no sense to think of the world causing a vocabulary to be right or wrong."[89] But once Rorty follows Davidson in abandoning the distinction between scheme and content and between appearance and reality, what in fact makes no sense is to argue that we are out of contact with the world. Coping with the world is the process by which we engage directly with it. As Rorty comments:

> An antirepresentationalist ... does not view knowledge as a matter of getting reality right, but rather as a matter of acquiring habits of action for coping with reality.[90]

To abandon the scheme-content distinction is to abandon the need for epistemological bridges between subject and object and thus to collapse that very distinction. To abandon these bridges, however, does not mean, as Vaden House assumes it does, that we abandon any idea of our contact with the world or its independence of us. The issue for Rorty is not about whether the world causes us to hold beliefs—like Davidson he believes it certainly does—the issue is whether it makes sense, as Vaden House believes it must, to take the further step and call these

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[87] D. Vaden House, *Without God or His Doubles: Realism, Relativism and Rorty*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), pp. 116-145 esp. p. 127.
[88] ibid., pp. 125-126 no. 17.
[89] ibid., p. 123; also pp. 62, 81.
[90] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, op. cit., p. 1.

beliefs right or wrong as if the world has a 'say' in what makes our vocabularies true. Summarising his account of truth and reality Rorty writes:

> To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and the human languages are human creations.
>
> Truth cannot be out there - cannot exist independently of the human mind - because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own - unaided by the describing activity of human beings - cannot.
>
> (...) The world does not speak. Only we do.[91]

However, sentences like these lead Frank Farrell to view Rorty as an inverted quasi-religious thinker. Farrell argues that Rorty wants to think of the world as if something like 'God' still existed. Unlike Vaden House, Farrell suggests that to view the world as a divine creation actually encourages us to view nature as lacking in its own self-determinacy. Rorty transposes the world's lack of self-determinacy viewed in the light of its supposed creation by God, into a lack of self-determinacy that follows from a subjective determination of the world by the self. According to Farrell, Rorty then maintains what Farrell believes to be the religious idea that humanity's place in the world is one of coping with a pre-given divine creation. This religious structure to Rorty's thought, Farrell argues, "means that the subject ambitiously takes on a divinized role or that it modestly projects its schemes upon a world it cannot hope to understand itself."[92] In the former view the world disappears into idealism, in the latter view it disappears into scepticism. Once transposed to the subject the religious structure of Rorty's thought about reality results in an anti-realist account of truth.[93]

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[91] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, And Solidarity*, op. cit., p. 5-6.
[92] Farrell, *Subjectivity, Realism and Postmodernism*, op. cit., p. 139.
[93] ibid., pp. 148-159.

Again, such a criticism only holds if Rorty maintains the distinction between scheme and content that appears to make a choice between anti-realism and realism necessary; but because Rorty's anti-representationalism abandons that distinction, it sees this choice as a non-issue. Farrell allows that Rorty follows Davidson in rejecting these distinctions but still believes that there is a 'gulf' between the two thinkers on the significance of the question of truth and its relation to the world.[94] Rorty's response to Farrell is first to point out how much he agrees with Farrell's account of Davidson's understanding of the necessary triangulation between, in Farrell's terms, "the world, the intentional life of subjects ... and the cultural realm in which our semantic production is repeated and interpreted and shaped."[95] Secondly, however, whereas Farrell interprets this triangulation as supporting a 'modest realism', Rorty interprets it as Davidson asking us to give up both realist and anti-realist intuitions.[96] The gulf that Farrell sees between Davidson and Rorty is, on Rorty's reading, more of a gulf between his own and Farrell's interpretation of Davidson.[97] Farrell argues that while the world cannot make our beliefs true, it nevertheless remains a criterion with its own articulation by "being that to which our beliefs attempt holistically to accommodate themselves..."[98] In this way the world affects our practices in such a way that we cannot view our beliefs as merely human creations. For Farrell, there are either true holistic beliefs about the world which the world causes us to have, or there are errant beliefs, such as those of religious faith. For Rorty, however, the idea of the mind projecting its structures onto the world is

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[94] ibid., pp. 118-147.

[95] ibid., pp. 113-114. Rorty describes himself and Farrell as 'fans' of Davidson's position. Rorty, 'Response to Frank B. Farrell', op. cit., p. 191.

[96] Rorty, 'Response to Frank B. Farrell', op. cit., p. 191.

[97] ibid., pp. 190, 228 no. 2. Farrell's interpretation has to deny the pragmatic element in Davidson's position in order to establish his interpretation, (Farrell, *Subjectivity, Realism and Postmodernism*, op. cit., pp. 75-79) while also highlighting Rorty's position prior to his complete adoption of Davidsonian triangulation. One difficulty with Farrell's position is that he is forced to accept that there are more errant beliefs than Davidson would be prepared to allow. For Davidson even the Neanderthals had mostly true beliefs, because we must assume that another person has mostly true beliefs if we are to make sense of their actions, beliefs and desires, but also because, as Rorty points out, truth is largely a matter of the shared practices and the purposes we are currently engaged in pursuing.

[98] Farrell, *Subjectivity, Realism and Postmodernism*, op. cit., p. 120.

as ludicrous as the idea of the world projecting its structures into language as though such language is only secondarily our own. He wants to drop such secondary-primary distinctions, as well as the optical metaphors on which they are based, and in the process to abandon the subject-object, scheme-content and realism-antirealism distinctions as well.[99] Rorty notes:

> If one is content to think of the relations between human organisms, their beliefs, and the rest of the universe in merely causal terms, rather than dragging in representational relations in addition to causal ones, questions about realism and antirealism will not arise.[100]

One side of Davidson's triangle is held in place by the other two sides. It is thus impossible to isolate the world from beliefs and linguistic interactions. For Rorty, nothing deep now hangs on the distinction between 'the world out there' and 'truth out there' because the world will always come in the description and redescription of *our* language-shaped packets.[101] He writes:

> The antirepresentationalist is quite willing to grant that our language, like our bodies, has been shaped by the environment we live in. Indeed, he or she insists on the point ... .[In their view,] [i]t is one thing to say that ... an ability to use the word 'atom' as physicists do, is useful for coping with the environment. It is another thing to *explain* this utility by reference to representationalist notions, such as the notion that the reality referred to by 'quark' was determinate before the word 'quark' came along.[102]

Farrell correctly notes that Rorty's interpretation of Davidson's work does leave room for some disagreement with Davidson,[103] but the dialogue between Rorty and

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[99] Rorty, 'A Response to Frank B. Farrell', op. cit., p. 192.
[100] ibid., p. 193.
[101] As Davidson writes:

> ... my own view is that, until we have an idea of what's going on in the minds of other people, it doesn't make sense to say that we have the concept of objectivity, of something existing in the world quite independent of us. ... First we find out what is in somebody else's mind, and by then we have got all the rest. Of course, I really think that it all comes at the same time.

Borradori, *The American Philosophers*, op. cit., p. 50.
[102] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, op. cit., p. 5.
[103] Two outstanding differences between Rorty and Davidson are firstly, that Davidson does not see anything particularly pragmatic about 'intersubjectivity' while Rorty does. Compare here Davidson's comments in Borradori, *The American Philosopher*, op. cit., pp. 43-44 with Rorty's comment in his 'Does Academic Freedom Have Philosophical Presuppositions?' in *Academe*, Vol. 80, 1994, p. 61. Secondly, Davidson sees his account of language, beliefs and behavioural dispositions as providing something more to truth than what it is good for us to believe. Rorty does not. See Davidson, 'The

Davidson has led Rorty to abandon a coherence account of truth and to avoid the danger of subjectivism. It has also led Davidson to abandon the idea that his holism might reinstate a revised correspondence theory. Davidson comments on Rorty's essay 'Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth' that he sees Rorty as saying that:

> ... my view of truth amounts to a rejection of both coherence and correspondence theories and should properly be classed as belonging to the pragmatist tradition. ... I pretty much concur with him ...[104]

He also concurs with Rorty's claim that he is not "answering the sceptic" who questions the possibility of contact with the world, but "telling him to get lost."[105] For Davidson, correspondence theories cannot intelligibly answer the sceptic because in taking the sceptic's questions seriously they allow the sceptic logical space. But to say that there is no way for our knowledge of the world to comprehend its objects without implying some use of that knowledge, does not mean accepting epistemic (schematic) or coherence theories of knowledge and truth. Such theory-laden approaches "reduce reality to so much less than we believe there is."[106] Rorty agrees, but he emphasises those conclusions of Davidson's triangulation that lead Davidson to write that "it is futile either to reject or to accept the slogan that the real and the true are 'independent of our beliefs'."[107] The *independence* necessary for 'correspondence realism' is beside the point when it

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Structure and Content of Truth', op. cit., pp. 279-328 and Richard Rorty, 'Is Truth a Goal of Enquiry? Davidson vs. Wright', in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 45, 1995. pp. 281-300. On Rorty's account, after truth has been related to a triangular analysis of our dispositional behaviour, telling us what a speaker finds it good to believe, all we are left with are three innocuous uses of the term: (i) a cautionary use, e.g. 'my belief that my car's engine will start tomorrow is perfectly justified but may not be true'; (ii) a commending use, e.g. 'it is true that the film was a good movie'; and (iii) a disquotational use, e.g. 'if what the teacher says is true then the candidate will pass their exam'. Unlike Davidson, Rorty notes:

> I see no significance in the fact that we use the same word to designate what is preserved by valid inference as we use to caution people that beliefs justified to us may not be justified to other, better, audiences.

ibid., p. 286. Also see Rorty, 'Response to Susan Haack', op. cit., p. 150. For an account of some differences between Davidson and Rorty similar to that offered by Farrell see Maria Baghramian, 'Rorty, Davidson and Truth', in *Ration (New Series)*, Vol. 3, 1990, pp. 101-116.

[104] Davidson, 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge' with 'Afterthoughts 1987', op. cit., p. 134.

[105] ibid., p. 134.

[106] Davidson, 'The Structure and Content of Truth', op. cit., pp. 298-299.

[107] ibid., p. 305.

comes to questions of truth and reality. "Realism," Davidson notes, "with its insistence on radically nonepistemic correspondence, asks more of truth than we can understand."[108]

Timothy Jackson, like Farrell and Vaden House, accepts the loss of metaphysical consolation that Rorty's work portends, but also, like Farrell and Vaden House, feels that Rorty emphasises too strongly a philosophy of subjective 'bestowal' at the expense of a philosophy of 'appraisal'.[109] If this once was a feature of Rorty's work it is, I have argued, no longer one he holds to. In an essay from 1984 Rorty notes that a consideration of works like Dewey's *A Common Faith* leads us to see that accepting the contingency of our words makes a sense of gratitude possible. Rorty notes:

> The gratitude in question is not the sort which the Christian has when he or she thanks Omnipotence for the stars and the trees. It is rather a matter of being grateful to the stars and trees themselves—to the beings that were disclosed by our linguistic practices.[110]

To appraise oneself as a gift rather than as a source for the bestowal of power, Rorty continues, enables you to "combine the humility of the scientific realist with the spiritual freedom of the romantic."[111] This, Rorty adds, is a combination Dewey hoped to achieve. This is also, I believe, a vision of a combination that Rorty shares: a vision that attempts to combine the philosopher's concern for 'truth' with the further attempt to combine concerns about freedom with concerns about justice. It is Rorty's attempt at the second type of combination which I shall discuss in the next chapter.

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[108] ibid., p. 309. Also see Rorty, 'Response to Frank B. Farrell', op. cit., p. 190.
[109] Timothy P. Jackson, 'The Disconsolation of Theology: Irony, Cruelty, and Putting Charity First', in *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 20, 1992, pp. 1-35.
[110] Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, op. cit., p. 48.
[111] ibid., p. 48.

6.4. Conclusion:

In this chapter I have summarised that aspect of Rorty's work which, according to David Hall, constitutes the work of Rorty the philosopher rather than Rorty the poet.[112] As a philosopher, Rorty is as much concerned about questions of truth as any of the most esteemed philosophers of history. I have argued that while he may have given them cause to hold the view that his pragmatic anti-representationalism reduces to radical subjectivism he regrets having done so. His use of a Davidsonian account of language, I have argued, makes the charge of radical subjectivism one that now no longer applies to his work. Neither, I wish to suggest, would it apply to religious non-realists if they were to be more consistent in adopting the type of pragmatic account of reality and truth outlined in this chapter.

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[112] Hall, *Richard Rorty: Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism*, op. cit., p. 235.

CHAPTER SEVEN.

RICHARD RORTY, PRAGMATISM AND THE SOCIO-POLITICAL GOOD.

7.1. Introduction:

In an autobiographical sketch Rorty recalls that he recognised from an early age that the point of life was to fight injustice while being free to pursue ones own little idiosyncrasies. He tells us that he hoped to hold reality and justice, freedom and solidarity in a single vision. Such a vision, he believed, needed firm foundations and these could be philosophical or religious. But, Rorty notes:

> ... a prideful inability to believe what I was saying when I recited the General Confession gradually led me to give up on my awkward attempt to get religion. So I fell back on my absolutist philosophy.[1]

Unfortunately, absolute or foundational philosophy also left Rorty disillusioned. The philosophers he read all seemed to build their systems on incommensurable first principles. This led him to accept that the foundations he sought belonged only to religion, "those lucky Christians for whom the love of God and the love of other human beings are inseparable."[2] He thus abandoned the attempt to provide foundations for his vision. However, I shall claim that the vision has never left him. In his philosophical works Rorty continues to balance concerns about truth with the further concern to balance justice with freedom in order to promote what he takes to be the interests of the pragmatic socio-political good. Having dispensed with the idea that Rorty's pragmatic anti-representationalism necessarily leads to radical subjectivism in the last chapter, in this chapter I shall argue that Rorty's pragmatism does not necessarily lead to dangerous political ideologies. Then, in chapter eight, I shall discuss his attitude to religion. His atheism, I shall argue, does not prevent a religious appropriation of his work.

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[1] Richard Rorty, 'Trotsky and the Wild Orchids', in *Common Knowledge* Vol. 1, 1992. p. 144.
[2] ibid., p. 147

7.2. Rorty's Anti-Representationalism and the Social Concerns of Philosophy:

As we have seen, Rorty allows that from the perspective of the epistemological thinker, the anti-representationalist looks both subjectivist and relativistic. However, such a perspective relies upon the very distinctions and realist intuitions which the anti-representationalist seeks to deny. Once these distinctions and intuitions are dropped, the charge of epistemological subjectivism and relativism no longer carries any weight. However, it might still be argued that Rorty is nevertheless a cultural relativist, if not an epistemological relativist and therefore unable to defend a conception of the social good. As Rorty notes, if being a relativist means accepting "that our only useful notions of 'true' and 'real' and 'good' are extrapolations from ... [our] ... practices and beliefs,"[3] then he is prepared to accept the term. However, this does not mean also accepting that any belief is as good as any other or that no socially defined criteria of truth can be used to judge one set of beliefs favourably against another set of beliefs.[4] Pragmatists, like Rorty, are accused of being relativists in this later sense because they no longer see any point in the attempt by philosophers to ground our theories of justice, science or religion etc. in something external to the practices of these disciplines. The version of cultural relativism that Rorty is concerned to refute is the one that says that it does not matter which practices in these disciplines 'win through'. Rorty does see a point in debating alternative political and scientific theories but denies that it makes sense to offer support for any of these alternatives by appealing to the worth of their philosophical grounding. What counts is the various practical advantages or disadvantages that these theories might have.[5] What 'philosophical' culture fails to

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[3] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980),p. 377.

[4] Richard Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), p. 166.

[5] A culture which still values philosophical grounding, however, will tend to see the pragmatist as denying something essential to these disciplines that enables us to get them right. But Rorty denies that "loyalty to our fellow-humans presupposes that there is something permanent and unhistorical which explains why we should continue to converse ...". ibid., p. 171. Such a presupposition is held in vain for the conversation of mankind is merely our conversation (ibid., p. 172) and thus the charge of relativism against the pragmatist is the charge of someone who wants to express disgust at the thought that we might lose philosophical culture and still manage our various practices.

see is that we can still have all the debates we want about politics, morality or religion without first giving them philosophical grounding. Such grounding makes no sense in a historicised culture that has given up the distinction between contingent cultural bias and necessary rational judgments.[6] When we see our current values as historical rather than as a property of 'nature' or 'reason', we will recognise that foundational philosophies which suggest that our practices can be grounded in something extra-historical say more about the idiosyncratic fantasies and private self-creations of the philosophers who propose such foundations than about the relevance of such foundations to our practices. We will also recognise, Rorty suggests, that the only difference between the Nazi and the liberal is that the liberal cares that they look good in the eyes of others.[7] Rorty writes:

> Whether such a narcissistic self-justification can avoid terrorism depends
> on whether the notion of persuasion rather than force still makes sense

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[6] Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume One*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 207-208. Rorty writes:

> ... we postmodernist bourgeois liberals no longer tag our central beliefs and desires as 'necessary' or 'natural' and our peripheral ones as 'contingent' or 'cultural'. This is partly because the anthropologists, novelists and historians have done such a good job of exhibiting the contingency of various putative necessities. In part it is because philosophers like Quine, Wittgenstein and Derrida have made us wary of the very idea of a necessary-contingent distinction.

ibid., p. 208.

[7] Rorty argues that we cannot appeal to some universal principle of human justice as a defence against contextualised expressions of human wickedness such as Nazism - justice too is de-divinised. The only defence we have is the skill of the liberal to persuade the world to adopt some of the habits of a liberal vocabulary. For Rorty, "the absence of . . . a neutral tribunal, to render judgement on us and the Nazis does not imply that there is no moral truth of the matter." Richard Rorty, 'Putnam and the Relativist Menace', in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 90, 1993, pp. 453. n. 18. His ethnocentric liberalism provides this moral 'truth'. he writes:

> Part of the force of the Darwinian picture I am suggesting is that the spirit of Sartre's famous remark about a Nazi victory was right, though the letter is a bit off. Sartre said:
>> ... after my death ... Fascism [may win out] ... if so Fascism will then be the truth of man, and so much the worse for us.
> Sartre should not have said that Fascism will be "the truth of man." There is no such thing. What he should have said is that the truth (about certain very important matters) might be forgotten, become invisible, get lost - and so much the worse for *us*. "Us" here does not mean "us humans" (for Nazis are humans too). It means something like "us tolerant wet liberals".

ibid., p.453. The quotation from Sartre is found in J-P. Sartre, 'Existentialism is a Humanism', in W. Kaufman (ed.), *Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, (New York: New American Library, 1975), p.358. My marks of omission.

after we renounce the idea of human nature and the search for transcultural and ahistorical criteria of justification.[8]

Rorty believes that it can, but that this will mean allowing that what we do in philosophical culture will be irrelevant to the type of things we do in politics, for persuasion means showing others the practical benefits or otherwise of living in a 'postmodernist bourgeois liberal democracy' and not outlining philosophical foundations in its defence or as its critique.[9] The 'rights' we possess are not achieved by mastering antecedently existing philosophical principles but are earned as a matter of social effort and historical luck. Politics comes first and philosophy is the attempt to justify to ourselves the type of society we have developed. "The question of whether justifiability to the community with which we identify entails truth," Rorty notes, "is simply irrelevant."[10] We can congratulate ourselves in the democratic first world for having developed the type of liberal practices we have, but we would be mistaken if we thought that our achievement was the result of having discovered and exploited certain truths about the human condition or reasoned political discourse. Thus in essays such as 'The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy' and 'Post-Modernist Bourgeois Liberalism', written in the early 1980s, Rorty hoped to show how postmodernist bourgeois liberalism "might convince our society that loyalty to itself is morality enough."[11] This unflinching ethnocentric[12] pragmatism has aroused a good deal of criticism. As Michael Roth notes:

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[8] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*. op. cit., p. 214.

[9] Rorty quotes John Rawls with approval. Rawls writes:

> ... what justifies a conception of justice is not its being true to an order antecedent to and given to us, but its congruence with our deeper understanding and aspirations, and our realization that, *given our history and the traditions embedded in our public life*, it is the most reasonable doctrine *for us*.

John Rawls, 'Kantian Constructivism', quoted in Rorty, ibid., p. 185 (Rorty's italics).

[10] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, op. cit., p. 177.

[11] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, op. cit., p. 199.

[12] In explaining what he means by the term 'ethnocentric' Rorty confessed to having been somewhat ambiguous. He does not mean the term to refer to some existential notion of human finitude but rather simply to a particular *ethnos*—a socio-political culture. Rorty wants to identify with the ethnos of western liberalism; his critics may not. So Rorty notes:

> So when I say ethnocentric things like 'our culture' or 'we liberals,' their reaction is 'who, we?' I, however, find it hard to see them as outsiders to this culture: they look to me like people playing a role—an important role—within it. I do not see them as having developed an alternative culture, nor even as having envisaged one. I see the culture of

... on the one hand Rorty offended traditionalists by emphasizing the historical specificity of what some had thought to be eternal problems or questions, while on the other hand he enraged radicals by defending contemporary western values and institutions after having redescribed them as foundationless.[13]

However, Rorty has shown himself willing to change his position in response to criticism. In the next two sections I shall consider two shifts in Rorty's postion as he attempts to develop a pragmatic account of the socio-political good.

7.3. Rorty's Pragmatism and the Severed Vocabularies of Public Solidarity and Private Self-Creation:

As we have seen, Rorty hives off questions about truth in terms of representational epistemology from questions about the pragmatic or social justification of our beliefs. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, this pragmatic context redescribed the subject-object distinction as a distinction between normal or systematic discourse and abnormal edifying discourse and the balance between them was weighed out on the scales of hermeneutics. By the time of writing the introduction to *Consequences of Pragmatism* two years later, Rorty had largely dropped this particular term.[14] Instead, the distinction between epistemology and hermeneutics was now made between upper case 'P' 'Philosophy' and lower case 'p' 'philosophy'. While proponents of 'Philosophy' presuppose that we can "believe more truths, or do more good or be more rational by knowing more about Truth or Goodness or

[13] Michael S. Roth, Review of 'Contingency, Irony and Solidarity', in *History and Theory*, Vol. 29, 1990, p. 341.

