

RELIGIOUS NON-REALISM AS A BORDER ZONE? REFLECTING ON FEUERBACH'S ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEOLOGY

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In the present paper I examine the issue of religious non-realism with a special focus on its expression in Feuerbach's anthropological theology. First, I discuss the distinction between religious realism and non-realism exploring the recent popularization of the latter by Don Cupitt. Second, I present Feuerbach as a representative of religious non-realism and outline the critiques of his anthropological theology by Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin, Augusto del Noce, and Jon Stewart. Third, I analyze Martin Buber's presentation of religious non-realism as a *restless* position. In the conclusion I suggest that religious non-realism is a border zone between religious realism and atheism, both of which tend to be critical of it. Non-realism is subject to pressure from both sides and might be considered a *weak* position between two *strong* positions.

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The present paper focuses on the issue of religious non-realism and particularly on its expression in Feuerbach's anthropological theology. At first, I discuss the distinction between religious realism and non-realism exploring the recent popularization of the latter by Don Cupitt. I go on to present Feuerbach as a representative of the non-realist position and outline the critiques of his project by Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin, Augusto del Noce, and Jon Stewart. Subsequently, I analyze Martin Buber's depiction of religious non-realism as a *restless* position. I conclude by situating religious non-realism as a border zone between religious realism and atheism, both of which tend to be critical of it. Non-realism is subject to pressure from both sides and might be considered a *weak* position between two *strong* positions. The paper has been inspired by Jon Stewart's recent treatments of Feuerbach; thus its discussion of non-realism has its starting point in German idealist and post-idealist philosophy.

I. Religious Non-Realism as a Skeptical Alternative to Religious Realism

The issue which divides religious realism and non-realism is the status of religious truths. The way these truths are viewed has far-reaching philosophical, theological and practical consequences. Religious realism represents the standard majority paradigm among religious adherents. Realists hold that their beliefs are about metaphysical realities that really exist and are independent of human thought. For example, there is an actual referent for assertions about God: a being which exists independently of human concepts and beliefs. God is a *real* transcendent being (Meister 2009, 15). Similarly, religious claims about afterlife, angels or the soul are objectively true, as they refer to real entities and conditions.

Religious non-realism is a minority paradigm and a skeptical alternative to realism. The proponents of this paradigm believe that “religious claims are not about realities which transcend human language, concepts, and social forms; religious claims are not about something ‘out there’” (Meister 2009, 15). There are no referents for religious beliefs about transcendent entities such as God. Thus, we can say that God is not real in a *strong* metaphysical sense, but rather in a *weak* metaphorical sense. God continues to play an important role as a symbol of order, eminence, love, or the triumph of the good, but this symbol is a complex human creation, not an independent being. As Chad Meister points out, despite denying God’s objective existence, non-realists view religion as a meaningful human construction and activity for a variety of reasons related to spirituality, morality, psychology or history (Meister 2009, 19).

The term *non-realism* has been popularized in the recent decades by the English philosopher of religion and a representative of radical theology Don Cupitt. He envisions the project of non-realism as a post-metaphysical attempt to renew Christianity while taking seriously the criticism of religion from the Enlightenment onwards (Cupitt 2002, xxiii). Cupitt distinguishes the *absolute* and *relative* meanings of the word “God,” suggesting that the former refers to “God as an infinite spiritual substance, self-existent Being, the world-cause, objective and distinct