[14] One reason why Rorty drops this term is that it can become a surrogate of epistemology when, after foundationalism, it is interpreted as a *narrative* theory of universality. This is the position taken by Gary B. Madison, 'Coping with Nietzsche's Legacy: Rorty, Derrida, Gadamer', in *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 36, 1992, pp. 3-19. Indeed, other critics of Rorty see his espousal of hermeneutics as making this claim to universality. See for example Kate Soper, 'Smooth But Fuzzy', in *Radical Philosophy*, Vol. 60, 1992, pp. 36-39. Also see, Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), pp. 151-166.: and Donald Rothberg, 'Gadamer, Rorty, Hermeneutics and Truth: A Response to Warnke', in *Inquiry*, Vol. 29, 1986, pp. 355-361. For Rorty, hermeneutics may now be too connected with representational presupposition to be a useful label to describe his project.

Rationality ..."[15], proponents of philosophy want to drop this presupposition common to Platonism and positivism and instead, in Davidsonian fashion, see 'truth' as "the name of a property which all true statements share."[16] The question of whether this claim about the philosophical enterprise is itself true, is a question for philosophy rather than 'Philosophy'. That is, it is a question about "whether a post-Philosophical culture is a good thing to try for[:]"[17] about the type of benefits it might bring, the 'Philosophical' puzzles it helps us to discard and the type of community it helps us to promote.[18] The philosopher puts 'Philosophy' aside, as the hermeneutic thinker puts epistemology aside, in order to free us from the view that something antecedent to the contingencies of human life, like God, Science, Rationality or Truth, might step in and save us.[19] Once 'Philosophy' is discarded, Rorty can define philosophy as "an attempt to see how things, in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together ... ."[20] Like the hermeneutic thinker, Rorty's philosopher wants to achieve balance and coherence between the things philosophers do. He wants to keep a pragmatic tolerance going between those philosophers like Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida, who fall upon the literary side of C.P. Snow's division of culture, and those philosophers like Kripke, Russell and Kuhn who fall on the scientific side.[21] He wants to balance John Rawls' quest for human solidarity through democratic institutions with Foucault's critique of the power relations that distort that quest. This is the type of balance that Dewey wanted to achieved.[22] For Rorty, Dewey is the paradigm philosopher who, by

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[15] Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, op. cit., p. xv.

[16] ibid., p. xiii.

[17] ibid., p. xliii.

[18] This is how Rorty avoids the type of criticism that suggests that his own account of truth must either itself be true in the sense required by the correspondence theory or useless. For an example of this type of criticism see John O. Nelson, 'Pragmatism According to Rorty: A Disaster Area', in *Journal of Philosophical Research*, Vol. 20, 1995.

[19] Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, op. cit., p. 208.

[20] ibid., p. xiv.

[21] ibid., p. 229.

[22] Rorty writes:

> If, with Dewey, one sees vocabularies as instruments for coping with things rather than representations of their intrinsic natures, then one will not think that there is an intrinsic

replacing questions of copying like 'have we got this right?' with questions of coping like 'what will happen if we try this?', was able to continue to use words like 'truth', 'rationality', 'progress', 'freedom', 'democracy', and 'God' without presupposing a vocabulary about correspondence to antecedent reality.[23] When the representational dualisms between subject and object, value and fact lose their force, there is no longer any reason, Rorty writes, "to keep either the 'aesthetic' or the 'religious' apart from the 'scientific' or the 'empirical'".[24] The philosopher follows Dewey in wanting a holistic account of inquiry in which the distinction between disciplines is dropped in favour of a general conversation that employs human intelligence in solving various problems.[25]

In this way the philosopher, the Deweyan pragmatist, can be seen as holding together in a single vision the contingency of all our starting points with a concern to create human solidarity. To lose the hope of grounding human solidarity in something extra-historical is to recognise that human solidarity only comes from our conversation with our fellow-humans. This recognition, Rorty argues, heightens "our identification with our community" because it reminds us that our community is "*ours* rather than *nature's*".[26] It allows us to regard bourgeois liberalism as "the best example of ... solidarity we have yet achieved and Deweyan pragmatism the best articulation of it,"[27]

However, if the decline of 'Philosophy' means that we can no longer draw a distinction between *making* and *criticising* our community independently of the

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connection, nor an intrinsic *lack* of connect between ... being able to predict and control people ... and being able to sympathize and associate with them.
ibid., p. 198.
[23] ibid., pp. 86, 163, 206.
[24] ibid., p. 46.
[25] ibid., p. 51.
[26] last three quotes, ibid., p. 166.
[27] ibid., p. 207. Elsewhere Rorty writes:
> Followers of Dewey like myself would like to praise parliamentary democracy and the welfare state as very good things, but only on the basis of invidious comparisons with suggested concrete alternatives, not on the basis of claims that these institutions are truer to human nature, or more rational, or in better accord with the universal moral law, than feudalism or totalitarianism.

Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, op. cit., p. 211.

critical practices that our community has developed through its liberal democratic institutions, and if our contingent practices which shape the contours of these institutions are practice in which we all must share if we are not to be considered as crazy, are we not simply taking Deweyan pragmatism into an apology for the status quo and laissez-faire conservative politics? This was the thrust of Richard Bernstein's 1986 critique of Rorty's position.[28] It is a critique which Rorty took with some seriousness,[29] and which led him again to rethink his attempt to hold in a single vision the quest for human solidarity and private edifying discourse. The latter seeks private perfection and is useful for dreaming up utopian visions of a human future but is not much use to the quest for human solidarity.[30] The former, seeks principles of social agreement but is not very good at creative social innovation.

The purveyors of private perfection have no respect for the type of universal criteria that purveyors of human solidarity require and that Bernstein castigated Rorty for not offering. Rorty responds to Bernstein's castigation by asserting that the purveyors of private perfection are largely correct in pointing to the non-existence of such universal criteria but that their private self-creations should have no public consequences anyway. For Rorty, one's self-creation is of no public concern. Some philosophers and novelists (Mill, Dewey, Rawls, Habermas, Zola, Dickens, Orwell) are useful to political practice; others are more useful in providing intellectuals with a better self-image and are irrelevant to political liberation (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Wittgenstein, Woolf, Proust, Nabokov).[31]

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[28] Richard Bernstein, 'One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward: Rorty on Liberal Democracy and Philosophy', in his *The New Constellation*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 230-257. How can we decide between benign and pernicious political experiments if there are no criteria by which to judge them independent of our own ethnocentric practices? With such criteria, Bernstein argues, Rorty's tolerance "can lead to the worst forms of intolerance". ibid., p. 243. This criticism is also made against Rorty by Jonathan Culler who sees in Rorty's position a pragmatic complacency 'appropriate to the Age of Reagan". Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign*, quoted in Richard Rorty, 'Feminism and Pragmatism', in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Vol. 30, 1991, p. 254 no. 23.

[29] Richard Rorty, 'Thugs and Theorists: A Reply to Bernstein', in *Political Theory*, Vol. 15, 1987, pp. 564-580.

[30] ibid., p. 571.

[31] ibid., p. 572.

Thus, partly as a result of Bernstein's critique, in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Rorty no longer thought it possible to combine the liberal imagination of historicists like Habermas with the private self-creation of historicists like Foucault.[32] Whereas historicists with a public concern seek stable structures upon which to base human solidarity, historicists of private perfection effectively undermine all such structures. While historicists with a public concern often possess their social hope for human solidarity by appealing to some universal feature common to 'humanity', historicists of private perfection are particularists, emphasising the historical contingency and particularly of language and our inability to step outside of it. Whereas historicists with a public concern wish to place human activity in a trans-contextual vocabulary which belongs to everyone in general and no one in particular, historicists who promote private perfection wish to recontextualise such activity in a vocabulary which they explicitly recognise as their own. Whereas the historicists with a public concern regard the historicists of private perfection as "infected with irrationalism and aestheticism,"[33] the latter are suspicious of the socialising tendencies of the former. Rorty writes, "the vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange."[34] We can have both historicist vocabularies, Rorty argues, if we hold them separate from each other. Then, Rorty suggests:

> [we will see]... the aim of a just and free society as letting its citizens be as privatistic, 'irrationalist', and aestheticist as they please so long as they do it on their own time - causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by those less advantaged.[35]

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[32] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. xiii-xiv. In a 1980 essay Rorty admitted to having no arguments that would allow him to combine self-creation with solidarity but suggested that a discussion of combining private fulfilment with public morality might possibly furnish such arguments. In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* Rorty rejects this possibility.

[33] ibid., p.xiv.

[34] ibid., p.xiv.

[35] ibid., p.xiv.

A space should exist in the liberal imagination for ironic and poetic self-creation, but the freedom to be idiosyncratic should not disrupt confidence in the solidarity and justice that liberal democracies create. Human solidarity, however, should not rest simply in the practices of the democratic institutions themselves for this, Rorty admits, risks maintaining the status quo. Nor should it rely upon some return to 'Philosophy'. Instead we should appeal to sentimentality. By appealing to sentiment, Rorty hopes to create an ethnocentric solidarity around the liberal susceptibility to extend its sense of 'we' to include a lot more of 'them' when 'them' are seen as our fellow sufferers rather than as sharing some common trans-historical universal antecedent nature.[36] Taking up Judith Shklar's description of liberals "as people for whom ... cruelty is the worst thing they do,"[37] Rorty is able to demarcate private from public vocabularies. He writes:

> ... our responsibilities to others constitute *only* the public side of our lives, a side which competes with our private affections and our private attempts at self-creation ... .[38]

The liberal fear of being cruel and causing humiliation is, according to Rorty, the criterion by which we may assert a liberal, rather than some other form of human solidarity.[39] The intellectual's contribution to moral progress, according to Rorty, is to provide "detailed descriptions of particular varieties of pain and humiliation (in e.g. novels or ethnographies), rather than philosophical or religious treatises."[40] Conscious of Whitehead's definition of religion Rorty notes that such treatises help "us decide what to do with our aloneness."[41] Suitably privatised, they help us create an identity for ourselves, but they are not much use in public debate.

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[36] Richard Rorty, 'Trotsky and the Wild Orchids', op. cit., p. 148.

[37] Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, quoted in Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, op. cit., p. xv.

[38] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, op. cit., p. 194.

[39] ibid., Ch. 4. Rather than seeing the vocabulary of human solidarity as having its source in some universal idea of human nature, Rorty turns to social dreamers: the visionaries and the novelists. These people inspire piecemeal reform in areas where their local society currently appears cruel without appealing to some objective standard. Rorty, 'Thugs and Theorists', op. cit., p. 578, no. 24.

[40] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, op. cit., p. 192.

[41] Rorty, 'Thugs and Theorists'; op. cit., pp. 572, 578 no. 24. Also see Richard Rorty, 'Religion As a Conversation Stopper', in *Common Knowledge*, Vol. 3, 1994, pp. 1-6.

However, Jennifer Herdt has noted that the essays which constitute *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* reveal some degree of tension between this new position on social philosophy and Rorty's earlier position, a tension that may result from the fact that these essays were written around, or just after, Bernstein's 1986 challenge. Nevertheless, the last chapter 'Solidarity', written especially for the book, clearly reveals the contours of Rorty's new position.[42] He concludes *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* as follows:

> ... [T]o distinguish public from private questions, questions about pain from questions about the point of human life, the domain of the liberal from the domain of the ironist ... makes it possible for a single person to be both.[43]

Rorty again achieves an integration of sorts and rescues some degree of balance. This time it is a balance more finely weighed out in the figure of the liberal ironist. The liberal ironist has the type of social project Rorty admires in the work of Habermas while supplementing it with the idiosyncratic need for private self-creation Rorty admires in Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida. The latter undermines the former's attempts at universal solidarity and transcendence by doing justice to the historical contingency of language. The former's quest helps make the world more just.[44] Thus, Rorty disagrees with both "Foucault's attempt to be an ironist without being a liberal [and] ... Habermas' attempt to be a liberal without being an ironist."[45] In this way Rorty hopes to split the difference between liberals and ironists. For Rorty, a liberal culture needs its ironists in order for it to continue to proliferate, but they are of little relevance for public action. Rorty writes:

> For my private purposes, I may redescribe you and everybody else in terms which have nothing to do with my attitude toward your actual or possible suffering. My private purpose, and the part of my final

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[42] Jennifer Herdt, 'Cruelty, Liberalism and the Quarantine of Irony: Rorty and the Disjunction Between Public and Private', in *Soundings*, Vol. 75, 1992, pp. 79-95.
[43] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, op. cit., p. 198.
[44] ibid., p. 67.
[45] ibid., p. 65.

vocabulary which is not relevant to my public action, are none of your business. But as I am a liberal, the part of my final vocabulary which is relevant to such actions requires me to become aware of all the various ways in which other human beings whom I might act upon can be humiliated.[46]

The use here of terms like 'redescribe' and 'final vocabulary' draws attention to Rorty's account of the contingency of language discussed in the last chapter When we abandon representationalism and assert in its place that "human beings make truths by making languages in which to frame sentences,"[47] we are not asserting a version of linguistic idealism, but rather the view that our beliefs about the world and our desires for ourselves are given to us within a network of human linguistic interactions.[48] Then, Rorty asserts:

> We should restrict ourselves to questions like 'does our use of these words get in the way of our use of those other words?[49]

When we have this view of language, terms like 're-description' and 'recontextualisation' are used to account for our skills at weaving and reweaving the network of linguistic interactions which constitute our beliefs and desires. This skill enables us to get certain words 'out of the way' of other words and thereby to create a new 'final vocabulary' that helps achieve more effectively the things we hope to do. This is the reason why a liberal society needs its private ironists like Foucault and Derrida. Rorty writes:

> For us ironists, nothing can serve as a criticism of a final vocabulary save another such vocabulary; there is no answer to a re-description save a re-re-redescription. ... Ironists are afraid that they will get stuck in the vocabulary in which they were brought up ... so they (...) read literary critics, and take them as moral advisers, simply because such critics have an exceptionally large range of acquaintance. ... They have read more books and are thus in a better position not to get trapped in the vocabulary of any single book.[50]

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[46] ibid., pp. 91-92.
[47] ibid., p. 9.
[48] ibid., pp. 10-11.
[49] ibid., p. 12.
[50] ibid., pp.80-81.

Wanting to extend her own vocabulary, the liberal ironist tries to emulate the literary critic by extending her acquaintance "to theology, philosophy, social theory, reformist political programs, and revolutionary manifestos. In short, ... extending it to every book likely to provide candidates for a person's final vocabulary."[51] Rorty's ethnocentricism may be open to criticism but he recognises and welcomes this as part of a dynamic openness to other vocabularies. Such openness prevents our current practices from dominating the ongoing process of conversation. It thereby helps to prevent that sort of cruelty which results from failing to be aware of other people's final vocabulary.

7.4. Rorty's Pragmatism and the Reconsideration of the Fracture of Public and Private Vocabularies:

An openness to criticism is manifest in Rorty's more recent work. In particular, he has responded to those who doubt both the probity and the practical possibility of keeping one's private self-creation separate from one's public concerns, and to those who doubt the effectiveness of the cruelty criterion, given the requirement of irony, to defend liberalism. For example, Nancy Fraser argues that Rorty's distinction effectively denies to radical thought any political implications. Being placed in the private realm of self-creation, the ideas of Heidegger and Foucault are kept safely away from any challenge that they might offer to liberal democratic institutions.[52] Fraser writes:

> There is no place in Rorty's framework for *political* motivations for the invention of new idioms, no place for idioms invented to overcome the enforced silencing or muting of disadvantaged social groups. (...) Finally, there is no place for *nonliberal* interpretations of social needs and collective concerns, hence, no place for, say, socialist-feminist politics. [53]

In making the public-private distinction, Bernstein argues, Rorty seems more concerned with the cruelties that might be inflicted by intellectual ironists than the

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[51] ibid., p.81.
[52] Nancy Fraser, 'Solidarity or Singularity?: Richard Rorty Between Romanticism and Technocracy', in Alan Malachowski, *Reading Rorty*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 311-312.
[53] ibid., p. 316.

cruelties inflicted by liberal society on, say, the unemployed or the homeless. By assuming that the public-private split is enough to guarantee both justice and freedom, Rorty leaves no room either for social facticity or tragedy.[54] In this sense, according to Guignon and Hiley, Rorty appears as an aloof observer of culture and thus apparently willing, as an ironist, to detach himself from cultural commitments. The type of ironic culture Rorty hopes for, they argue, would be a cynical culture in which moral commitments mean nothing and in which disorders of the self are exacerbated for the sake of creating a social enclave from which the leisured elite can contemplate their ironic doubts. It would be a culture without justice because it would be a culture without *reasons* not to be cruel.[55] Timothy Cleveland and Michael Roth share Bernstein's concern that by denying argumentative force to the historicised decision to be liberal there is nothing to stop Rorty's irony from turning into Mussolini's cynicism. Equally, Bernstein and Roth question whether the novel is able to perform the role in social criticism that Rorty attributes to it. Why should a society be receptive to one novel rather than another?[56] For Cleveland, the issue does not just revolve around the question of how much contingency an ironist can embrace in order to maintain solidarity, but also what kind of solidarity would result. He notes that Rorty's emphasis upon historical contingency means that the realisation of a liberal society becomes "a matter of weapons or luck, not a matter of having truth on your side, or having detected 'the movement of history'."[57] But, Cleveland asks, does this not concede too much to the fascist? He writes:

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[54] Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, op. cit., pp. 258-291 esp. p. 287.

[55] Charles B. Guignon and David R. Hiley, 'Biting the Bullet: Rorty on Private and Public Morality', in Alan Malachowski, *Reading Rorty*, op. cit., pp. 339-364. Similar points are made by Roy Bhaskar, 'Rorty, Realism and the Idea of Freedom' in the same volume, pp. 198-232. However, Guignon and Hiley do find Rorty's intentions admirable if not the consequences that follow. They write:

> What is most admirable about Rorty, we feel, is the courage, integrity and clear-sightedness with which he bites the bullet and draws out the inevitable consequences of anti-foundationalism for moral and social thought. He is willing to stand unflinchingly for the ideals of liberal society while both undercutting their traditional supports and acknowledging that there is a price to be paid.

ibid., pp. 343-344.

[56] Roth, 'Review of *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*', op. cit., pp. 354-357.

[57] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, op. cit., p. 91.

> The liberal ironist cannot help but play into the hands of the non-liberal because the ironist philosophy leaves no room for liberal distinctions that would separate the methods of the liberal ironist from those of the fascist and other non-liberals.[58]

In the end, Rorty lacks any argumentative resources in favour of liberalism because his ironism does not allow for any.[59]

This view is shared by Norman Geras. For Geras, to talk of our shared ability to experience pain and humiliation is to define human nature so narrowly that it gives some credibility to Rorty's suggestion that without our socialisation by language and history we would be unrecognisable to ourselves, but it does nothing to support the quest for human solidarity. What Rorty sees as defining a quality that motivated those who rescued the Jews from the Nazis, Geras sees as preparing the type of cynical approach to human nature that was shared by those who persecuted the Jews. However, Geras also argues that Rorty has a rhetorical need to affirm a universal human nature. That is, Rorty affirms some universal traits—those that centre on human socialisation—even if only to employ them against metaphysical notions of a fixed a-historical universal human nature. In so doing Rorty employs the very traits that make talk of a universal human nature interesting while simultaneously denying such talk.[60]

Rorty's response to these criticisms is to agree that the position his critics attack is indefensible, but to claim that they are not positions he ever held. Accepting historicism does not mean refraining from political commitments nor does it mean refusing to defend liberal against fascist political alternatives.[61] What it does mean is that such defence can no longer be made by appeal to the sort of antecedent, extra-historical conditions or principles that those with realist intuitions desire. In his recent article 'Feminism and Pragmatism', Rorty has suggested that granting that

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[58] Timothy Cleveland, 'The Irony of Contingency and Solidarity', in *Philosophy*, Vol. 70, 1995, p. 240.

[59] Jay Rosenberg, 'Raiders of the Lost Distinction: Richard Rorty and the Search for the Last Dichotomy', in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 53, 1993, pp. 195-214.

[60] Norman Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind: The Ungroundable Liberalism of Richard Rorty*, (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 47-70.

[61] Rorty, 'Trotsky and the Wild Orchids', op. cit., pp. 149-150.

our contingent historical situation means that there are no extra-practical or extra-ethnocentric way of justifying to ourselves the feminist case rather than the Nazi case, does not mean that we are unable to hope that the dreams of the former group rather than those of the latter can become established social facts.[62]

Nevertheless, partly as a result of these criticisms and partly to make his own position clear, Rorty has moved beyond his attempted demarcation of public and private concerns. In a number of recent essays Rorty has suggested ways in which public and private concerns interpenetrate. One such is the supplementation of his novelistic hope (for democracy, equality and freedom), which Rorty articulates in essays like 'Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens',[63] with prophecy and political campaigns. In 'Feminism and Pragmatism', Rorty argues that the feminist social hope will not succeed because it appeals to something called 'reality' which transcends our social practices telling women that 'God' or 'nature' or 'reason' has always recognised them as the unjustly oppressed half of humanity and thus on their side in their struggle for liberation. Rather, it will succeed if it can do "the same sort of things as the early Christians, the early socialists ... and the Nazis did: trying to articulate hitherto undreamt-of possibilities by putting new linguistic and other practices into play and enacting new social constructs."[64] These groups succeeded because, by force or persuasion, they managed to suggest to a larger group of people that they would be crazy not to share their dream.

For Rorty, the difference between the Nazi and the liberal is also the difference between the radical and the reformist and between the realist and the pragmatist.[65]

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[62] Rorty, 'Feminism and Pragmatism', op. cit., and *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, op. cit., pp. 90-95, 111 no. 11.

[63] Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others : Philosophical Papers Volume Two*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 66-82.

[64] Rorty, 'Feminism and Pragmatism', op. cit., p. 236.

[65] Rorty's contrast between the liberal and the radical at this point may at first appear to undermine the argument made earlier in the thesis that pointed to the need for radical rather than liberal perspectives in theology. However, there is an important Deweyan distinction to be made here in terms of the relation of ideal to actual. This distinction allows one, as a utopian prophet, to be as radical as one can be in dreaming up new and better ways of doing the things that humans want to do as long as a practical reformer who wants to implement the prophet's vision takes into account the actual

Whereas the liberal and the pragmatist rely upon persuasion alone, the Nazi, the radical and the realist want something more powerful on their side that would help enable people to consider themselves crazy not to follow the vision they offer. As Glyn Daly makes clear in his critique of Rorty, Rorty comes off second-best compared with the ideas of the anti-foundationalist neo-Marxists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe because while the latter pair, like Rorty, disclaim realist intuitions, their radicalism makes them prepared to argue that democratic citizenship requires for its defence an ontology of power and violence. In contrast to Rorty's liberalism, Daly notes:

> ... the post-Marxist's emphasis on the constitutive and ineradicable nature of power and antagonisms is one which affirms the centrality of authorial and discursive violence as the very condition for meeting this [the democratic] challenge.[66]

Daly sees Rorty as offering merely the freedom to dream not the ability to act. He believes that the type of unmasking of power relations that neo-Marxists see themselves as good at, can provide some theoretical weapons in the fight for democracy. Rorty, on the other hand, is concerned that with such a position we would find it difficult not to "avoid having these weapons turn in our hands and bash all the genial tolerance out of our own heads."[67]

Concerned with breaking the chain of patriarchal power and violence, Rorty believes the feminist is better off with reformist pragmatism than with the radical and the realist. Rorty notes:

> Radicals think that there is a basic mistake being made, a mistake deep down at the roots. They think that deep thinking is required to get down to this deep level, and that only there, when all the superstructural appearances have been undercut, can things be seen as they really are. Utopians, however, do not think in terms of mistakes or of depth. They abandon the contrast between superficial appearance and deep reality in

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conditions in which such reform has to take place, including the need to avoid the potential humiliation that might be caused to those who do not share a particular prophet's vision.

[66] Glyn Daly, 'Post-Metaphysical Culture and Politics: Richard Rorty and Laclau and Mouffe', in *Economy and Society*, Vol. 23, 1994, p. 193.

[67] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, op. cit., p. 43.

favor of the contrast between a painful present and a possibly less painful, dimly-seen, future. Pragmatists cannot be radicals, in this sense, but they can be utopians. They do not see philosophy as providing instruments for radical surgery, or microscopes which make precise diagnosis possible. Philosophy's function is rather to clear the road for prophets and poets, to make intellectual life a bit simpler and safer for those who have visions of new communities.[68]

The realist wants a confrontation between our moral ideas and the real seams of the universe; the pragmatist aims at "reweaving and enlarging a fabric which is not intended to be congruent with an antecedent reality."[69] The pragmatist does not need something like a 'critique of ideology' before engaging in reformist practices. Rather, such practices will aim at the melioration of current social conditions through imagined sketches of better alternative conditions.[70] The pragmatist sees no antecedent reality or depth to human nature, the discovery of which empowers the critique of existing practices. Such practices should not be viewed as distortions from an original purity as if we might then attempt, as some post-modernists do, to unmask the rhetoric of oppression.[71] In the case of a society viewed as suffering from patriarchal ills the pragmatist will not require some prior general theory of male oppression nor some accurate a-historical representation of women's experience. Rather, the pragmatist will see the melioration of patriarchal ills as a matter of women "creating such an experience by creating a language, a tradition and an identity."[72] Pragmatism helps feminism not by providing unshakeable foundations but by clearing the road of representational and realist ideology,

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[68] Rorty, 'Feminism and Pragmatism', op. cit., pp. 239-240.

[69] ibid., p. 252.

[70] Richard Rorty, 'The Intellectuals at the End of Socialism', in *The Yale Review*, Vol. 80, 1992, pp. 1-16 esp. pp. 5-6.

[71] Richard Rorty, 'Feminism, Ideology and Deconstruction: A Pragmatist View', in *Hypatia*, Vol. 8, 1993, pp. 96-103; and 'Feminism and Pragmatism', op. cit., p. 234. Rorty notes:
> Pragmatism ... offers all the dialectical advantages of postmodernism while avoiding the self-contradictory postmodernist rhetoric of unmasking.
ibid., p. 237.

[72] Rorty, 'Feminism and Pragmatism', op. cit., p. 250. Also see *Essays On Heidegger And Others*, op. cit., pp. 119-128. Here Rorty notes:
> ... the realm of possibility expands whenever somebody thinks up a new vocabulary, and thereby discloses (or invents ...) a new set of possible worlds.
ibid., p. 127.

enabling feminists to create the moral space they require for the deliberation of the type of questions about human identity which patriarchal culture finds bizarre.[73] Within such a space, "what looked like nature begin[s] to look like culture."[74] The language of the oppressor, which the oppressed imbibe so that they look crazy even to themselves to view themselves as oppressed, is broken by the suggestion of an alternative language in which the oppressed can express their own aspirations.[75] Until and unless such real or imaginative alternatives emerge, Rorty argues, women will not see themselves as oppressed.[76]

The pragmatist thus advises the feminist to "[d]rop the appeal to neutral criteria ... [and instead] ... make invidious comparisons between the actual present and a possible, if inchoate, future." In this way, Rorty continues:

> ... pragmatism allows for the possibility of expanding logical space, and thereby for an appeal to courage and imagination rather than to putatively neutral criteria.[77]

From the logical space pragmatism makes available private utopian dreams can become relevant to public social concerns if small communities can be formed around such utopian hopes. By seeing themselves as campaigners rather than founders of a new movement, the members of these communities may succeed, like "the early Christians meeting in the catacombs,"[78] in getting their private self-creation accepted as part of normal social discourse. Achieving such acceptance is a matter of imagination and of courage, of the sympathy it can engender and the prophetic vision it offers to the community at large.[79] The only test of such

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[73] Rorty, 'Feminism and Pragmatism', op. cit., pp. 234-235, 240.

[74] ibid., p. 232.

[75] ibid., p. 239. Emphasising the ideal in Dewey's active relation of ideal with actual, Rorty notes: "Anti-foundationalists ... want to substitute our social constructs for theirs." They do so by pretending that the sort of community they want to see is already in existence and, with luck, such community will be created *ex nihilo*. Richard Rorty, 'What Can You Expect From Anti-Foundationalist Philosophers?: A Reply to Lynn Baker', in *Virginia Law Review*, Vol. 78, 1992, p. 726.

[76] Rorty, 'Feminism and Pragmatism', op. cit., p. 244.

[77] Both quotes from Rorty, 'Feminism and Pragmatism', op. cit., p. 242.

[78] ibid., p. 242.

[79] ibid., p. 247. Rorty notes that:
> Good prophets say that if we all got together and did such and such, we would probably like the results. They paint pictures of what this brighter future would look like, and

alternative vocabularies will be how they work when they are put into practice.[80] If the feminist vision of a new human community in which gender difference is no longer an issue eventually materialises, it will not be because feminists have revealed something about human nature which previously we failed to recognise but because they will have succeeded in making their new language a part of the language we all share.[81] That is, they will have succeeded in crossing the public-private divide. As new discourses, born from private utopian hopes, can become common public possessions, so what were once common public possessions can return back into the private sphere and eventually die out. Rorty notes:

> ... What people cannot say in public becomes, eventually, what they cannot say even in private, and then, still later, what they cannot even believe in their hearts.[82]

Rather than undermining the public-private distinction, as Glyn Daly suggests, Rorty's new position can be seen as a further, more subtle, articulation of it. As William Buscemi argues, Rorty's distinction can be seen as part of a pragmatic strategy by which he engages in conversation those most likely to reject his position in order to debate his own prophetic vision of a 'poetised politics'.[83] If this view is accepted then, rather than regarding Rorty's distinction as Daly does, as an attempt to present a covert philosophical essentialism centred upon the irreducibility of liberal freedom, we might see the distinction in Buscemi's terms as the attempt by Rorty to employ the same prophetic strategy that he recommends to feminists. His

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write scenarios about how it might be brought about. When they've finished doing that, they have nothing more to offer, except to say "Let's try it!" ... This kind of prophet does not think that her views have 'legitimacy' or 'authority'.
The bad prophet claims to speak in the name of such authority. Rorty, 'What Can You Expect From Anti-Foundationalist Philosophers?', op. cit., p. 719.

[80] Richard Rorty, 'Why Can't a Man Be More Like a Woman, And Other Problems In Moral Philosophy', in *London Review of Books*, 24th February 1994, pp. 5-6; 'Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality', in *The Yale Review*, Vol. 81, 1993, p. 15; 'What Can You Expect From Anti-Foundationalist Philosophers?', op. cit., p. 719.

[81] Rorty, 'Feminism and Pragmatism', op. cit., p. 249.

[82] Rorty, 'What Can You Expect From Anti-Foundationalist Philosophers?', op. cit., p. 726.

[83] Glyn Daly, 'Post-Metaphysical Culture and Politics: Richard Rorty and Laclau and Mouffe', op. cit., p. 198, no. 17. William Buscemi, 'The Ironic Politics of Richard Rorty', in *Review of Politics*, Vol. 55, 1993, p. 153.

work might then be seen as offering proposals for Deweyan reconstruction rather than for political stasis. Buscemi concludes:

> [I]t can be argued that Rorty is to the left of those who charge him with conservatism. ... His seemingly conservative embrace of contemporary institutions is seen, upon analysis, to be not an embrace but a strategy for total transformation of those institutions.[84]

While Rorty's liberalism allows for piecemeal reform, such reform is inspired by prophetic vision and utopian desire for a better human society which can be as radical as any political philosophy ever was.

In Rorty's articles, published in the Nineteen-Nineties, the public and private infiltrate each other to such an extent that the distinction becomes heuristic rather than a strict demarcation of responsibilities. To some degree this view is now accepted by both Bernstein and Fraser. According to Fraser, Rorty correctly sees in feminism "far-reaching redescriptions of social life ... yet ... simultaneously tied to the collective political enterprise of overcoming oppression ..." and thus, she continues, "the effort to think about feminism has had a major impact on the structure of Rorty's thought," exploding his earlier distinctions.[85] However, Fraser still maintains some reservations about Rorty's new position because the move she sees him making from irony to prophesy does not necessarily imply a further move to politics, or rather, the type of collective political agreement and political theory that Fraser hopes might defend feminist aspirations. For her, feminism needs to be seen as a mass democratic movement rather than a club for prophets. Fraser's reservations have been criticised by J.M. Fritzman. Fritzman agrees that in 'Feminism and Pragmatism', Rorty has shown how the public and private interact and how existing practices can be changed by employing the distinction as a

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[84] William Buscemi, 'The Ironic Politics of Richard Rorty', ibid., p. 157. This view is also found in David L. Hall, *Richard Rorty: Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism,* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), pp. 190-196. According to Hall, Rorty would do well to be less bashful about his own prophetic strategies.

[85] Nancy Fraser, 'From Irony To Prophecy To Politics: A Response To Richard Rorty', in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Vol. 30, 1991, p. 262 (both quotes).

heuristic tool. Further, Fritzman argues that the courage and imagination of the feminist prophetic voice does not require in addition to the formation, and support of, a small group that shares the prophet's vision, the type of 'social theory' that Fraser still hankers for. Such a theory, Fritzman suggests, can be seen as a grab for power over the new communities that have formed to promote the prophet's vision. Such communities are not merely 'individualistic, aesthetic and depoliticised' without such a theory, as Fraser suggests, but articulate a new voice in the political sphere.[86] What Rorty offers feminism, according to Fritzman, "is an understanding of prophecy that is ironical, and a concept of politics that remains prophetic." Prophecy does not replace irony as Fraser suggests, but instead is part of a strategy of "dialectical succession". Again, politics is not one step removed from prophecy, as Fraser suggests, but "consists in the systematic attempt to instantiate prophecy, and to make it possible for others to do so as well."[87] According to Fritzman, the difference between Rorty and Fraser is that whereas Rorty emphasises a continual proliferation of new vocabularies and practices, Fraser emphasises the need to implement the ones we have. Both are allies in the process of reconstructing current unjust social and political discourse.

Indeed, Rorty regards himself as a 'progressive' who wants a liberal political consensus to mesh with something like European social democracy and opposes the orthodox conservatism of the American new Right.[88] However, within the 'progressive' camp, Rorty suggests, there is a relatively unimportant battle between intellectual, left-wing post-modernists who argue that liberal institutions are inherently wicked and intellectual, left-wing liberals who argue that such institutions

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[86] J.M. Fritzman, 'Thinking With Fraser About Rorty, Feminism, and Pragmatism', in *Praxis International*, Vol. 13, 1993, pp. 113-125.

[87] ibid., p. 121 (all three quotations). Fritzman writes:
> The prophetic moment does not represent the abandonment of irony, but rather its expansion into the public sector, as well as an acknowledgement of its collective nature. But otherwise, prophecy is the sublation of irony. Irony simultaneously is *negated* ... *affirmed* ... and *transcended* ... by prophecy.

ibid., p. 121.

[88] Rorty, 'Trotsky and the Wild Orchids', op. cit., p. 150.

have made a significant contribution to a more just and less painful way of life than humans have ever before enjoyed. Explaining his own position as it is seen by his critics, Rorty writes:

> I am distrusted by both the 'orthodox' side of the important war and the 'postmodern' side in the unimportant one, because I think that the 'postmoderns' are philosophically right though politically silly, and that the 'orthodox' are philosophically wrong as well as politically dangerous.[89]

As a citizen who is also a philosopher, Rorty engages in the former war against the 'orthodox' conservative. As an intellectual Rorty engages in the second war. In articles like 'The Intellectuals at the End of Socialism' and 'Intellectuals in Politics' he castigates those post-modernists who think that they have made a blow for justice when they have detected a social ill in a soap opera or who think that concentrating upon difference in 'race, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation' does more for human solidarity than redressing the balance between the rich and the poor. Such post-modernists are more concerned with cultural politics and 'political correctness' than with "mobilizing moral outrage in defense of the weak."[90] As a consequence the American academy is more fragmented and less able to offer the type of social vision that characterised Dewey's academic life. So while Rorty believes that any leftist politics is better than no left,[91] he would like to see less cultural politics and more moral indignation from his 'progressive' colleagues. Such indignation has as little to do with the unmasking of cultural power relations as feminist social hope has to do with a recovery of authentic human relations but, Rorty notes, it meshes well with "what is still alive in Christianity."[92] Like the Christian, Rorty claims, the progressive liberal should be indignant at the way the rich treat the poor, at the way people in the west are not willing to be taxed to help people in the third world. He writes:

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[89] ibid., p. 151.

[90] Richard Rorty, 'Intellectuals in Politics', in *Dissent*, Vol. 38, 1991, p. 489. Also see pp. 488-491.

[91] Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, op. cit., p. 137.

[92] Rorty, 'The Intellectuals at the End of Socialism', op. cit., p. 14.

> We are indignant, in short, over the tendency of human beings to divide up into groups who want to hold on to what they have, rather than sharing the surplus ... [This] is the tendency ... Jesus observed in the Jerusalem of his time.[93]

Referring to Rorty's recent essays, and to a paragraph similar to the one just quoted, Bernstein acknowledges that "[w]hen Rorty writes in this vein he is carrying on the tradition of John Dewey."[94]

One of Rorty's realist critics, Norman Geras, has conceded that the academic reception of Rorty's most recent work "is that it marks a significant shift by him, away from the anti-universalistic views he had previously put forward."[95] Geras disagrees with such an interpretation but allows that if it is correct, "so much the better for Rorty ... so much the worse however for a solidarity and a liberalism without foundations."[96] Geras suspects that Rorty's position will not have changed until he abandons his critique of foundationalism: something which Rorty emphatically refuses to do even in his latest essays. What, then, gives credence to the recent academic reception of Rorty that suggests a recovery of an 'element of universalism' in his work? Partly it is Rorty's creation of the prophetic liberal ironist which we have already discussed, but perhaps more significantly it is the greater emphasis Rorty now places upon sentimentality. Sentimentality encourages us to appreciate a shared sense of human dignity without the prior presumption of some fixed universal human nature. This emphasis is made by Rorty in his 1993 Amnesty International lecture 'Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality'. After Darwin, Rorty argues, we no longer need to ask questions which aim to establish human

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[93] ibid., p. 14. The point is not whether Rorty has correctly identified Jesus as a moral teacher but that he sees a congruence between Christian social concern and his own. It might be relevant to note at this point that Walter Rauschenbusch, the leader of the social gospel movement, was one of Rorty's grandparents.

[94] Richard Bernstein, 'American Pragmatism: The Conflict of Narratives', in Herman J. Saatkamp Jr., *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995)., p. 65. Bernstein refers here directly to a quotation from Rorty's 'Trotsky and the Wild Orchids', op. cit., p. 150, and also to Rorty's article 'Intellectuals in Politics'. See the Saatkamp *Rorty and Pragmatism* op. cit., p. 214 no. 20.

[95] Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind*, op. cit., pp. 98, 104 no. 43.

[96] ibid., p. 103.

rights upon something intrinsic to human nature.[97] It is not clear to Rorty, as it is to Geras, why asserting human dignity also must involve asserting something special and universal about human nature. Following the suggestion of Annette Baier, Rorty argues that we should see the growth of 'the human rights culture' not as a matter of an increasing sense of moral obligation as a fixed human essence or moral law but to 'a progress of sentiments'. Rorty writes:

> This progress consists in an increasing ability to see the similarities between ourselves and people very unlike us as outweighing the differences. It is the result of ... 'sentimental education'. The relevant similarities are not a matter of sharing a deep, true self which instantiates true humanity, but are such little, superficial similarities as cherishing our parents and our children—similarities which do not interestingly distinguish us from many nonhuman animals.[98]

Rorty wants to drop the assertion common to Plato and Nietzsche of an intrinsic universal human nature and instead see the notion of human dignity as something we make, and should continue to make, rather than find. Human rights is a historical rather than a philosophical foundation which "owe[s] nothing to increased moral knowledge, and everything to hearing sad and sentimental stories."[99] Rorty doubts that such knowledge would lead us to change our behaviour. Thus the difference between Rorty and Geras is not between implicit and explicit affirmations of human nature as Geras suggests, but between whether we should put our trust in sentimentality or rationality. Whereas the effectiveness of the latter relies upon increasing our knowledge, the former relies upon manipulating feeling; whereas the latter requires something antecedent to be known, the former requires us to expand our imagination. Substituting sentimentality for moral knowledge is equated by Rorty with the desire to "disentangle Christ's suggestion that love matters more than knowledge from the neo-platonic [Johannine] suggestion that knowledge

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[97] Rorty, 'Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality', op. cit., p. 4. "Keeping faith with Darwin," Rorty asserts, means accepting "the realization that our species, its faculties and its current scientific and moral languages are as much the products of chance as are ... mutated viruses." Richard Rorty, 'Untruth and Consequences', in *New Republic*, Vol. 213, 1995, p. 36.

[98] Rorty, 'Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality', op. cit., p. 15.

[99] ibid., p. 7.

of the truth will make us free."[100] What the barbarous are in need of is not more moral knowledge but greater security and a lot more sympathy.[101] What Geras sees as Rorty's rhetorical need for universal human nature, Rorty sees as a historically constituted sense of the liberal imagination's susceptibility to be moved by someone's story of suffering, someone's story of affection, someone's story about their struggle against all the odds. Although philosophers may have such stories to relay, there is no reason to think of them as indispensable to this task. Rather, such stories are better relayed by historians, novelists and journalists.[102]

However, Rorty's emphasis upon sentimentality does not presage a total denial of rationality. If pragmatists talk of rationality, Rorty argues, they will first distinguish between three uses of the term. The first use views rationality as a skill or an ability, something not unique to humans but something humans have more of than squids. Rationality in this use is a survival skill. The second use sees rationality as an ingredient unique to humans, an evaluative capacity that enables us to distinguish ourselves from other animals and to distinguish principles for action from the actions themselves, evaluating the former with greater value than the latter. The third use of rationality is synonymous with freedom and tolerance: the ability to imagine better ways of living and a predilection for persuasion rather than force. Whereas the first and third uses of rationality are instrumentally connected to a flexible ability to adapt to a changing environment, the second is reified and a-historical; it is disconnected from natural conditions. Pragmatists like Dewey, Rorty

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[100] ibid., p. 10.

[101] ibid., pp. 13-15. Rorty comments:

> By *security* I mean conditions of life sufficiently risk-free as to make one's difference from others inessential to one's self-respect, one's sense of worth ... By *sympathy* I mean the sort of reaction ... that white Americans had more of after reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* than before, the sort that we have more of after watching t.v. programs about the genocide in Bosnia. Security and sympathy go together for ... the more you have to be afraid of, the more dangerous your situation, the less you can afford the time or effort to think about what things might be like for people with whom you do not immediately identify. 'Sentimental education' only works on people who can relax long enough to listen.

ibid., pp. 14-15.

[102] ibid., p. 12. Also see Richard Rorty, 'An Exchange on Truth, Freedom and Politics' Truth and Freedom: A Reply to Thomas McCarthy', in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 16, 1990, p. 643.

asserts, want to debate the relationship between the first and third use of rationality and drop the second as un-Darwinian.[103] That is, to:

> ... drop the whole idea of rationality$_2$ and come to think of ourselves as continuous with the amoebas and the squids, although also continuous with those far more flexible, free, and imaginative humanoids who may be our descendants.[104]

To combine the first and third type of rationality is to balance the skills of survival and the minimisation of suffering with utopian hope. According to John Rothfork, it is to see one's deepest social hopes and commitments as tacitly embedded in the way we live. Drawing upon Michael Polanyi's notion of tacit or personal knowledge, Rothfork sees in Rorty's philosophy an articulation of those social commitments to tolerance and freedom tacitly displayed within self-indulgent Anglo-American culture which, to those struggling against injustice and oppression, might appear light-minded and frivolous in regard to moral principles. Such a response, however, misses the *tacit* commitments of such a culture.[105] These commitments are embedded in a way of life and defended by an appeal to rationality one and three rather than by an appeal to rationality two. The way of life in question, Rorty notes, helps to "make the world's inhabitants more pragmatic, more tolerant, more liberal, more receptive to the appeal of instrumental rationality,"[106] Such a way of life, despite the views of its critics, is one that tacitly knew what was right in 1939 and now is prepared to sacrifice its youth in order to establish greater tolerance in Bosnia. Combining Rorty with Polanyi, Rothfork argues, enables us to see the 'rationality' in Rorty's moral philosophy. It enables us to see Rorty as asserting "that the deepest values of liberal society are tacit. Because we live them, we do not need to profess them ritually,"[107]

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[103] Richard Rorty, 'A Pragmatist View of Rationality and Cultural Difference', in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 42, 1992, pp. 581-582.

[104] ibid., p. 587.

[105] John Rothfork, 'Postmodern Ethics: Richard Rorty and Michael Polanyi', in *Southern Humanities Review*, Vol. 29, 1995, pp. 15-48.

[106] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, op. cit., p. 193.

[107] Rothfork, 'Postmodern Ethics: Richard Rorty and Michael Polanyi', op. cit., p. 45.

Losing faith in the second type of rationality does not mean entering a moral abyss but rather being prepared to live in a plurality of communities and sharing a range of overlapping commitments. These include, among others, scientific, educational, legal, religious, and aesthetic communities.[108] Involvement in such communities tacitly requires the acceptance of tolerance and democracy but when we ask why, Rothfork notes, "the answer cannot be rendered as a principle ... it can only be novelistically illustrated by descriptions of personal knowledge."[109] This, for Rorty, is moral commitment enough and if it is open to possible imagined future goods it will be rationality enough. Rorty's emphasis upon sentiment does not, as Geras ironically suggests, "edge one toward a possible terrain of morally relevant transcultural facts,[110] but rather highlights the tacit set of commitments involved in the kind of ethnocentric liberal culture that Rorty regards as "the best little culture anyone ever thought of."[111] The concrete benefits of such a culture can be fought for and preserved without regarding its particular manifestations as antecedently realised or transcendentally deduced. As long as such a culture has its prophets, its dreamers and indeed its philosophers to ensure that it does not get stuck within particular practices, it will be better able to deal with the inequalities and the unnecessary suffering that many of its members still experience.

As well as reintegration of public and private discourse, Rorty's latest work has also attempted to reintegrate the type of thing philosophers have to say about truth with the kind of things he has been saying about the social good. In his article 'Does Academic Freedom Have Presuppositions?' he draws a distinction between 'practical presuppositions' which tell us that, for example, surgery is more likely than

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[108] ibid., pp. 35-42.

[109] ibid., p. 39. As Rorty notes:

> ... one can be human without being universalist, without believing either that it is 'rational' to be concerned with the sufferings of others or that there is a 'common humanity which binds you to those others. One can want to relieve suffering without having an interesting answer when Socrates asks you why you desire this ...

Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, op. cit., p. 198.

[110] Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind*, op. cit., p. 102.

[111] Richard Rorty, 'Toward a Liberal Utopia' (Interview by Martyn Oliver), in *The Times Literary Supplement*, June 24, 1994, p. 14.

acupuncture to be successful at treating cancer, and philosophical presuppositions which tell us, for example, that truth is more likely to be successful if it is viewed on the model of correspondence to reality than anything else. Alterations in the first type of presupposition would have definite social effects—greater investment in acupuncture, for example. Alterations in the second type of presupposition will have little impact beyond a small band of philosophy professors. This is because the latter presupposition is "not tied very closely either to observation and experiment or to practice."[112] Our social practice, including that of academic freedom, will be shaped by practical presuppositions, and any philosophical presuppositions they are thought to require will be ornamental rather than foundational. Philosophy will not have much impact upon practice. However, this raises the problem of the relationship between Rorty's own anti-representational pragmatism and his social views. Is not pragmatism a philosophy that is supposed to make a difference? Does not Rorty make presuppositional use of Dewey and Davidson to develop the social implications of his linguistic Darwinism in which the creative misuse of language can cause changes in beliefs and effect our social practices?[113] Does Rorty draw on these philosophers, as Alasdair MacIntyre suggests, merely to employ their conclusion without heeding their rational presuppositions?[114]

Rorty's response to these questions is to insist upon a further distinction between short-term and long-term effects of philosophical presuppositions. For example, while under oath Christians may tell the truth because they fear damnation and atheists may do the same in the short term because they could not with integrity break the social construct against committing perjury, "in the long run", Rorty notes, "it may make a lot of difference whether a society is regulated by its members' fear

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[112] Rorty, 'Does Academic Freedom Have Philosophical Presuppositions?', in *Academe*, Vol. 80, 1994, p. 53.

[113] See, for example, Rorty's use of anti-representational philosophy against the type of foundationalist Marxism that still appeals to Terry Eagleton. Richard Rorty, 'We Anti-Representationalists', in *Radical Philosophy*, Vol. 60, 1992. pp. 40-42.

[114] Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Review of *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*', in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 87, 1990, pp. 708-711.

of non-human sanction or by secular sentiments of pride, loyalty, and solidarity."[115]

If Rorty had to choose between the social practice of academic freedom or anti-representationalism he would choose the former because philosophy should be placed in the service of political progress, not placed at its foundation. Nevertheless, he regards anti-representationalism and its account of truth as more in the *long-term* service of academic freedom than representationalism. To quote him at length he concludes:

> We shall not change our practices ... merely because we have ceased to concern ourselves with epistemology, or because we have adopted non-representationalist philosophies of language and mind. But we may change our attitude to these practices, our sense of why it is important to carry them out. Our new sense of what we are doing will be itself as indemonstrable and as intuitive as was the Western Rationalistic Tradition. But pragmatists think it will be better, not just because it will free philosophers from perpetual oscillation between skepticism and dogmatism, but because it will take away a few more excuses for fanaticism and intolerance.[116]

When seen in the service of social progress, philosophy can become useful not as a foundation for our practices but as an element in the long-term expansion, clarification and improvement of our practices.[117] Philosophy is not socially useless:[118] "anything that philosophy can do to free up our imagination a little is all to the political good." Rorty continues:

> the freer the imagination of the present the likelier it is that future social practices will be different from past practices. Nietzsche's, Dewey's, Derrida's and Davidson's treatment of objectivity, truth and language have freed us up a bit. ... But philosophy is not ... a source of tools for path-

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[115] Rorty, 'Does Academic Freedom Have Philosophical Presuppositions?', op. cit., p. 58.
[116] ibid., p. 61.
[117] Rorty, 'A Pragmatist View of Rationality and Cultural Difference', op. cit., p. 594 no. 7.
[118] Rorty notes:
> Had there been no Plato, the Christians would have had a harder time selling the idea that all God really wanted from us was fraternal love. Had there been no Kant, the nineteenth century would have had a harder time reconciling Christian ethics with Darwin's story about the descent of man ... .

Rorty, 'Trotsky and the Wild Orchids', op. cit., p. 152. Rorty wants to maintain a gratitude for the prophetic utopian Kant if not his claim to have discovered truth. Rorty, 'Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality', op. cit., p. 7.

breaking political work. Nothing politically useful happens until people begin saying things never said before.[119]

Philosophy can help us solve particular problems: it can help give us a better self-image, it can suggest means of reconciling ideologies, it can suggest distinctions which make existing practices easier to understand. It can suggest ways of reconciling old ideas with new imaginative ones, it can be a vehicle for 'holding one's thought in time'; what it cannot do is offer a foundation which assures us that our thoughts and practice accurately represent something a-historical and relevant for all time. It cannot, in this sense, offer 'truth' but it can offer truthfulness. "Truthfulness," Rorty writes, "like freedom, is temporal, contingent, and fragile. But we can recognize both when we have them."[120] It requires us to relate how things work in particular situations; it involves us in clearing up difficulties and removing obstacles. Possessing it makes us less dogmatic and more experimental.[121]

A utopian hope, irony, prophecy, trust, pragmatic rationality, sentimentality, indignation, courage, imagination, campaigning reformism, fellowship groupings and truthfulness are all employed by Rorty within a Deweyan means-ends continuum to maintain and reform the type of tacitly tolerant ungrounded democratic society that balances freedom with justice—the type of open and challenging democratic society that Dewey saw as now exhibiting significant features of the religious dimension of experience. In this, and the previous chapter, I have suggested that Rorty attempts to further balance these concerns with an additional concern for questions about truth. Having these three concerns is part of the traditional job-description of the philosopher and the attempt to integrate them a common philosophical task. This is a task Rorty shares with Dewey. Like Dewey, however, Rorty wants such an integration without the quest for certainty and without any possible assistance from some putative antecedently existing entity that might

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[119] Rorty, 'Feminism, Ideology and Deconstruction: A Pragmatist's View', op. cit., p. 100.
[120] Richard Rorty, 'Philosophy and the Future', in Saatkamp, Rorty and Pragmatism, op. cit., p. 205.
[121] Rorty, 'Does Academic Freedom Have Philosophical Presuppositions?', op. cit., p. 59. Also see p. 56.

have traditionally been thought to ground and support such a task. Rather than calling upon such an entity, both Dewey and Rorty content themselves with carrying this task through by participating in the practical activity of problem-solving and by engendering community self-reliance. If "democracy and reciprocal tolerance" can be kept alive, then "everything else can be settled by muddling through to some reasonable sort of compromise."[122] This thesis, Rorty claims, is the same as saying in philosophical terms that Davidsonian intersubjectivity is just as good at making our practices intelligible as talk of objectivity, but without the latter's forlorn need for foundation. Translated into the terms of religious belief, he notes:

> ... this is the Feuerbachian thesis that God was just a projection of the best, and sometimes of the worst of humanity.[123]

7.5. Conclusion:

In this chapter I have traced the development of Rorty's social philosophy as this has been shaped by his dialogue with other social philosophers. I have suggested that Rorty is not adequately treated when he is interpreted as a cultural relativist. His appeal to liberal values without the further need for philosophical foundations is not a cynical and empty exercise. Such an appeal arises from his tacit commitment to the moral goods involved in perpetuating and improving the tolerant, just, open and free society that western liberal culture sees itself as having become By first dividing public from private vocabularies, and then uniting them again as a result of criticism, Rorty has developed a philosophical discourse that encourages prophetic and utopian visions of radical transformation of social ills and practical piecemeal reform, while asserting that our most prised liberal freedoms are nothing more than a matter of luck and historical contingency.

Forged in the crucible of criticism and conversation, Rorty's pragmatic anti-representationalism, I have been arguing, does not necessarily lead to radical

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[122] ibid., p. 61.
[123] ibid., p. 61.

subjectivism nor to dangerous political ideologies. My next task is to show that despite his avowed atheism his thought is not necessarily antithetical to the type of religious belief that has been outlined in the first three chapters and chapter five of this thesis.

CHAPTER EIGHT

RICHARD RORTY'S PRAGMATISM AND RELIGIOUS NON-REALISM

8.1. Introduction:

In the last two chapters I argued that it is not a necessary feature of Rorty's work that

it leads to subjectivism or to dangerous political ideologies. Rorty's pragmatic anti-

representationalism may undermine overblown expectations that have traditionally

constituted philosophy's approach to concerns for truth, justice and freedom but this

does not mean that Rorty no longer shares these concerns. He may at times, as

David Hall points out, be coy, diffident and bashful about admitting to the assertive

nature of his own strategies of intellectual road clearing, irony and prophecy[1] by

which he hopes to persuade rather than force his community toward the type of open

liberal democracy that John Dewey worked for, but this is not, as Hall posits, an

attempt to stand above the philosophical fray, as though Rorty aims to out-do

Nietzsche and Heidegger and thereby gain a place among the immortal names of

philosophy.[2] Rather, such coyness, diffidence and bashfulness stems from a desire

not to humiliate other people by redescribing them and their practices in such a way

that they take such redescriptions to be an exertion of force over them, rather than a

persuasive invitation to new practices and a new self image. To suggest, as Hall and

others do, that all Rorty has to offer is 'table talk', because in the end he cannot

escape from the privatising irony of his own philosophy,[3] is an account of his work

that Rorty finds hurtful rather than persuasive.[4] It is a redescription of his work

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[1] David L. Hall, *Richard Rorty: Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism*, (New York: SUNY Press, 1994) pp. 169-200.
[2] ibid., p. 231.
[3] ibid., p. 236.
[4] Richard Rorty, Trotsky and the Wild Orchids, In *Common Knowledge*, Vol. 1, 1992. p. 141.
Defending Rorty on this point J. Wesley Robbins writes:
> It is no part of this thesis that knowledge is self-referential, that all the sentences we
> manipulate are about our own linguistic behaviour. Those sentences are about all sorts of
> things inside us as well as outside of us and, therefore, so is our knowledge. It simply

which, in this respect, and despite Hall's claim to critique Rorty in the spirit of his own work, goes against that spirit by being forceful rather than persuasive. This does not mean that such a critique has no place, for as we have seen, Rorty has often changed his position in response to criticism, but this is only to say that he was sufficiently persuaded to do so. Whether a criticism, or an attempted redescription, turns out to be positively persuasive or negatively humiliating will often only emerge after lengthy discussion and dialogue which requires us to keep open the channels of conversation and tolerant democratic interaction to which Rorty is supremely committed. In what follows in this chapter I shall consider Rorty's attitude to religious belief. I shall not go as far as J. Wesley Robbins and argue that Rorty is a Deweyan religious thinker, for this may also be a forceful rather than a persuasive redescription of his work. Rather, my aim will be to suggest that despite his atheism, his work might still be appropriated by religious non-realists.

Rorty is a self-confessed atheist and thus may at first appear, an unlikely figure for theological appropriation.[5] For Rorty, a Christianity that centres on the reality of God, or on human wickedness, a Christianity that tells us that only by grace through faith do we gain salvation, a salvation that is not of ourselves, will have to be recontextualised as a moral enterprise, concerned with love rather than knowledge and as a prophetic vision that abjures cruelty by engendering a sense of indignation at social ills, if it is to function outside of a privatised idiosyncratic desire. Yet, on his own admission, if defined broadly enough "even the atheist will be said to have a religious faith."[6] Here, I intend to argue that Rorty's pragmatic anti-

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does not follow that, since human knowledge is linguistic all the way down, therefore regardless of what we seem to talk about all we ever really talk about, and know, is our own 'conversation'.

J. Wesley Robbins, 'Neo-pragmatism and the Radical Empiricist Metaphysics of Pure Experience' in *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, Vol. 14, 1993. p.30.

[5] Richard Rorty, 'Response To Charles Hartshorne' in Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr. *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995), p. 36.

[6] Richard Rorty, *Objectivity Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume One*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 182.

representationalism need not be anti-religious. After summarising Rorty's rejection of religious belief, I shall argue that his entire philosophy is predicated upon his use of the divine trope and that therefore 'God' has a negative 'use' in his work. The divine trope is used by Rorty as a symbol for all that is wrong with realism and representationalism. It is also employed as a warning against the move from a metaphysics of representational presence to a deconstructive post-modern metaphysics of representational absence. I will then draw upon passages in Rorty's work where he offers a more positive account of religious belief. These positive allusions to religious belief, I will suggest in the concluding chapter, make Rorty just as open to theological appropriation as any other atheistic philosopher. In that final chapter I shall suggest that Rorty's figure of the prophetic liberal ironist and his pragmatic anti-representational helps to articulate important features of religious non-realism and provides it with an argumentative resource that it can employ against alternative critical realist accounts of religious belief.

8.2. Rorty's Rejection of Religious Belief, and His Use of the Divine as a Trope:

Rorty believes that it is unnecessary to provide arguments against God. If you no longer believe in God you do not have to argue the case. You simply pick up the habit of using a vocabulary in which 'God' need not appear. The word 'God' like 'phlogiston' is being "unstitched and thus erase[d]"[7] as we continue to recontextualise the linguistic web of our belief and desires. The age of belief in an objective God has passed. To argue about God gives this practically useless notion too much credence. It would be like trying to argue against the existence of unicorns or the possibility of finding a 3000 B.C. pharaoh alive in his pyramid drinking a cup of tea. No one bothers with such arguments. There is no *use* in employing them, either for or against. Nobody, Rorty claims, is interested in

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[7] ibid., p. 93. The residual effect of religious belief, Rorty predicts, may have about another 500 years survival. ibid., p. 115.

hearing the orthodox theist criticised.[8] A theological vocabulary no longer serves any useful purpose[9] He notes:

> ... we may find ourselves no longer bothering to use religious terminology. In such cases x-talk just fades away, not because someone has made a philosophical or scientific discovery that there are no x's, but because nobody any longer has a use for this sort of talk.[10]

Galileo's de-centring of the world, Darwin's account of our biological contingency (which Rorty regards as "lying behind both Nietzsche and Dewey,"[11]), Freud's account of the contingency of the self and Davidson's account of the language-world-self relation, all make it "harder to believe in God,"[12] by recontextualising our understanding of our world and our use of language. The recontextualisation these figures have wrought has made us conscious as never before of the de-divinising process of recontextualisation itself.[13] Language should now be understood as a contingent tool that helps us to fulfil our purposes; not a medium of representation. As such, the contingency of language makes it impossible to argue that there is a special divine language in which God has always wanted to be spoken and in which God always speaks. Language is human. Our view of language is itself contextualised, always itself under certain linguistic descriptions which are useful for certain purposes. Rorty's own anti-representational account of language is itself a recontextualisation. It does not itself represent something real. Rather, he notes, his own linguistic Darwinism is not true in the sense that it has correctly represented reality as if it has laid bare the mind of God, but because it "provides a useful vocabulary in which to formulate the pragmatist

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[8] Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), p. 64.

[9] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, op cit., pp. 186-187. n. 31.

[10] ibid., p. 115.

[11] Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers Volume Two*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 3.

[12] ibid., p.144.

[13] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 39-40.

position."[14] Like our direct contact with the world the ability to recontextualise is so characteristically human as the desire to know 'essences' or 'God' is not. The former ability is not a privileged mode of thought but something over which, as humans, we have "little choice but to employ."[15]

The word 'God' therefore, as Rorty understands it, is found within the list of "dead metaphors which pragmatists can no longer find a use for."[16] The issue though, does not rest upon the phrase 'dead metaphors' because, for Rorty, all literalised language is made up of dead metaphors, and a lot of literalised language is useful. Rather, the issue rests on the fact that for Rorty's pragmatist, the notion of 'God' has no use. In a world conscious of recontextualisation, recontextualisation is also a process of de-divinisation. Rorty summarises his rejection of belief in God in the following passage:

> ... the secularist ... says not 'There is no God' but rather 'All this talk about our relation to God is getting in our way' ... It isn't that we believe in God, or don't believe in God, or have suspended judgement about God, or consider that the God of theism is an inadequate symbol of our ultimate concern; it is just that we wish we didn't have to have a view about God. It isn't that we know that "God" is a cognitively meaningless expression, or that it has its role in a language-game other than the fact-stating, or whatever. We just regret the fact that the word is used so much.[17]

However, for someone who professes to have this regret, Rorty seems reluctant to drop the term 'God'. This is because the term has a significant function in his texts as a personification of all that is wrong with representationalism. Rorty employs 'God' as a negative trope against which he attempts a recontextualisation of many other realist notions. For him, to say there is 'truth' about human nature or that there is 'reason' for the type of solidarity that we now experience; to say that there is

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[14] Richard Rorty, 'Putnam and the Relativist Menace', in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 90, 1993, p. 447.

[15] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, op. cit., p. 110.

[16] Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, op. cit., p. 20.

[17] Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, op. cit., pp. 97-98.

a substantial self and a convergence of meaning; and to say that there are rationally deducible principles for understanding nature or the moral good all amount to talk about topics which are as unprofitable as talk about the nature and reality of God.[18] Rorty notes that a realist view of truth treats truth as "identical with God", while the realist view of the everyday world treats facts as identical "with the world as God's project."[19] He writes:

> The very idea that the world or the self has an intrinsic nature - one which the physicist or the poet may have glimpsed - is a remnant of the idea that the world is a divine creation, the work of someone who had something in mind, who Himself spoke some language in which He described His own project. ... To drop the idea of languages as representations ... would be to de-divinize the world.[20]

Equally, a realist account of science is viewed by Rorty as the attempt "to make nature do the duty of God." That is, to see science as representing "a power not ourselves, rather than simply facilitating our commerce with the things around us."[21] This is not an apology for relativism because just as there is "no such thing as blasphemy" for someone who does not believe in God so there is no such thing as relativism for someone who no longer believes that her language represents something to which it is meant to correspond.[22] Whether he is discussing his attitude to nature or science, the self or humanity, justice or ethics, language or human solidarity, or encouraging us to drop the notions of essence, universality, representation, correspondence and reality, we find his views are always set against the need to de-divinise these vocabularies. In each case 'God' is used as a trope with negative force against which Rorty's anti-representational recontextualisation is defined.

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[18] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,* op. cit., p.8. Also pp. 5, 20, 35, 41, 68-69.
[19] ibid., p. 5.
[20] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,* op. cit., p. 21.
[21] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth,* op. cit., p. 87. (Both quotes).
[22] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity,* op. cit., p. 50.

A second, less negative, use that the trope 'God' plays in Rorty's texts is found in his warning not to take deconstruction too seriously. Deconstruction highlights differance as the site of the fissure of linguistic meaning through which an openness to 'the other' is glimpsed but never captured. This evasion destabilises all attempts to fix linguistic representations and thereby dissolves the metaphysics of presence. It finds no room for self-present, self-sufficient explanation and thus no room for divinity that purports to be such an explanation, whether this comes in the form of religion or the surrogate theologies of humanism. For Rorty, however, we should not try to turn Derrida's valuable, but private ironic fantasies, into yet another realist philosophy as some of his interpreters tend to do. Rorty's comments upon Paul de Man are relevant here.

According to Rorty, de Man sees literature's 'take-over' of philosophy as pointing to a void at the heart of reality. By revealing the total contingency of language, deconstruction exposes the vain attempts by philosophy to cover this void: the attempt to show "that sign and meaning can coincide."[23] This logocentric desire is impossible to fulfil and knowledge of this engenders a sense 'of the presence of a nothingness' - a void which can be named but not known.. The 'essence' of literature is that it has no essence. Thus the 'essence' of things, which literature recontextualises, is that which all these things lack. Literature thus reaches the 'essence of man' - the void - which other disciplines, like philosophy, fails to reach. But, for Rorty, just because the logocentric desire may be shown by deconstruction to be unsatisfiable this does not mean that this unsatisfied desire is the essence of language or man. It merely shows us that we have more choices than we once thought. Returning to the divine trope, Rorty writes:

> ... pragmatists see no reason to set up an altar to Literature - to the Dark God whose voice is in the literariness of language - on the spot where we once worshipped the radiant, effulgent logos. Pragmatists would prefer to have no high altars, and instead just have lots of picture galleries, book

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[23] Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, op cit., pp. 130-132.

displays, movies, concerts, ethnographic museums . . . and so on - lots of cultural options but no privileged central discipline or practice.[24]

Rorty equates de Man's account of language directly with negative theology. To reintroduce essence, even in a negative sense, is to reintroduce God; something that is immune from recontextualisation. Pragmatists, Rorty asserts, reject the notions of "the negative theologians, the worshippers of the Dark God whose voice is in the Literariness of Language."[25] Unlike de Man, Rorty argues, Derrida does not essentialise the absence of presence, he is simply trying to make the meaning of words enigmatic.[26] Whereas de Man "needs a clear vision of the dead, but luminous, God of Presence in order to display (by contrast of darkness to light) his living but invisible Dark God of Absence,"[27] Derrida, according to Rorty, simply exhibits "the comic writer's urge to make something once held sacred look funny."[28]

A theology of deconstruction, such as Mark C. Taylor's a/theology which tries to think of God in the absence of God after the death of God, as an absence in presence and a presence in absence falls into the same representational conceptuality as de Man's philosophy of literature. The flow of difference which heralds the slippage of fixed meaning from words, makes impossible any direct speech about God through the use of putatively privileged words. Rather, the endless play of signs itself becomes the nomadic terrain of divinity: "divine insofar as it is the creative/destructive medium of everything that is and all that is not."[29] In deconstructive theology, therefore, God has become totally immanent within the flow of language nowhere graspable but nevertheless omnipresent. As J. Wesley Robbins notes:

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[24] ibid., p. 132.
[25] ibid., p. 115.
[26] ibid., p. 116.
[27] ibid., p. 117.
[28] ibid., p. 117.
[29] Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 116.

> The divine, in short, is, according to the theological deconstructionists, the vital force resident in language rather than the permanent transcendent referential framework of language.[30]

Offering the type of critique of Rorty encountered in the last chapter, Taylor suggests that Rorty, and pragmatists who think like him, replace epistemological forms of intellectual domination with hermeneutical forms of domination so that while Rorty's open-ended 'general conversation of mankind' purports to provide a dialogue between our various cultural domains, it in fact "ends as a monologue ... written to colonize the other."[31] Pragmatism, for Taylor, is just one more failed attempt by the human subject to take for itself the mantle of divinity and become the upholder of extra-linguistic meaning. As such, it is a form of theological humanism that remains captive to the 'philosophy of presence'. According to Robbins, however, it is not pragmatism but deconstruction that remains caught within the economy of representation.[32]

Robbins argues that a deconstructive a/theology employs a vocabulary which, in effect, claims "that language as disciplined, fixedly defining objects, is less real than language as flow interminably putting off fixed definitions."[33] Compared to this privileged vocabulary, other vocabularies are secondary, illusory projections that have failed to unmask the real workings of language. Such secondary vocabularies will eventually submit to that ultimate vocabulary which contains the divine names of 'differance', 'trace', 'otherness' and 'fissure' among its pantheon.[34] Deconstruction can thus be read as an attempt to instantiate a theology of religion that is truer—closer to reality—than any other. Robbins notes:

> To them has been revealed, through their immersion in language, the bountiful, but restless, sacred void that is the worldly reality underlying

[30] J. Wesley Robbins, 'Pragmatism and the Deconstruction of Theology' in *Religious Studies*, Vol. 24, 1989, p. 377.

[31] Mark C. Taylor, *Tears*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), p. 129.

[32] J. Wesley Robbins, '"You Will Be Like God": Richard Rorty and Mark C. Taylor on the Theological Significance of Human Language Use' in *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 72, 1992, pp. 389-402.

[33] Robbins, 'Pragmatism and the Deconstruction of Theology', op. cit., p. 378.

[34] ibid., pp. 378-379.

human language and culture. It is these literati who, in and through writing, are closest to, and thereby in a position to keep the rest of culture close to, the divine reality.[35]

Whereas pragmatists disregard the notion that language conceived as 'fixed' or as 'flow' is 'closest to reality', deconstruction continues to perpetuate it "under the guise of a literary culture."[36] Robbins continues:

> Their literary culture ... supposedly has overcome the errors of referentiality that plagued its predecessors, plays exactly the social-cultural role that those predecessors played. It, like the theology, metaphysics, epistemology, and hermeneutics which it would depose, purports to show us how we must think, speak, act, worship, if we are to be true to reality.[37]

Christian non-realists, I suggest, would be better advised to follow the pragmatist line and avoid the seductive lure of the new linguistic foundationalism of deconstruction.

In this section I have attempted to summarise Rorty's critique of religious belief. In doing so I have suggested that Rorty presents his entire philosophical project against the backdrop of the de-divinisation effect of recontextualisation. Rorty rejects belief in God not because there are sound arguments against such a belief but because, in a contextualised world conscious of recontextualisation, such a belief now serves no or little purpose. A world recontextualised into atheism, rather than argued into atheism, is a world which the religious non-realists like Don Cupitt and Graham Shaw try to inhabit. They agree that if what we mean by 'God' is something which resists human recontextualisation; something which is regarded as antecedently real and independent of the world, then Rorty is correct. Such a God 'is' next to useless and can take a place alongside the unicorn and our tea-total pharaoh. However, for them, the loss of this view of God no more heralds the end of religious belief and practice than the loss of enlightenment rationality heralds the

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[35] ibid., p. 379.
[36] ibid., p. 381.
[37] ibid., p. 381.

end of the beliefs and practices of liberal democracy. Rorty recontextualises belief in God in negative tropological terms. He employs the spectre of the divine trope in order to both undermine philosophical realism and to warn interpreters of deconstruction not to try to build methodological practice in philosophy or literature on the new foundations of a negative theology. Despite his claims to the contrary, Rorty does have a *use* for religious language. Religious non-realists have a more positive use for it.

8.3. Rorty's Philosophy and Religious Non-Realism:

Despite Rorty's critique of religious belief and his negative tropological use of the term 'God', there are pointers in his work that suggest the possibility of a more positive attitude to a religious form of life. I shall consider these in this section and relate them to the type of things Dewey and the 'Sea of Faith' religious non-realists want to say about 'God.' In his more positive considerations of religious belief Rorty tends to regard it as a vocabulary of private perfection. He accepts Whitehead's definition of religion as that activity which I do with my solitariness, my "obligation to ... become who I am,"[38] as a definition of a private vocabulary. However, he is also prepared to allow that the private fantasy of St. Paul and other Christians have been successful in literalising their metaphors into 'common sense',[39] and these have made a significant historical contribution to human solidarity.[40] According to Rorty, one consequence of the Christian's private fantasy was to make the world less cruel[41] by giving charge of European history to "people who pitied the humiliated and dreamed of human equality".[42] As Rorty notes:

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[38] For Rorty, this is rendered as 'what an individual does with their aloneness'. Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* op. cit., p.13. A.N. Whitehead, *Religion In The Making*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1930), p.6. David Hall notes that Rorty exchanges Whitehead's use of 'solitude' for his own use of 'aloneness' in order to dissuade any thoughts that 'solitude' might mask some hidden internal metaphysical comfort. Hall, *Richard Rorty*, op. cit., pp. 171-174.

[39] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, And Solidarity*, op. cit., p. 17.

[40] Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, op. cit., pp. 121-122; *Contingency, Irony, And Solidarity*, op. cit.., pp., 184.

[41] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, And Solidarity*, op. cit., p.55. In a discussion of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*, Rorty relates that among the historically contingent "ideas associated with

> ... it is part of the tradition of *our* community that the human stranger from whom all dignity has been stripped is to be taken in, to be re-clothed with dignity. This Jewish and Christian element in our tradition is gratefully invoked by freeloading atheists like myself.[43]

Nevertheless, Rorty maintains that Christians should not actively seek to implement their private beliefs into public action. Religion should remain 'privatised'. However, he assumes that a religious frame-of-mind, will always tend to opt-out of worldly struggle and to direct its goals and desires toward the perfect 'City of God', a wholly other realm than our own.[44] In other words the religious frame of mind will always understand God in terms of the representational ideology that constitutes his own tropological use of the word 'God'. This is a frame-of-mind which Rorty equates with what Nietzsche termed 'ascetic priests'—people, according to Rorty, who are "not much fun to be around" although useful as "vehicles of linguistic novelty ... by which a culture is able to have a future interestingly different from its past."[45]

In his explicit comments on religion in his article 'Religion as a Conversation Stopper' he clearly feels the effect of his 'tropical' God and thus continues to want to privatise religion, as he puts it, "to trade privatization for a guarantee of religious liberty.[46] Nevertheless this is not to trivialise religion. He writes:

> The poems we atheists write, like the prayers our religious friends raise are private, nonpolitical, and nontrivial.... The search for private perfection, pursued by theists and atheists alike, is neither trivial nor, in a pluralistic democracy, relevant to public policy.[47]

Christianity" which he admires, we find, "the idea that reciprocal pity is a sufficient basis for political association, the idea that there is something importantly wrong with (to use Orwell's list) "imprisonment without trial, the use of war prisoners as slaves, public executions, torture to extract confessions, the use of hostages, and the deportation of whole populations," the idea that distinctions of wealth, talent, strength, sex and race are not relevant to public policy - these ideas were once fantasies as implausible as those associated with O'Brien's oligarchical collectivism." ibid., p. 184.
[42] ibid., p. 184.
[43] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, op. cit., p.202.
[44] Rorty *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, op. cit., pp. 70-71.
[45] ibid., pp. 72-73.
[46] Richard Rorty, 'Religion as a Conversation-Stopper', in *Common Knowledge*, Vol. 3, 1994, p.3.
[47] ibid., p. 2.

Despite this, it is Rorty's attitude to religion that confirms for him the need to keep the public separate from the private. Calling upon one's religious beliefs in the context of public debate stops conversation. The pause is followed by the response from a secular colleague 'that's your own private affair, this is public policy'.[48] He does not deny that there can be a religious influence on public policy but he does deny this to religious *arguments*, by which he means appeal to something like 'the revealed will of God' or 'the immortal soul'[49] However, this is only to sanction against a religious vocabulary that appeals to antecedently existing reality. Any such appeal should be viewed as a private idiosyncratic need rather than a source of moral knowledge. Democratic debate is silenced rather than furthered by appeal to private, idiosyncratic sources of such moral knowledge.[50] Again, this is not so much a sanction against religious knowledge, as against defining public policy in terms of some pre-given 'source' as opposed to 'public consensus'. Talking of the religious citizen, Rorty notes, "the fact that one of us gets his premises in church and the other in the library is, and should be, of no interest to our audience in the public square."[51] In the public square there are no religious or non-religious *arguments* although there are both religious and non-religious *influences*. Privatising belief in antecedent sources is demanded by the lack of utility such belief has for our civil practices. Whether the privatisation of realist religious belief is thought generally to be appropriate will be a matter of whether privatisation is thought to be a fair price to pay for religious liberty, and whether this is a good social policy to have will be a matter of whether more is to be gained than lost. Either way, Rorty argues, such privatisation does not trivialise religious belief.[52] Nevertheless, while belief in Rorty's tropical God may need to be privatised, a Deweyan religious faith and 'Sea

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[48] Richard Rorty, 'Towards a Liberal Utopia', an interview with Martyn Oliver in *The Times Literary Supplement*, June 24th 1994. p. 14.
[49] Rorty, 'Religion as a Conversation-Stopper' op. cit., pp. 4, 6.
[50] ibid., pp. 4-5.
[51] ibid., p. 4.
[52] ibid., p. 6.

of Faith' religious non-realism which do not ground religious belief upon such a tropical God should perhaps be allowed, on Rorty's own premises, to take a full part in public argument and debate.

In his article 'Does Academic Freedom Have Philosophical Presuppositions?', there is some evidence that Rorty might allow the possibility of a public Christianity if it drops the 'tropical' God. Such a possibility emerges from his use of Christian belief, again as a foil against which he presents his own ideas, this time, his desire to defend the notion of intersubjectivity against subjectivism and academic freedom against unwarranted politicisation. Confirming both his concern for truth and the possibility of a non-realist Christianity, Rorty writes:

> ... philosophers who deny that there is any such thing as the correspondence of a belief to reality ... are no more dangerous to the pursuit of truth than theologians who deny the existence of hellfire. Such theologians put neither morality nor Christianity in danger, and such philosophers endanger neither the university nor society. ... [T]heologians did, however, change our sense of what Christianity was—of what it takes to be a good Christian. We now have a conception of Christianity which would have seemed perverse and outrageous to many of our eighteenth-century ancestors.[53]

This change, Rorty argues, can be seen in pragmatic terms, not as a move from darkness to light, but as a matter of growth, as "escape from the satisfaction of old needs into the satisfaction of new needs ... [which] ... will indeed be an escape from error to truth"[54] but not an escape from appearance to reality. The defence of academic freedom, Rorty argues, no more requires respect for correspondence theories of truth than a defence of modern Christianity requires respect for hellfire. He notes:

> The distinction I am drawing is analogous to that between saying 'we have no further use for Christianity' and saying 'we cannot explain the

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[53] Rorty, 'Does Academic Freedom Have Philosophical Presuppositions?', in *Academe*, Vol. 80, 1994, pp. 53-54.
[54] ibid., p. 60.

Eucharist by reference to Aristotelian notions of substance and accident'.[55]

For Protestant Christianity, the view that such an understanding of the Eucharist might mean the end of Christianity is ridiculous. For Rorty, disputes between Catholicism and Protestantism are as pointless to Eucharistic practice as disputes between proponents of coherence theories of truth and proponents of correspondence theories of truth are to academic freedom. If anti-representationalism wins out in the end, Rorty suggests, neither historians nor physicists would behave differently, although they may have a different long-term self-image (perhaps a greater sense of self-reliance and a greater sense of responsibility for what they do).

What ensures the continuation of academic freedom is the traditional practices of the academy like civility and tolerance which historians and scientists respect, not the ability to connect with some mind-independent reality. Equally, Rorty writes:

> ... the only difference between unconsecrated and consecrated bread is in the social practices appropriate to each ... The point, we say, is not whether Christ is Really Present in the bread, but whether we should treat a consecrated Host as we would a snack.[56]

Continuing the analogy between university and church, the healthy university, Rorty argues, will ingest new radical perspectives in politics and religion and the new insights of each generation by 'muddling through' as best it can.[57] The healthy church, Cupitt would say, would now function in a similar way. Just as Rorty's academy will 'muddle through' by appeal to its traditions of drawing the line between unacceptably new politicisation and unreplaceable old utility, so would Cupitt's church. Like Cupitt's church, Rorty's academy is "unlikely to remain healthy and free once people outside ... take a hand in re-drawing this line."[58] For

[55] ibid., p. 55.
[56] ibid., p. 55.
[57] ibid., p. 55.
[58] ibid., p. 56.

Rorty, if we keep civility and tolerance alive and maintain the academy's independence, disinterested objectivity, rationality and truth will look after themselves. For Cupitt, if we keep alive religious tolerance and prayerfulness and maintain a 'Kingdom Church' of faith, hope and outpouring love, then our blessedness will look after itself.[59] Just as disinterested objectivity, rationality and truth for Rorty will be a matter of describing "how the people we most admire conduct their inquiries,"[60] so for Cupitt, blessedness will be a description of how religious belief shows itself in the work done by those religious people we most admire.

Nearly every book written by Don Cupitt since 1982 can be seen as an attempt to recontextualise Christian belief for a world conscious of the de-divinising consequences of recontextualisation. Thus Cupitt writes:

> ... Our religious beliefs and practices are an integral part of the evolving totality of culture, and must change with it. (...) In the old scheme of things God did all the creating. God stood on the far side of the world, everything was ready-made for us, and nothing much could be altered. ... Today, by contrast, human creativity confronts the flux. God has moved round to our side, and looks through our eyes. Christian action is now at last liberated. The material we have to work on is our world and our own lives.[61]

For Rorty, recontextualisation de-divinises the world. Assuming his antecedently existent tropical God, religious talk is private; useless to community affairs. For Cupitt, however, recontextualisation *is* a religious activity. The language of creation attributed to the deity is now transferred back to us.[62] Religious myths about the creator God provide a useful vocabulary for understanding our own recontextualisation of our world, but not, as Farrell suggests, by stripping the world

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[59] Here I refer to the type of religious faith, hope, love and blessedness presented by Cupitt in his books *The Last Philosophy*, (London: SCM Press, 1995), esp. pp. 5-9, 124; and *Solar Ethics*, (London: SCM Press, 1995), esp. p. 59.

[60] Rorty, 'Does Academic Freedom Have Philosophical Presuppositions?', op. cit., p. 56.

[61] Don Cupitt, 'Anti-Realist Faith', in Joseph Runzo (ed.), *Is God Real?*, (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 54-55.

[62] Don Cupitt, *Only Human*, (London: SCM Press, 1985), p.181.

of a causal determinacy for Cupitt values science as much as he values religion. Like Rorty, he does not ask: 'Does God exist?' Instead he asks: 'What job does religious vocabulary do?' For Cupitt it does "something distinctive in shaping our practices,"[63] and since Rorty allows that a vocabulary is for a purpose, and that the more vocabularies the better, he can hardly complain about those who find a purpose for a religious vocabulary.

To some extent, Rorty recognises this in his discussion of Paul Tillich and John Dewey in 'Pragmatism Without Method'. There, Rorty argues that

> ... certain forms of religion (when not construed as an encounter with a pre-existent power that will rescue us) do help us envisage [our connection with the world in ways] which naturalism ... does not help us envisage.[64]

Tillich and Dewey remind us of the futility of reducing knowledge to scientific criteria. If such a reduction is made, Rorty asserts, proponents of religious belief will "find some new terminology for forms of discourse that are not subject to such criteria but which are nevertheless necessary for our lives."[65] For Rorty, both Tillich and Dewey offer such new terminology. He sees no difference between the former's attempt "to distinguish genuine from idolatrous faith"[66] and the latter's "attempt to distinguish the religious from the supernatural."[67] Both men were saying the same thing to different audiences. Rorty argues that both Dewey and Tillich wanted to continue to speak of 'God' even after they had accepted naturalism. He continues:

> ... both experimented with various reweavings that might enable them to do so. Tillich also thought that he could hang on to some beliefs best expressed using the world 'Christ', though Dewey did not. Both were ... keeping as much of the old as they could in the face of the new.[68]

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63 ibid., p. 179.
64 Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, op. cit., p. 74.
65 ibid., p. 74.
66 ibid., p. 69.
67 ibid., p. 69.
68 ibid., p. 70.

The fact that Rorty feels that reference to the word 'God' "is a rhetorical blemish, a misleading way of getting one's point across,"[69] does not diminish the main point that he accepts that other people can still reweave their beliefs and desires so as to include the word 'God'.

Rorty recalls, that when he was asked why Dewey and Tillich still talked about 'God', he found himself replying by quoting Dewey's desire to avoid the isolation, despair, and defiance that comes with atheism.[70] Importantly, Rorty is prepared to allow that

> Dewey's seemed, *and still seems*, a good way to keep the term 'God' in one's vocabulary, thus enabling one to keep some of the strands in one's web of belief which, at the time one became a naturalist, one had feared one might have to tease out.[71]

In various articles J. Wesley Robbins makes an association between Dewey's Darwinian inspired immediacy of experience with Rorty's equally Darwinian, but Davidsonian inspired, account of the immediacy of our linguistic contact with our environment.[72] This leads him to assert that

> Dewey and Rorty are both naturalists who believe that the creative power of human language use, in causal interaction with the surrounding environment, happens to be all that is left of God.[73]

Because Rorty extends Dewey's critique of antecedent reality Robbins believes that Rorty can be seen as "a latter day Deweyan religious humanist." He continues:

> Rorty's ironist, simply put, is a person who takes to heart Dewey's distinction between the religious as devotion to imaginatively projected

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[69] ibid., p. 71.

[70] ibid., pp. 69-70.

[71] Rorty, ibid., p. 70. (my italics).

[72] J. Wesley Robbins, '"You Will Be Like God": Richard Rorty and Mark C. Taylor on the Theological Significance of Human Language Use' in *The Journal of Religion* Vol. 72, 1992, pp. 381-392, 397-399. Also J. Wesley Robbins, 'A Neopragmatist Perspective on Religion and Science' in *Zygon,* Vol. 28, 1993, pp. 337-349.

[73] J. Wesley Robbins, 'Neo-pragmatism and the Radical Empiricist Metaphysics of Pure Experience' in *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy,* Vol. 14, 1993. p.34.

ideal values and a religion as beliefs about 'unseen higher powers' in which such ideals are antecedently realised.[74]

Indeed, he argues that Rorty's entire philosophy is "predicated on Dewey's distinction between a religion and a religious faith."[75] A devotion to ideal ends, which Dewey saw as determining religious faith, translates in Rorty's terminology as those commitments, hopes, doubts, alliances and projects that constitute our various final vocabularies.[76] As a consequence, Robbins believes that it is possible to assert that Rorty's account of philosophy amounts to a "projection of a religiously humanistic culture, the inspiration of which is, among others of his works, Dewey's *A Common Faith.*"[77]

However interesting this interpretation of Rorty's work is, it may not do complete justice to Rorty's own declared position. Rather than following this 'strong' account of Rorty and religion I have offered a 'weaker' version. I have suggested that Rorty is driven by a vision that hopes to balance the traditional philosophical concerns about truth with the further concern to balance freedom with justice. This vision points to the type of democratic community that Dewey saw as continuing aspects of the religious dimension of experience and is expressed within Rorty's own use of the prophetic strategy that he describes in others. This strategy is the Deweyan strategy by which actual conditions of existence are actively united with the ideal ends that the prophet calls into being. Rortyan prophecy, we might say, is centred on the image of Dewey's definition of God and requires a 'leap of faith' in the possibility of a Deweyan divine immanence, a commitment to the type of human inquiry (recontextualisation) that Dewey saw as unblocking the "highways

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[74] Robbins, 'A Neopragmatist Perspective on Religion and Science', op. cit., p.339.

[75] Robbins, 'When Christians Become Naturalists' in *Religious Studies* Vol. 28, 1992, p. 197.

[76] Robbins, 'A Neopragmatist Perspective on Religion and Science', op. cit., p.339.

[77] J. Wesley Robbins, 'Neo-Pragmatism and the Philosophy of Experience' in *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, Vol. 14, 1993, p. 177. Also see, J. Wesley Robbins, 'A Common Faith Revisited' in *Religious Humanism*, Vol. 28, 1994, p. 24.

of thought ... that lead to the future."[78] Such faith commitment, Rorty allows, is

'absolute' in the sense of an "unconditional obligation" rather than "objective

factuality." Rorty writes:

> To say that one has an absolute obligation, in the first sense, is to say, 'here I stand, I can do no other.' In the second sense, however, 'absolute' means something like 'objectively wrong,' where 'objectively' has the force of 'wrong whether or not you, or anyone else, can see its wrongness—yet you would only *fail* to see its wrongness if your mind were clouded by sin, prejudice, emotion, impure motives, or unfortunate cultural conditioning.'[79]

He denies that rejecting realism about God, or the good, or the self etc. makes it

impossible to hold absolute commitments in the first sense. Such commitments are

not related to something 'out there' that might underwrite them, but to the contingent

practices that make our life meaningful. For Rorty, the practices that matter are

those which emphasise our shared dignity and Christ as much as Socrates, should be

congratulated for giving Europe these practices.[80]   Unlike Charles Taylor, who

suggests that we can neither maintain moral realism nor abandon it without spiritual

loss and therefore need, in some way, to hold on to our realist intuitions while

recognising that in doing so we cannot escape from a 'personal resonance,'[81] Rorty

believes that human spiritual health is best promoted by following Dewey and

giving up all our anxieties about realism and anti-realism[82] Realism and anti-

realism should better be seen as a non-issue. Referring to *A Common Faith* Rorty

notes:

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[78] John Dewey, 'From Absolutism To Experimentalism' in G.P. Adams and W.P. Montague, (ed.) *Contemporary American Philosophy* Vol. 2. (New York: Macmillan, 1930) p. 26.

[79] Richard Rorty, 'The Seer of Prague' in *The New Republic*, July 1st 1991. p.39.

[80] ibid., pp. 39-40.

[81] Rorty refers here to Charles Taylor, *Sources of The Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.513.

[82] Rorty writes:

> ...if we could get rid of *both* ... [the] sense that we are meaningless unless we are getting something not ourselves right, *and* the Nietzschean sense that we are meaningless unless we create a world in our image ... then our spiritual state would be better than it is now,

Richard Rorty, 'Response to Farrell' in Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr. *Rorty and Pragmatism*, op.cit., p. 195.

Dewey thought that once the subject-object way of thinking faded out, so would the sense of awful and magnificent solitude which ensued upon the death of God, and so would any temptation to arrogant self celebration.[83]

We would then not worry about whether our absolute commitments have some transcendent factual objectivity 'out there', but see such transcendence as something like, 'what our commitments might mean to our descendants'; that is, something like Dewey's utopian hope that, Rorty notes, highlights Dewey's "highly secularised definition of faith"[84]–a faithfulness to ideal ends. As Rorty further notes:

> Dewey thought that, just as many Christians have outgrown the need to ask whether the sentences of the Creed correspond to objective reality, so civilisation as a whole might outgrow the supposed necessity to believe in absolute truths.[85]

The type of absolute commitment that Rorty can affirm, which is congruent with 'Christianity without correspondence' and with a Deweyan religious faith, need not be restricted to the private realm. Rorty now sees the difference between subjectivity and scholarship as the difference between needs that are satisfied privately and "needs which are widely shared, well publicized and freely debated"[86] Thus, like all other human enterprises, religion is neither no more nor no less a private matter than it is a public matter.[87]

8.4. Rorty's Use of a Religious Vocabulary:

Having considered Rorty's more positive treatment of religious belief I now wish to go one stage further and suggest that Rorty might find a definite use of a religious

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[83] Richard Rorty, 'Taylor on Self-Celebration and Gratitude' in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 54, 1994. p. 200.

[84] Richard Rorty, 'A Pragmatist View of Rationality and Cultural Difference', in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 42, 1992, pp. 589-590.

[85] Richard Rorty, 'Does Academic Freedom Have Presuppositions?' op. cit., p. 59.

[86] ibid., p.61.

[87] In a review of Alan Ryan's *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*, Rorty questions Ryan's claim that Dewey wanted religious belief without its epistemological price tag on the grounds that "pragmatists do not think that beliefs come with epistemological price tags attached. Nevertheless, under the influence of his 'tropological' God, Rorty still maintains that neither should religious belief come with social price tags. "All religious pragmatists need to do," he comments, "is to be reasonable, to keep their religion out of their scientific and political activities... ." Richard Rorty, 'Something To Steer By', in *London Review of Books*, 20th. June 1996. p.8.

vocabulary in his own network of beliefs and desires and that an anomaly in his own work calls for a 'religious' resolution. This suggestion will not be simply a matter of accusing Rorty of making the same mistake that he sees in the later Heidegger of leaning "over so far backward to avoid being one more ... metaphysician, one more theologian, that he ceases to reweave."[88] It is rather a matter of making a practical suggestion that at one point in his thinking, Rorty might find it useful to reweave a religious strand into his web of beliefs, especially if this religious strand, to use Rorty's words, is "not construed as an encounter with a pre-existent power that will rescue us."[89]

This 'knot' in Rorty's thought occurs when he comes close to allowing that one feature of our finitude—our experience of anguish, pain and suffering—cannot be recontextualised. He finds it hard, if not impossible, "to imagine a human life which felt itself complete."[90] He comments:

> The world can blindly and inarticulately crush us; mute *despair*, intense mental pain, can cause us to blot ourselves out. But that sort of power is not the sort we can appropriate by adopting and then transforming its language, ...[91]

It was to avoid such despair that led Dewey to keep the word 'God' as a strand in his web of beliefs, but Rorty has no such strand and thus no resource for recontextualising human suffering. He writes:

> ... our relation to the world, to brute power and to naked pain, is not the sort of relation we have to persons. Faced with the nonhuman, the nonlinguistic, we no longer have an ability to overcome contingency and pain by appropriation and transformation, but only the ability to *recognize* contingency and pain.[92]

This is not the Davidsonian point of the world's causal effect upon us, it is more an existential point that for a crucial aspect of our finitude, redescription becomes

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[88] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, op. cit., p. 73.
[89] ibid., p.74.
[90] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, op. cit., p.40.
[91] ibid., p.40.
[92] ibid., p.40.

impossible. Since resistance to redescription is a mark of Rorty's understanding of the divine trope, he may here by guilty of keeping something—pain and suffering—holy. Here, the metaphorical playfulness of redescription is just too difficult to imagine. For Cupitt and Dewey, this is not the case. Cupitt is able to partake of 'playful' recontextualisation because he still has a use for religion. For example, he notes that the 'sermon on the mount' is useful in "teaching that eternal life is to be completely and selflessly absorbed in the present fleeting moment."[93] By taking every moment as it comes we might make it easier to see our life as 'complete' at every moment. Religion helps us to imagine a recontextualisation of finitude and this might result in slightly less despair. Equally Cupitt notes:

> ... we might reinterpret Jesus' death for us. Dying he passed into the void for our sakes. He saw the Nihil as he died (Mark 15.34), and his having gone into it then helps me to go into it now. We are all going to have to put our heads into the black sock, you, me, everybody. He had to; but his despair may give us hope, if we can but bring ourselves to share it. Dying with Christ in the practice of religion, we go into the Nihil with him. We experience it while we are still alive. We die before death, and are thereby liberated for eternal, non-egoistic life now. If I have already died to Death in this way, I can accept my own insubstantiality and that of everything else, and live free from anxiety. That is religion.[94]

This issue is illuminated in a discussion of Helmut Peukert's political theology by the philosopher Thomas McCarthy. Political theology, McCarthy suggests, takes the view that:

> ... without religious faith we cannot avoid moral-political despair [and that] solidarity with the victims of history makes sense only on the assumption of a just God who reconciles virtue and happiness.[95]

In this way, it resembles Kant's second critique. Kant, as we saw in chapter two, believes that to avoid moral despair, moral action required the postulate of God's

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[93] Cupitt, *Creation Out of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 16.

[94] ibid., pp. 16-17. Note that Cupitt's use of the term 'void'; occurs 'within' religious vocabulary. It is not therefore used in de Man's sense. For Cupitt there is no 'mystic potency' to words, p.18.

[95] Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory*, (Cambridge, MA.: M.I.T. Press, 1991), p. 206.

existence. While such a postulate was subjectively held, it was produced within pure practical reason, that is, by rational faith. Peukert, notes McCarthy, employs Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action, rather than the Kantian second critique, to ground such rational faith. He thereby hopes to make possible a solidarity with the victims of history. In developing this point, Peukert draws upon a debate between Max Horkheimer and Walter Benjamin in which Horkheimer takes a view that resembles Rorty's refusal to recontextualise the human experience of pain and suffering. For Horkheimer, McCarthy notes, historical "injustice has happened and is over and done with. ... What happened to those human beings who have perished cannot be made good in the future."[96] Any thought of redescription is theological fancy. However, for Benjamin, who hopes for a historical solidarity with past generations by means of an empathetic memory, we cannot be totally non-theological in our attempts to transform the past. Peukert argues that Benjamin's desire for an anamnistic solidarity with history's victims is made possible if we draw upon Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action. Such a theory enables Peukert to restate Kant's postulate argument for God and thus to hope that the past will be transformed in God's all-consuming love. However, McCarthy finds Peukert's use of Habermas problematic. Mutual understanding, intersubjectivity and free non-coercive discussion are concomitant with undistorted communication rather than the teleological manifestation of the union of virtue and happiness. Happiness is part of the content of justice rather than its reward. However, Peukert thinks that the future happiness of a fulfilled, ideal, historical human community will be rendered an inhuman and a guilt-ridden nightmare if it is to be built upon the unredeemed and tortured bodies of past humanity. McCarthy comments that for Peukert:

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[96] Max Horkheimer, *Kritische Theorie* Vol. 1, p. 198. Quoted in McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions,* ibid., p. 207.

[w]ithout a rational faith in God and immortality to supply a background of hope to practical reason, moral-political practice in solidarity with the victims of history makes no sense; it can only lead to despair.[97]

While this despair cannot be used as an argument that says it cannot obtain, neither do we have to treat it as Rorty appears to, as a stubborn unrecontextualisible brute fact. Religious non-realists like Cupitt agree that the past is past, but will not remain content with Peukert's or Rorty's despair. They respond by allowing with Peukert that the ideas of religious faith provide resources that enable us to develop a sense of solidarity with the sufferings of past generations while denying Peukert's belief that such solidarity is only obtainable on the assumption of a 'Lord of History' outside of human practice. Religious non-realists would agree with McCarthy when he points out that the postulate argument Peukert professes furnishes us with subjective rather than objective knowledge of God. Rather than seeing this subjective knowledge in terms of the requirements of moral and practical reason, religious non-realists will follow Dewey and see it in terms of imagined ideal ends and their union with actual conditions. By projecting ideal ends, a religious faith may assist the type of empathetic and compassionate solidarity with the past that Benjamin envisages without the despair that follows from accepting the finitude of the past. Nothing can redeem the suffering of those victims of the terrible events that constitute such historical horrors as the Holocaust, but a religious faith with the memory of the suffering of human beings at its centre and guided by projected ideal ends for a better, more just, future, will attempt to incorporate as part of its own self-understanding an identification with the victims of history.

Religious belief provides a vocabulary in which 'naked pain' and 'brute power' can be recontextualised and transformed. Cupitt agrees with Rorty that everything is contingent, that the world is de-divinised "and everything is negotiable."[98] But he writes:

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[97] ibid., p. 211.
[98] Cupitt, *Creation out of Nothing*, op. cit., pp. 16, 17.

I differ from Rorty only in that I find that to survive in our post-modern universe made only of contingencies, relativities and interpretation, I need more resources than Rorty's ... account supplies.[99]

For Cupitt, religion *is* the acceptance of contingency through ritual.[100] For Dewey a religious faith connects us with nature in such a way as to assuage us from despair. Both find a use for religion in its ability to provide a vocabulary for recontextualising our experience of human pain and suffering. This vocabulary, I suggest, is one that Rorty could choose to use, for he allows that once we see a use for a certain vocabulary for fulfilling a purpose, including a Christian vocabulary[101] we should use it. It was used in the past, he suggests, to alleviate cruelty, perhaps today, it can be recontextualised and used in the way Cupitt and Dewey suggest.

Since Rorty admits that the manipulation of metaphors can cause us to "gain or lose religious faith,"[102] and since his liberal ironism requires "as much imaginative acquaintance with alternative final vocabularies as possible"[103] we might hope that Rorty may become more imaginative about religion, for only a "lack of ingenuity" can hinder our ability to recontextualise.[104] We can *argue* that he should separate his tropological God from his conception of religion, but adopting Rorty's own style, it might be more effective to persuade him toward more ingenious recontextualisations of religious belief.[105]

8. 5. Conclusion:

In this penultimate chapter I have discussed Rorty's attitude to religious belief. He is an atheist who claims that a religious vocabulary is no longer of much social use. Nevertheless he has been shown to have both a negative tropological use for 'God'

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[99] ibid., p.16.

[100] ibid., p.17.

[101] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, op. cit., p.55.

[102] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, op. cit., p. 163.

[103] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, op. cit., p. 92.

[104] ibid., p. 134.

[105] As David Hall points out the most effective critique of Rorty will be to employ a sympathetic misreading of his work. Hall, *Richard Rorty: Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism*, op. cit., pp. 9-10, 169.

and a more positive attitude to a religious vocabulary that has been suitably de-divinised. Such a vocabulary is offered in 'Sea of Faith' religious non-realism and by John Dewey in his book *A Common Faith.* I have suggested that although Rorty does not affirm such a religious vocabulary himself, he cannot criticise those who do. Further, I have suggested, that a recontextualisation of Rorty's own 'final vocabulary' so that it includes a more explicit affirmation of a 'religious' stand would help reweave a certain knot in his own complex of beliefs and desires. In the concluding chapter I shall argue that, despite his atheism, a theological appropriation of Rorty's work is possible. Not only does it mesh well with, and help articulate, the self understanding of 'Sea of Faith' religious non-realism, it also provides it with an argumentative resource by which it might defend itself against alternative religious critical realist positions.

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSION

9.1. Introduction:

In this thesis I have summarised the main ideas associated with some of the prominent writers belonging to the religious non-realist 'Sea of Faith' network. By far the most significant of these writers and the inspiration behind the network is Don Cupitt. Cupitt argues that the intellectual history of the last four hundred years, and pressures internal to religious belief and ethical practice suggest that religious non-realism, rather than religious realism, is now a genuine inheritor of the Christian tradition. I have emphasised the pragmatic strand both in the 'Sea of Faith' writers and in Cupitt's early and later accounts of religious non-realism. I have argued that this pragmatic element in their work is paralleled in the religious thought of John Dewey. However, Cupitt prefers to appeal to the neo-pragmatism of Richard Rorty. In the latter part of this thesis I have attempted to defend this appeal by addressing three major issues related to the interpretation of Rorty's work: that in matters of truth he is an epistemological subjectivist, that his pragmatism leads to a dangerously cynical political ideology and that his atheism offers little or no support to a religious mentality. I have challenged these claims. While Rorty was to some degree responsible for making these interpretations of his work credible, his position has not been static. Changes in his position in relation to the first two concerns make appeal to Rorty's ideas by religious non-realists more palatable than might first appear. His work neither necessarily implies subjectivism in matters of truth nor cynicism about the social good. Thus, the association of religious non-realism with Rorty's pragmatism need not lead the religious non-realist to fear that they are being yoked to an apology for relativism, for fascism or for idealism and its anti-realist cognates. Equally, despite his avowal of atheism, I have argued that Rorty has a positive as well as a negative use of religious belief.

Further, while not necessarily going as far as J Wesley Robbins in viewing Rorty as a Deweyan religious thinker, an incorporation of a religious vocabulary into Rorty's pragmatism may assist him in resolving certain remaining problematic features in his work. In this concluding chapter I want to consider some of the practical gains for religious non-realists from a theological appropriation of Rorty's work.

One such, directs our attention to the possible future development of religious non-realism in terms of its relation to, and interaction with, other theological perspectives influenced by pragmatism. Future study might investigate the similarities and differences between 'Sea of Faith' religious non-realism and the pragmatic strand in the work of theologians influenced by Wittgenstein, such as D.Z. Phillips and Gareth Moore. According to this theological interpretation of Wittgenstein, it makes no sense to talk of divine reality as lying hidden behind the veil of language. The way you use the word 'God', noted Wittgenstein, "... does not show *whom* you mean but rather *what* you mean."[1] As D.Z. Phillips argues:

> ... language is not a screen which hides God from us. On the contrary, the idea of God *in* the language ... is the idea of a hidden God.[2]

Gareth Moore also points out that to look for God behind language, as if language were a medium between us and God, is to hold a view of language that leads us to search for God in the wrong place. "The impossibility of describing God," he writes, "comes from there being nothing there to describe." And yet, he adds:

> ... on the other hand, it is very easy to describe God: God is merciful, compassionate, omnipotent, just, watchful, faithful; and God is everything that Jesus Christ shows him to be. But such a description of God is not a description of a something we know not what: ...[3]

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[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 50e.

[2] D.Z. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism*, (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 289.

[3] Gareth Moore, *Believing in God*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), p. 56. Moore indicates that "the language in which we talk about God is like the rest of our language *our* language." (p. 55). For Moore to fear and to trust God (p. 123), to love God (p. 126), to pray to God (pp. 60-62), and even the creative activity of God (pp. 278-279) can all be understood in the context of the last sentence of his book. "We may say:" he writes, "people do not discover religious truths, they make them." (p. 287).

A second group of theologians, also influenced by pragmatism and with whom religious non-realists might find fruitful dialogue, are those broadly termed 'radical American religious empiricists' such as Gordon D. Kaufman, Sallie McFague, Jerome A. Stone and Everett J. Tarbox[4]. A prime example of this group of theologians is William Dean. Like Cupitt, Dean values both science and religion and calls for spiritual renewal based upon the establishment of sacred conventions.[5] Such conventions, he argues, are human creations but will also take on a life of their own.

Important though these interactions with other theological traditions influenced by pragmatism are, I shall concentrate upon two other practical gains that follow for religious non-realists from a theological appropriation of pragmatism. These relate to Rorty's figure of the prophetic liberal ironist, discussed in chapter seven, which articulates significant elements of the non-realist's self-understanding and his pragmatic antirepresentationalism, discussed in chapter six, which provides them with an argumentative resource they might choose to employ in order to defend their position against alternative critical realist accounts of religious belief.

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[4] Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Age*, (London: SCM Press, 1987); Jerome A. Stone, 'The Viability of Religious Naturalism', in *The American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, Vol. 14, 1993, pp. 35-42; Everett J. Tarbox Jr., 'Linguistic Pragmatism, William James and Ludwig Wittgenstein', in *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, Vol. 15, 1994, pp. 43-58. While theologians like Kaufman and McFague still claim to be realists, Joseph Runzo in the case of Kaufman (Joseph Runzo, 'Realism, Non-Realism and Atheism', in Runzo (ed.), *Is God Real?*, op. cit., pp. 154-156, 174) and David Bromell in the case of McFague (David J. Bromell, 'Sallie McFague's Metaphorical Theology', in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 16, 1993, pp. 485-503; see pp. 499-501), have pointed out how close their position is to that of the pragmatic non-realist. For McFague, our metaphors for God (and the metaphor 'God') do 'refer' to "a power ... which is on the side of life and its fulfilment." (Sallie McFague, *Models of God*, op. cit., p. 195) But this, as she points out, is itself a linguistic construction made up of metaphors which produce rather than imitate reality. (ibid., p. 192) She admits, therefore:

> ... the main criterion for a 'true' theology is pragmatic, preferring those models of God that are most helpful in the praxis of bringing about fulfilment for living beings.

ibid., p. 196. For a further discussion of the theological implications of this tradition see Terence Reynolds, 'Two McFagues: Meaning, Truth, and Justification in 'Models of God'', in *Modern Theology*, Vol. 11, 1995, pp. 289-313; see also John Avery, 'Three Types of American Neo-Pragmatism', in *Journal of Philosophical Research*, Vol. 18, 1993, pp. 1-13.

[5] William Dean, *The Religious Critic in American Culture*, (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), especially chapters 7 and 8. See also his 'Sheltering Skies: A Response' in *The American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, Vol. 16, 1995, pp. 87-98.

9.2. Prophetic Liberal Ironism and Christian Ironism:

Anthony Thiselton, contrasts what he terms 'Rorty's socio-pragmatic hermeneutics' unfavourably with the 'socio-critical hermeneutics' of Jürgen Habermas.[6] However, I want to suggest that a Rortyan pragmatism is not as disagreeable to theology as Thiselton argues. That Rorty does not affirm a personal religious faith should not be taken as negating the possibility of a theological appropriation of his work. For Thiselton, Habermas and Rorty represent different ends of a spectrum which finds its centre in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer.[7] Whereas Habermas' hermeneutic "reaches beyond the horizon of particular persons or communities"[8] toward the possibility of a trans-contextual critique of human practice, Rorty insists that this is not possible. Criteria for a trans-contextual critique of human practice, "remain relative to what is perceived to *count* as criteria within a given social community."[9] Thus, according to Thiselton, Rorty's account of hermeneutics denies to Christians the possibility of seeing in the cross of Jesus a critical perspective on the world. In Rorty's pragmatism, notes Thiselton "the cross is controlled, domesticated and transposed into a construct of the linguistic world of some given community. The cross performs no trans-contextual function."[10]

For Thiselton, a theology of the cross must perform such a function and therefore Christian theology must share some common concerns with the socio-critical hermeneutics associated with Habermas, who alongside Karl-Otto Apel, the later Wittgenstein and the atheistic deconstructive critique of post-modernism associated with Christopher Norris are all marshalled by Thiselton into a critique of Rorty's socio-pragmatism.[11] In Thiselton's eyes these writers provide philosophical support for the idea that it is possible for us to bridge our own contextual boundaries and assert the validity of notions like 'the common behaviour of mankind'. As we

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[6] Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, (London: Harper Collins, 1992), Chapter 11.
[7] ibid., p. 6.
[8] ibid., p. 7.
[9] ibid., p. 7.
[10] ibid., p. 7.
[11] ibid., chapter 11 and pp. 540-550.

have seen, Rorty would reply that there are contexts in which talk of trans-contextual bridges might make sense, but that these bridges are built by a community as it expands what it takes to be "us" to include more of "them." For Thiselton, to follow Rorty would be to make theology hostage to the imperial claims of American cosmopolitanism.[12] However, an antipathy to meta-critical theory does not necessarily lead to one specific cultural or political direction. It need not mean accepting as one's own, the contextual setting which is Rorty's. Rather it can mean acknowledging our own responsibility for our continued commitment to a Christian context in which the meaning and purpose of our lives and the lives of other people is understood and given expression.

In a rare discussion of theology, Habermas notes, contra Thiselton, that a trans-historical human solidarity does not need "an experience *accessible only in the language of the Christian tradition.*"[13] While it is the case that human solidarity cannot be separated from a dependence upon a certain degree of historical favourableness "this favourableness," Habermas notes, "is still no licence for the assumption of a divine promise of salvation."[14] Habermas asserts the plausibility of speaking of a 'transcendence from within', but adds that an awareness of the limits of such transcendence "does not enable us to ascertain the *countermovement* of a compensating transcendence from beyond."[15] Commenting upon the assertion of Charles Davis, that "a secular hope without religion cannot affirm with certainty ... a future fulfilment,"[16] Habermas argues that he does "not see why [such] a *superadditum* is indispensable in order that we would endeavour to act according to moral commands."[17]

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[12] ibid., pp. 27-28, 398-401.

[13] Jürgen Habermas, 'Transcendence From Within. Transcendence in this World' [E.T. Eric Crump and Peter P. Kenny]. In Don S. Browning and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Habermas, Modernity and Public Theology*, (New York: Crossroads, 1992), p. 238. Also see William J. Meyer, 'Private Faith or Public Religion?: An Assessment of Habermas's Changing View of Religion', in *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 75, 1995. pp. 371-391.

[14] Habermas, 'Transcendence From Within. Transcendence in this World' op. cit., p. 238.

[15] ibid., p. 238.

[16] ibid., p. 238.

[17] ibid., pp. 238-239.

If Habermas is persuaded to talk in theological terms he prefers what he terms 'methodical atheism' which he associates with the Danish theologian Jens Glebe-Möller. Habermas emphasises Glebe-Möller's atheistic vision of the ideal communicative fellowship: a vision in which God remains unthinkable, but in which, we strive ourselves to bring about a solidarity which makes a positive use of the loss, guilt and pain of the human condition; and a practical use of Jesus' example, without employing any notion of divine deliverance.[18] Habermas even goes a stage further in his antipathy to religion. He asserts that if religious language is to have any meaning today it must risk the loss of its identity and be translated into the language of scientific culture.[19] Rorty's pragmatism, on the other hand, will allow that if religious belief can be shown to serve a useful purpose no such translation need be demanded. Like Habermas, Rorty insists that religion will need to reconstruct its arguments into secular terms if its proponents are to have a place in public debate. But unlike Habermas, Rorty notes:

> 'Reconstructing the arguments in purely secular terms' just means 'dropping reference to the source of the premises of the arguments' and that this omission seems a reasonable price to pay for religious liberty.[20]

In that neither Dewey's religious naturalism nor Cupitt's religious non-realism share realist premises there can be no objection that Rorty could raise against allowing them both a place in *public* debate.

Thiselton recognises that his own appeal to Habermas, while providing *tools* for developing a socio-critical trans-contextual understanding of the cross, also "constitutes a theological transposition of Habermas' social theory into a new or different key"[21]. I wish to argue that Rorty's pragmatic antirepresentationalism can also undergo 'theological transposition into a new and different key': one in which Rorty's hostility to religion is cancelled out by his freeing of religious discourse

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[18] ibid., pp. 235-236. Also see Jens Glebe-Möller, *A Political Dogmatic*, (E.T. Thor Hall. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p.112.

[19] J. Habermas, 'Transcendence From Within. Transcendence in this World' op. cit., p. 234.

[20] Richard Rorty, 'Religion as a Conversation-Stopper', in *Common Knowledge*, Vol. 3, 1994, p. 5.

[21] Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, op. cit., p. 393.

within the open, 'general conversation of mankind' which liberal institutions try to keep going. In some respects, Rorty's anti-trans-contextualism is confirmed by Thiselton's desire to see Habermas' socio-critical hermeneutics within the context of a specifically Christian construal of his work. I now wish to suggest that a specifically Christian construal of Rortyan pragmatism, contra Thiselton, can affirm the transformative power of the crucified Christ as a means of encouraging human solidarity. In order to do this, it will be useful to remind ourselves of the characteristics of Rorty's prophetic liberal ironist.

Rorty's figure exhibits at least four characteristics. First, she recognises that her own commitment to justice and human solidarity is itself contingent. Claims to ground solidarity on anything more stable are seen by her as "platitudes used to inculcate the local final vocabulary."[22] Yet, writes Rorty, such commitment "can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that ... [it] ... is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance."[23] Second, the liberal ironist is committed to the notion that cruelty is the worst thing we can inflict on other people.[24] She does not look for '*reasons*' to care, but tries to ensure she "*notices* suffering when it occurs"[25] in order to help prevent or alleviate it. Her commitment to the "hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease"[26] remains an ironic, ungrounded, historically contingent hope. Third, she is someone who refuses to answer the question, "How do you decide when to struggle against injustice and when to devote yourself to private projects of self-creation?"[27] because there is no general answer to such a question. Only by the contingencies of local events can one judge the answer, and these answers will differ. What she does know is that she needs both

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[22] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 76-77.
[23] ibid., p. 189.
[24] ibid., pp. 73-74; 92-93.
[25] ibid., p. 93.
[26] ibid., p. xv.
[27] ibid., p. xv.

the vocabulary of justice and the vocabulary of self-creation. She also knows that she initially needs to keep these vocabularies separate from each other. This is because "most people do not want to be redescribed." Rorty continues:

> They want to be taken on their own terms ... The ironist tells them that the language they speak is up for grabs by her and her kind. There is something potentially very cruel about that claim ... redescription often humiliates.[28]

For this reason Rorty's ironist is always a liberal—someone who is prepared to redescribe every final vocabulary while continuing to be sensitive to the humiliation such redescription might cause. The prophetic liberal ironist wants more solidarity than we have now, but she believes it is a mistake to think that 'reasons' for such solidarity are independent of our creating it. If we think there are independent reasons, the sceptic can use his rejection of these reasons as an excuse not to seek solidarity.[29] The prophetic liberal ironist wants to eliminate this excuse as much as she wants to abandon universalism and essentialism. Rorty notes:

> She thinks of final vocabularies as poetic achievements rather than as fruits of diligent inquiry according to antecedently formulated criteria.[30]

Fourth, because redescription is a continuous process "of diversification and novelty rather than convergence to the antecedently present,"[31] the prophetic liberal ironist will take care to be skilful enough to redescribe by persuasion rather than force.[32] Part of this skill will be the ability "to separate the question 'Do you believe and desire what we believe and desire?' from the question 'Are you suffering?'"[33] A further part of this skill will be the ability to allow one's sensibilities to such suffering to support a move from irony to politics by instantiating persuasive prophetic visions of a more just community or a community more at ease because it has less problems to trouble it. These abilities will be part of the further skill to

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[28] ibid., pp. 89-90.
[29] ibid., p. 196.
[30] ibid., p. 77.
[31] ibid., p. 77.
[32] ibid., pp. 60-61.
[33] ibid., p. 198.

"work with the final vocabulary we have, while keeping our ears open for hints about how it might be expanded or revised."[34]   Such an ability, Rorty believes, is one more readily practised by the prophetic liberal ironist than the metaphysician who believes he has a fixed universal criteria for ethical action. The difference between the prophetic liberal ironist and the metaphysical ethicist is not, according to Rorty, that the former is engaged in constant redescription of the world which may humiliate people, while the latter is not, for "redescription and possible humiliation are no more closely connected with ironism than with metaphysics."[35] Rather, it is that "[t]he metaphysician ... thinks that there is a connection between redescription and power, and that the right redescription can make us free,"[36] The prophetic liberal ironist will see a greater danger of humiliation from the vocabulary of the metaphysical ethicist who substitutes persuasive skill for a claim to be speaking of a power greater than ourselves.

The prophetic liberal ironist hopes to combine public and private vocabularies—to combine a concern for truth with further concerns for social justice and the protection of liberal freedom. In doing so, Rorty believes, she resembles "Christians (and others) for whom the search for private perfection coincides with the project of living for others ..."[37] Perhaps, if Rorty were not so dominated by his negative tropological conception of God he might be more explicit in acknowledging that much of what he attributed to liberalism, in terms of its relevance to public concern for human solidarity, is also part of the public vocabulary of contemporary Christianity. He might then allow the possibility of a 'Christian ironist' who like the prophetic liberal ironist desires both a vocabulary of private self-creation and a vocabulary of public concern. Any such 'Christian ironist' would be committed to the Christian concern for one's neighbour in the terms of a 'Christian', rather than a 'liberal' vocabulary, while recognising that there is no extra-

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[34] ibid., p. 197.
[35] ibid., p. 90.
[36] ibid., pp. 90-91.
[37] ibid., p. 143.

human guarantee for such a vocabulary nor any philosophical or historical necessity about them. She would accept, in Cupitt's words, that

> In this shifting relativistic world of ours, we can still choose our values and fight for them, but our beliefs won't have the old kind of permanent anchorage in an unchanging ideal order.[38]

Having reminded ourselves of these characteristics of Rorty's prophetic liberal ironist, we can now compare her vocabulary and the vocabulary of the religious non-realist. To develop this comparison I shall relate some Rortyan remarks to the theological views expressed by Graham Shaw.

Like the prophetic liberal ironist, the Christian ironist would acknowledge that today the sermon has largely been replaced by the novel, the movie and T.V. programmes, as a source of moral guidance.[39] She would also acknowledge, with the liberal ironist, that these media are able to bring about social reform not by appealing to divine imperatives or some Habermasian universal criteria, but piecemeal, by characterising local situations.[40] A novel like *Bleak House*, writes Rorty

> ... aroused participative emotions which helped change the laws of England, and ... [was] ... written so as to keep right on producing tingles between the shoulder blades long after the particular horrors of Dickens's century had been replaced by new ones.[41]

The Christian ironist would agree, but would see the Bible in a similar fashion. She will suggest that scripture can have a similar effect as Dickens' novels. The gospel story of the life and death of Jesus, re-enacted in the Eucharist, brings similar kinds of tingles with equal social consequences.[42] Such sentimentality is not simply a private matter but rather also a matter of our public responsibility.

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[38] Cupitt, 'Anti-Realist Faith', in Joseph Runzo (ed.) *Is God Real?*, (London: Macmillan, 1993), p. 48.
[39] ibid., p.46. Also see Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, op. cit., p. xvi.
[40] Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, op. cit., p. 79.
[41] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, op. cit., p. 147. (Also see p. 148.)
[42] David Hart, *Faith in Doubt: Non Realism and Christian Belief*, (London: Mowbray, 1993), pp. 92-93.

Graham Shaw accepts that religious belief is a private, self-creative quest for perfection. He writes:

> When I invoke God, I am being truly creative. No image is being imposed upon me. ... in prayer, in relation to the God of my imagining, I develop a self I can respect. In praising my God I learn the value of my imagination.[43]

He is ironic about the attempts of humans to seek supernatural power to reverse the contingencies of life.[44] Such attempts are futile and succeed only to buttress the position of the powerful authority figures, within the social structures of the religion they claim to serve.[45] This futile attempt occurred in Christianity with the development of the resurrection myth. This myth attempts to reinstate the 'God of Power' over the 'God of Peace' conveyed by Jesus in his suffering death on the cross.[46] For Shaw, the creator God, the judging God, the redeeming God who will intervene in the world to put everything right, is the 'God of Power' repudiated in the cross of Jesus. The effect of the 'God of Power' was that it "cloaked the violence of men [so that] the glory of God hid the self-regard of his agents."[47] Yet Jesus, writes Shaw

> ... was content to be deprived of all human power and stripped of all human prestige, because only in that way could the integrity of the man of God be demonstrated. ... only the man on the cross without power or prestige can speak to us of a God which our suspicion cannot sully.[48]

Out of Shaw's private irony emerges a sense of Christian identity—its association with the weak, the powerless and the victim. This is similar to Rorty's liberal whose identity rests in her concern for the humiliated and her desire to avoid cruelty. For Shaw, the cross reveals the Christian God to be "a God who can sustain the self-respect of the victim".[49] Such a God is proclaimed against the realist God of power

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[43] Graham Shaw, *God in Our Hands*, (London: SCM Press, 1987), p. 220.
[44] ibid., p. 186. Compare this with Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, op. cit., p. 75.
[45] Shaw, *God in Our Hands*, op. cit., pp. 153. ff.
[46] ibid., pp. 114, 121-122, 136.
[47] ibid., p. 135.
[48] ibid., pp. 135-136.
[49] ibid., p. 239.

which, according to Shaw, encouraged "human beings to seek privilege and shun solidarity."[50] Summarising his understanding of what Jesus reveals to us, Shaw writes:

> The disconcerting feature of his goodness is precisely that it has discarded all claim to power, human or divine; it does not need them. The man of God needs neither the violent defence of men nor the privileged intervention of an Almighty God ... The utter vulnerability of goodness is displayed without equivocation, in a way which makes it possible to realise that our wretchedness comes not from the pain we suffer but from the damage we inflict. Instead of feeling threatened and looking for protection, *the victim directs our attention toward our own destructiveness.*[51]

Shaw sees in the suffering death of Jesus the source of human solidarity which does not require the God of power. Rorty claims that "victims of cruelty ... do not have much language"[52] and therefore, someone else will have to speak for them. For Rorty, the novelist and the journalist are good at this. For Shaw the gospel writers, who attest to the God of Jesus do this (however tempted they might have been by the God of power). They tell us that the man of the cross should not remind us of our victories but of our victims.[53]

Like Rorty, Shaw is very keen to emphasise human self-creation. For Shaw, religion is the means by which I can be true to myself.[54] But, also like Rorty, Shaw sees the source of human solidarity in our avoiding the danger of inflicting pain and humiliation on other people, that is, in a 'common danger' rather than a "common possession or a shared power."[55] Picking up on the notion that human solidarity comes from a similar danger, Shaw writes:

> ... in the mirror which the crucifixion holds up to us we lack not power but pity and peace. For us the cross remains a haunting symbol not least because it reflects our ruthless and destructive possibilities. Mankind with nuclear power in its possession no longer kneels to an Almighty

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[50] ibid., p. 110.
[51] ibid., p. 124 (my italics).
[52] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, op. cit., p. 94.
[53] Shaw, *God in Our Hands*, op. cit. p. 129.
[54] ibid., pp. 192, 220-223.
[55] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, op. cit., p. 91.

God. As we come to recognise our real needs the religions of power must give way to a religion of peace.[56]

A religion of peace, rather than a religion of power is best suited to the cause of human solidarity. For both Rorty and Shaw, human solidarity is created by seeing the dignity of the human stranger as a potential fellow sufferer. In this way they combine private and public vocabularies within a prophetic vision of a new humanity.

Given this it seems difficult to agree with Anthony Thiselton that "[s]ocial pragmatism accepts only social winners as criteria for truth."[57] Whatever 'truth' might mean here Rorty is clear that human solidarity

> ... is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalise people different from ourselves by thinking, "They do not feel it as *we* would, ...[58]

Neither does Rorty 'domesticate' the cross. Recognising that "Nietzsche was absolutely ... wrong to treat Christianity and ... [democracy] as signs of human degeneration,"[59] he acknowledges that after dispensing with 'God and his doubles' the Cross takes on a far more important role in Christianity. He writes:

> Pragmatism seems to me ... a philosophy of solidarity rather than of despair. From this point of view, Christianity's turn from an Omnipotent Creator to the man who suffered on the cross, ... can be seen as ... [a].... preparation for the act of social faith which is suggested by a Nietzschean view of truth[60]

Contra Thiselton: a socio-pragmatic, Christian ironism can centre on a theology of the cross. Contra Habermas: a cross centred theology for human solidarity is possible.

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[56] Shaw, *God in Our Hands*, op. cit., p. 21.
[57] Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, op. cit., p. 550.
[58] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, op. cit., p. xvi.
[59] Richard Rorty, 'Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality', in *The Yale Review*, Vol. 81, 1993, p. 17.
[60] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, op. cit., p. 33.

Having suggested that Rorty's pragmatism is capable of sustaining a counter-cultural theology of the cross, I now intend to discuss a further practical gain for non-realists who adopt pragmatism by showing how a Rortyan account of the Davidsonian triangulation of truth articulates an argumentative resource that non-realists might employ in defence of their position against alternative critical religious realist positions.

9.3. Rorty's Pragmatism and the Debate Between Religious Non-realists and Religious Critical Realists:

For religious critical realists, versions of realist faith which emphasise divine revelation or human reason as the basis of our epistemological access to divine reality do not always fully appreciate the extent to which our epistemological capacities shape and condition the reality that they convey. Like non-realists, critical realists point out that what we take to be divine revelation always comes in 'ready-made' cultural packages relevant to the specific psychological and social background of the individuals or communities who receive and interpret the revelation.. They argue that reality is to a large degree constructed by the rational procedures available to humans as knowers. For religious critical realists, the reality of God, as well as the realities of the physical world, *are* independent of us but are necessarily understood and shaped in language and conveyed through media that reflect the psychological, sociological and cultural conditions which any particular observer will always manifest, and which thereby limit the claims of any observer to 'describe' the realities being referred to as they are in themselves. Janet Martin Soskice summarises 'religious critical realism' when she writes:

> ... we are saying that the theist can reasonably take his talk of God, bound as it is within a wheel of images, as being reality depicting, while at the same time acknowledging its inadequacy as description.[61]

And Arthur Peacocke notes:

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[61] Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p.141.

> Critical realism in theology would maintain that theological concepts and
> models should be regarded as partial and inadequate, but necessary and,
> indeed the only ways of referring to the reality that is named as 'God' ...[62]

Critical realists therefore, view language as an inadequate but necessary medium for representing divine reality. Inadequacy, for them, indicates the inability of language, or other representational media, to convey directly to us the entities necessarily referred to or depicted by these media.

For John Hick, critical realism holds:

> ... that the world as we experience it is a distinctively human construction
> arising from the impacts of a real environment upon our sense organs, but
> conceptualised in consciousness and language in culturally developed
> forms.[63]

For Hick, the philosophical background to critical realism was provided by Kant's analysis of the categories of human understanding and our conceptual intuition of space and time, producing thereby a distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal world: that is, between the world unknowable by us and *that* world understood through the conditions which make knowledge possible for human beings. Hick suggests, in effect, that Kant is applying to our knowledge of the physical world a distinction which has long been part of our traditional understanding of God, that is, between God as God's self, completely unknowable by us, which Hick calls 'the Real', and God as we perceive God to be.[64] Hick notes that since Kant's time we recognise even more the contribution made by language, culture, history, social background and psychological make-up in shaping our awareness of the environment around us and also "that ultimate environment ... of which the religions speak."[65] This ultimate environment, 'the Real', like Kant's noumena, cannot be directly encountered but is available within, and approached by,

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[62] Arthur Peacocke, *Theology For A Scientific Age*, (London: S.C.M. Press, 1993 Enlarged Edition), p.14.

[63] John Hick, 'Religious Realism and Non-realism', in Joseph Runzo (ed.) *Is God Real?*, op. cit., p. 5.

[64] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 241.

[65] John Hick, 'Religious Realism and Non-realism', op. cit., pp. 5-6.

culturally specific religious discourse and experience.[66] Thus our experience of 'the Real' and the language in which this is expressed will always be inadequate as an actual description of 'the Real' in itself.

A rather different account of critical realism is provided by Soskice. For her, metaphor provides the necessary but inadequate medium for representing reality. Towards the end of her book *Metaphor and Religious Language* she writes:

> All the metaphors which we use to speak of God arise from experiences of that which cannot adequately be described, of that which Jews and Christians believe to be 'He who is'.[67]

Soskice correctly rebuts the view that metaphors are merely rhetorical tropes. They are, she writes, "figures of speech whereby we speak of one thing in forms which are seen to be suggestive of another"[68] They can, therefore, be understood as referring terms within a causal theory of reference. That is, Soskice's causal theory of reference asserts that when we say in faith, 'whatever caused this experience is God' and then go on to depict this God as 'love', 'father', 'spirit', etc., we engage in a dubbing event in which metaphors make referential claims. Metaphors not only say something which cannot be said in any other way, they also refer to entities which cannot be referred to in any other way. Such entities include the theoretical entities of science and the supernatural entities of religious belief. However, while metaphors may refer, they do not offer literal descriptions of that to which they refer. God is not literally 'a father' nor, in science, do genes literally 'pass on information that is written into them'. As straightforward descriptions of things, metaphors are to be regarded as inadequate. As a result, we might be led to abandon certain metaphorical references and the network of associations, or models, that they inhabit, as failing to refer. Phlogiston is mentioned by Soskice in this respect.[69] We do not, therefore, need proof of the existence of such entities in order to make a

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[66] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, op. cit., p. 14.
[67] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, op. cit., p. 160.
[68] ibid., p. 15.
[69] ibid., p. 131.

reference but we do need a designation that fits our experience. In relation to references to God we need a designation of God which, writes Soskice, "if it existed, Christians would be obliged to say was God."[70] Anselm's designation of 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' seems to fit the bill, but if it was shown that such a designation could not reasonably be understood in personalistic terms or if it were to go the way of phlogiston, then theists must be prepared to admit to have held errant beliefs. For Soskice, realism always means being prepared to be wrong.[71] She believes that metaphors, while revisable and inadequate, are sufficient for depicting the experience that religious people have when they talk of God and that such depiction is enough to guarantee the veracity of the critical realist's position. For her, the fact that we cannot describe God is an advantage because it shows that the transcendence of God passes beyond all our attempts to capture divine reality in language. It also means, in relation to the natural world, that our science need not "mirror the world in unrevisable fashion"[72] in order to be considered as reality depicting.

However, many realists, including Brian Hebblethwaite and Michael Durrant, have suggested that critical realism is not realist enough.[73] For Durrant, Soskice's account of reference does not guarantee that God is in fact a real entity. Indeed, non-realists accept the view, affirmed by both Hick and Soskice, that "theological models must be understood contextually"[74] and they can also accepts Soskice's causal theory of reference. In a purely causal theory of reference, that which words name, for example 'the blood hound of Baker Street' or 'the Iron Lady', need not refer to a 'real thing' and thus notions like 'correspondence' or 'representation' are not

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[70] ibid., p. 139.

[71] ibid., pp. 139-140, 152.

[72] ibid., p. 136..

[73] Hebblethwaite disagrees with the type of epistemological realism associated with John Hick. Such a realism risks giving the impression that we are cut off from the world by our concepts. Instead, Hebblethwaite's is an ontological religious realism. The world is as observation says it is and God is as revelation says God is. Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Ocean of Truth: A Defence of Objective Theism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 71-85, 102-113, 139-149.

[74] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, op. cit., p. 153.

involved. The causal theory on its own makes no distinction that would enable it to divide what is a real thing from what is not. For non-realists, who are also pragmatists, what counts as successful reference is the contribution it makes in assisting our coping with the world by the naming of various portions within it. In this view of reference, language works to serve our purposes rather than mediating to us some antecedently existing 'real thing'. Thus, like the reference to the 'blood hound of Baker Street', the metaphorical dubbing that refers to God as 'that which caused this religious experience' need not make a reference to anything outside of our human creativity. This is the point that Durrant makes. For him, reference without some prior knowledge or description of what is being referred to is an impossible realist position. He writes:

> In order to determine that ... an experience is of God we must first be able to truly claim that God is of such a nature that such experiences are of him; ... [this would] demand that *some* prior description of God is possible, ... which Soskice denies.[75]

In order to make her view more plausible, Soskice places the emphasis of her account of reference on culturally oriented religious experiences. Metaphorical references in religion are, she writes, "... stumbling approximations used to articulate experiences judged to be of God."[76] Because reference need not imply correspondence, Soskice, like Hick, supports her claim that metaphorical references are reality depicting by pointing to cultural and psychological experiences of God which can equally well be interpreted in non-realist terms. As Hebblethwaite acknowledges:

> ... an argument from religious experience for the reality of God ... is extremely vulnerable to alternative psychological and sociological explanation as Cupitt [is] quick to point out.[77]

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[75] Michael Durrant, 'Reference and Critical Realism' in *Modern Theology*, Vol. 5, 1989. p. 142.
[76] ibid., p. 153.
[77] Brian Hebblethwaite, 'Reflections on Realism vs. Non-realism' in Joseph Runzo (ed.), *Is God Real?*, op. cit., p. 210.

Given the premise of the critical realist's epistemological distinction between cultural or metaphorical oriented reference and literal description, Durrant's point seems cogent. Critical realism does seem unable to give an account of reality that is independent of our cultural or metaphorical access. This point applies as much to Hick as it does to Soskice, for if descriptions of 'the Real' are limited to, and exhausted by, phenomenal formulations how are we able to regard these formulations as expressions of something more real? And yet, the critical realist's critique of the possibility of a neutral or literal description of supernatural entities also seems convincing. We therefore reach an impasse.

For non-realists influenced by Rorty, this impasse does not present a problem that needs to be solved but rather an issue that needs to be dissolved. For them the notion of inadequacy will not pertain to the descriptions of entities referred to, but to the relevance of these descriptions to our purposes. In a context which drops the distinctions between appearance and reality, and between scheme and content, the language we use at any particular time will not be understood as inadequate unless it fails to reach the purely conventional standards required by any particular contemporary discipline or activity. Pragmatic non-realists would not apply the notion of inadequacy to representational media. They would not talk of our language, or anything else, as media with a representational role. They would accept, with Soskice, a causal link between our beliefs and the world, but they would not see this as something in need of support from a further notion like 'reference'. The relation between our knowledge of our environment, they will argue, has nothing to do with correspondence or representation and everything to do with our direct contact, dealing and coping with the world we live in. What the critical realist sees as representational media, the non-realist will see as fodder for our creative purposes. They will reject the critical-realist and anti-realist issue as a non-issue because they will dispense with the idea that knowledge or language mediates or fails to mediate reality. However, they will not dispense with reality. Instead they will follow Dewey, Rorty and Davidson and emphasise our immediate

contact with our environment without recourse to the epistemological dualisms which make questions of realism and anti-realism plausible.

J Wesley Robbins agrees. He argues that critical realism requires something like 'reference' to be independent of the linguistic structures that shape our particular views of the world while simultaneously being accurately represented in such structures. But if we follow Davidson and Rorty and give up on the distinctions between reference and description, we will assert the causal connection between our beliefs and the world and see the truth of our beliefs as a matter of their expediency to our purposes.[78] The vocabulary of religious faith will still be effective even after its truth is no longer regarded as depending upon the attempt to see it as representing accurately some extra-linguistic power. For pragmatic non-realists, what makes religious belief valuable and effective has nothing to do with representing reality and everything to do with what purposes it will enable us to fulfil. Thus Robbins argues that Christianity "is not the private property of people who happen to believe that ideal values are nothing if they are not realised in some antecedent thing."[79] Such people draw upon a representational philosophy which, Robbins notes, "should have no more standing as a constraint on contemporary Christian self-understanding than Aristotle's theory that some people are slaves by nature"[80] should have on contemporary social theory. Such people, including creationists and critical realists share with reductive scientific naturalists, a common reliance upon the notion of ultimacy.[81]

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[78] J. Wesley Robbins, 'When Christians Become Naturalists' in *Religious Studies*, Vol. 28, pp. 205-206.

[79] ibid., p. 203.

[80] ibid., p. 203.

[81] See J. Wesley Robbins, 'Religion in Culture: Religionism or Pragmatism?' in *Religious Studies*, Vol. 22, 1986, pp. 439-446. Also see three other articles: J. Wesley Robbins, 'Science and Religion: Critical Realism or Pragmatism' in *International Journal For Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 21, 1987, pp. 83-94; 'Seriously but not Literally: Pragmatism in Science and Religion' in *Zygon*, Vol. 23, 1988, pp. 229-245.; 'A Neopragmatist Perspective on Religion and Science' in *Zygon*, Vol. 28, 1993, pp. 337-349.

Robbins' critique of Peacocke's referential realism is particularly revealing.[82] For Peacocke, the quest after religious truth cannot begin before a theory of reference is in place. This theory guarantees that "we may fairly hope to speak realistically of God through revisable metaphor[s] and model[s]"[83] Reference, for Peacocke works in two ways. First, it "is grounded in the seminal initiating experience of individuals and communities,"[84] that is, the dubbing of a name which individuals and communities continue to use over time to 'refer' to the same thing through its various states and changes during that time. This Robbins calls a causal-social theory of reference. Second, successful reference will occur when something pre-existently real is being referred to.[85] The first is causal and conventional and is unobjectionable. The second, however, posits a representational vocabulary which claims for itself a privileged position at the centre of culture.[86] Peacocke requires this stronger, correspondence theory of reference in order to affirm that our references are to "real prompters."[87] Peacocke sees the second account as much as the first as being relevant to the realities of both science and religion.[88] But, Robbins argues, while science and religion are parallel cases in the first account of reference, when it comes to the correspondence theory the parallel breaks down. He writes:

> Peacocke does not identify any cases of religious success that are parallel
> to these scientific ones. ... God, after all, is not supposed to be an entity
> within the physical order whose causal properties can be taken advantage
> of by our mechanical devices.[89]

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[82] J. Wesley Robbins, 'Science and Religion: Critical Realism or Pragmatism' op. cit., pp. 83-94.

[83] Arthur Peacocke, *Intimations of Reality: Critical Realism in Science and Religion*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 46.

[84] ibid., p. 47.

[85] ibid., p. 25.

[86] Robbins, 'Science and Religion', op. cit., pp. 83, 91-93.

[87] ibid., p. 88.

[88] Arthur Peacocke, *Theology For a Scientific Age*, op. cit., pp. 15, 21.

[89] Robbins, 'Science and Religion', op. cit., p. 89.

This disparity emerges in Peacocke's account of the use of models and theories in science and religion, an account that is shared by Ian Barbour.[90]. Peacocke writes:

> Science can often be confident of the realities to which its *theories* refer, but ... its language and *models* concerning these realities are always revisable and subject to change.[91]

Unlike theories, models have no propositional structure of their own. They do not have a representational relation to the world but, according to Barbour "are used to generate plausible hypotheses to investigate. They are a source of promising theories to test."[92] Once tested, however, these theories help us decide if the model is to be "amended or discarded." The theories therefore determine which models are to be taken seriously and which are merely useful. But while science has its theories to keep its models firmly under control, religion only has its models. While in science, models are in touch with reality when confirmed by theories, in religion theories (doctrines) *derive* from models that are only putative representations of reality. For Peacocke, there are two solutions to this problem. First, he asserts a hierarchy of order to reality in which God stands at the summit as a comprehensive explanation of a theistically structured universe in which scientists produce their models and theories,[93] and second he allows "that, having referred to God, whatever we say will be fallible and ... inadequate."[94]

The problem with Peacocke's first solution is that it tries to justify the use of models in theology by reference to a theological model. The problem with Peacocke's second solution, is its predication on the paradoxical, dualistic, assumptions about the inadequacy of language. Language is somehow supposed to cross the veil of what is sayable and convey in language (refer to) that which human language cannot convey (describe). But, Robbins notes:

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[90] Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms*. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1974)
[91] Peacocke, *Theology For a Scientific Age*, op. cit., p. 14. (my italics).
[92] Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms*, op. cit., p. 34.
[93] Peacocke, *Intimations of Reality*, op. cit., pp. 43, 51-52.
[94] Peacocke, *Theology For a Scientific Age*, op. cit., p. 15.

Neither Barbour nor Peacocke describe what it is for models to be more or less like the world's own structure by themselves, apart from being associated with, and under the control of, a definite set of propositions [theories].[95]

Without such an account, Robbins continues:

[W]e have only the hopelessly vague assertion that models of Christianity stand in some sort of indefinite connection to the world's own structure such that they deserve to be taken seriously but not literally.[96]

All critical realism leaves us with, Robbins argues, is the negative point that theological models should not be dismissed out of hand as merely subjective because they are without the propositional support that theories give to scientific models. But without any means of supplementing this negative point, the impression is given, in Robbins' words, that religion "is semantically deficient in its truth connection to the world when compared with micro physics."[97] But crucially Robbins adds:

There is no reason to come to this conclusion if, as pragmatists claim, the truthfulness of our ideas is a function of the role(s) that they play in our coping with the world.[98]

On the pragmatist's view, models in science and the models in religion *are* parallel cases. Pragmatism has no place for a distinction between theories that connect reference to the real world and models that do not. Equally it sees no distinction to be drawn between references we should take literally in the light of these theories, and references we should take seriously but not literally in the light of these models. For pragmatists, the literal-metaphorical distinction should be reconceived as a "historical distinction between those sentences that do and those that do not have a fixed usage and acceptability in an ongoing practice."[99]

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[95] J. Wesley Robbins, 'Seriously but not Literally: Pragmatism in Science and Religion' in *Zygon,* Vol. 23, 1988, p. 236.
[96] ibid., p. 236.
[97] ibid., p. 237.
[98] ibid., p. 237.
[99] ibid., p. 237.

Peacock's referential realism is unsatisfactory, according to Robbins, because it is too sceptical. As long as entities are conceived of as remaining "beyond the range of any completely literal description"[100] we have reason to doubt the extent to which any of our references are true to reality itself. For pragmatists Robbins comments:

> [It is] our practical familiarity ... [of] ... coping with the world that provides us with the 'sense' that our representations are in touch with reality regardless of how 'unobservable' the aspect of the world that we are dealing with ... may be.[101]

Equally, Peacocke is falsely led to believe that there is more support for his version of referential realism among the community of philosophers of science than in fact there is.[102] Considering the move to a holistic account of scientific inquiry found in the work of philosophers like Davidson, Robbins argues that

> ... holistic accounts of empirical inquiry offer, if anything, less support for taking Christian assertions about God to be assertions of fact than did their logical empiricist predecessors.[103]

This is because a holistic framework of inquiry, by denying the possibility of any neutral standard for knowledge, undercuts both "the logical empiricist standard of factuality ... [and] ... arguments for divinity as the ultimate ground and guarantor of cognitive endeavour."[104] Religious realists are happy to accept the former but extremely reluctant to accept the latter.[105]

Pragmatic religious non-realists, like Robbins and Cupitt, do not differ from religious critical realists like Hick, Soskice and Peacocke in viewing the world as having a causal relation to what is said about it. They differ on whether language is a representational medium or a tool for facilitating our purposes. Robbins writes:

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[100] Peacocke, *Theology For a Scientific Age*, op. cit., p. 15.

[101] Robbins, 'Seriously but not Literally', op. cit., p. 241.

[102] ibid., pp. 239-240.

[103] J. Wesley Robbins, 'In defence of Attitudinal Christianity' in *Religious Studies*, Vol. 18, 1982, p. 14.

[104] ibid., p. 13.

[105] Robbins illustrates this point in his discussion of the views of R.B. Braithwaite and R.M. Hare, (in 'In defence of Attitudinal Christianity' ibid., pp. 11-27.) and those of Wentzel van Huyssteen and Philip Clayton, in his 'Review of *Theology and the Justification of Faith* by Wentzel van Huyssteen and *Explanation from Physics to Theology* by Philip Clayton' in *Zygon*, Vol. 27, 1992, pp. 225-231.

> I submit that questions about whether theology is more like physics or literature are, broadly speaking, moral questions about what kind of people we want to be and what kind of culture we want to have. It is a matter of where to pin our hopes for salvation.[106]

This is not a denial of the meaningfulness of religious belief.. All that is denied is that anything is explained by asserting that the 'finality', 'ultimacy' and 'cultural centrality' of a religious vocabulary is to be derived from a correspondence to reality that has been underwritten by a distinction between reference and description.[107] Robbins notes:

> [Starting] "with the words of Jesus, who taught us to say 'our Father' and the words of his followers, ... I say the same things about those words that Rorty says about the words of Galileo, that there is no secret behind them. There just is the terminology and how it has worked out thus far. That leaves questions about whether to continue using those words ... as matters of practical judgement and the right to believe.[108]

One advantage of this pragmatic approach is that it allows that a religious belief will be true to the extent that it facilitates our coping with the world. To this extent those who profess a realist view of God are nonetheless "allies in our efforts on behalf of ideal values."[109] To quote Robbins again:

> When it comes to coping with the problem of modern life, Dewey's naturalistic solution is not the only one. Others may elect to make different adjustments in their belief systems, for instance, ones that leave their initial belief in a supernatural God untouched. Such a solution to the problem is a reiteration of Christian supernaturalism. Pragmatism takes these different solutions, reiterated supernaturalism and religious naturalism to be ... expedients to be evaluated in terms of their relative merits as such.[110]

For Robbins, Christianity's future is now best served within the context of pragmatic non-realism. I have argued that this is the direction in which Cupitt has recently

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[106] J. Wesley Robbins, 'Review of *Theology and the Justification of Faith* by Wentzel van Huyssteen and *Explanation from Physics to Theology* by Philip Clayton' in *Zygon*, Vol. 27, 1992, p. 231.

[107] Robbins, 'Religion in culture', op. cit., pp. 444-446.

[108] J. Wesley Robbins, 'Neo-pragmatism and the Radical Empiricist Metaphysics of Pure Experience' in *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, Vol. 14, 1993. p.31.

[109] J. Wesley Robbins, 'When Christians Become Naturalists' in *Religious Studies*, Vol. 28, p. 206.

[110] ibid., pp. 199-200. Cupitt allows that if realist "religious practice makes sense *within* the world of signs, then we are bound to concede the legitimacy of their position."
Don Cupitt, *Life Lines*, (London: S.C.M. Press, 1986), p.212.

been moving. It is a direction that enables him to affirm both our scientific and our religious practices without reducing one to the other.

I have traced Cupitt's theological pilgrimage from his own understanding of God in the critical realist terms of inadequacy to the Rortyan view that religious meaning, like all other meaningful areas of life, "...will be an explanation of what people *do*, rather than of a non-causal, representing, relation in which they stand to non-human entities."[111] For Cupitt, theology is constituted in, and by, particular uses of language. Davidson, Cupitt notes, points "philosophy toward a new version of pragmatism [which is] ... [b]est popularized by Rorty."[112] For these pragmatists, language as such cannot be understood as an inadequate medium. To think we can get outside of language to see what our language refers to independent of its descriptive activity adds to our linguistic practices but not to our knowledge of putatively extra-linguistic, extra-natural entities.[113] This does not mean that everything we say will *always* be adequate. Our purposes move on and so does what we take to be a useful description. As Cupitt notes, "... we stick to our current theories because they are the ones that work best at present, but when the time comes we will unhesitatingly trade them in for new ones."[114] This also goes for our religious beliefs. Cupitt writes:

> ... God is the role God plays in developing our self understanding, focusing our aspirations, and shaping the course of our lives; ... the right God for us at any one time is the God that is most religiously powerful for us at that time. ... You need a God that is right for you just now, and still more do you need the God that will be right for you next.[115]

Contra critical realism, to say that certain uses of language become inadequate is to say that we no longer employ them to fulfil our purposes. It is not to say that language is essentially inadequate as a description of that to which it refers.

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[111] Rorty, *Objectivity Relativism and Truth*, op. cit., p.154.
[112] Cupitt, *The Last Philosophy*, (London: SCM Press, 1995), p. 137.
[113] Don Cupitt, *The Time Being*, (London: S.C.M. Press, 1992), p.33.
[114] Cupitt, *Life Lines*, ibid., p. 103.
[115] ibid., p. 103.

When our discourse in science, religion or anything else is primarily a function of the relation between our purposes and more and different language, rather than a connection to some extra linguistic stuff, we can say that those people working on the internal structure of the atom or the human genome, are no more nor less in contact with reality than are those working on the trinity or the relation between cultural formations of belief and 'the real'. Non-realists, therefore, can agree with Soskice when she allows that the models and metaphors by which religious people orientate their lives "... have been gradually selected out by the faithful as being especially adequate to their experience."[116] But, this should in no way imply that language works as an epistemological bridge to an antecedently existent divine reality.

For the non-realist, who accepts a Rortyan pragmatic antirepresentationalism, religious critical realism is one among many possible adequate approaches to the question of God because, contra critical realism, language is not a representational medium, but a tool for achieving certain purposes. Our purposes might be misconceived but the language which articulates these purposes cannot itself be inadequate. When the adequacy of language becomes more widely recognised the strength of the non-realist challenge to traditional religious belief might become more fully understood.

9.4. Conclusion:

In this concluding chapter, I have suggested that Rorty's pragmatism helps to outline the non-realists' radical religious alternative to existing religious ideas, an alternative that is both counter-cultural and critical. Remaining ironic about its own commitments, this alternative nevertheless chooses to see religious practice and symbols as the source of its radical identity and counter-cultural perspective. I have suggested that Rorty's pragmatism offers religious non-realists a vehicle for reminding Christians of the centrality of the cross as the source of human solidarity

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[116] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, op. cit., p. 153.

with the victims of history. It also supplies an argumentative resource that enables non-realists to defend their position against alternative critical realist positions. Taken together, these aspects of Rorty's work help to establish the credentials of religious non-realism as a contemporary revision of religious thought that deserves serious theological attention.

The substantial proportion of this thesis has been directed at drawing lines of connection between the views of the 'Sea of Faith' religious non-realists, the religious naturalism of John Dewey and the pragmatic antirepresentationalism of Richard Rorty. Rorty and Dewey, like Cupitt, suggest that salvation is a matter of gaining a greater deal of intersubjective self-reliance, instead of looking for some connection to an extra-historical or extra-human power that might save us. For them, the salvation that is 'religious' is not a rescue but an adventure, a process of growth in which we are continually forming more plausible and more integrative self-images. On the pragmatist reading, our different vocabularies, be they religious, scientific or literary, are of value not in terms of their closeness to a representation reality but in terms of our practical muddling through—the problems they help us to solve and the things they enable us to do. Here 'non-realism' is defined as rejecting the representational conceptuality that realists require. Unlike anti-realism, idealism and atheism, non-realism drops the question of reality as a non-issue when it comes to deciding what, for all practical purposes, counts as our encounter with divine or worldly reality. When the centre is gone, things don't fall apart. We just come to recognise the different ways in which human beings achieve different purposes. If the pragmatists' own vocabulary is thought of as true it is not because it holds to a representation of reality, giving it privileged status at the centre of culture, but because it has hit upon a temporarily useful way of conveying our cultural situation, one that does away with many of the outworn philosophical disputes by simply dropping the correspondence view of truth. Pragmatism offers a vision of the kind of people they would like us to become, whether they are successful only time will tell. The 'truth of the matter' has nothing to do with what

time will bring. The fruitfulness of our current strategies for coping are far more important in this respect. For them, religion, alongside science and the arts, remains one of the most potent of such strategies. To be sure, it will be non-realist religion without the traditional connection with the vocabulary of antecedent, divine ultimacy, but the point that religious non-realists and pragmatists are trying to make is that such a vocabulary is not required to sustain the practices in which we engage. Their fruitfulness is enough to sustain them. There is, therefore, no reason, on pragmatic grounds, why we should cease being Christian, Buddhist, Islamic etc. and every reason why we should continue.

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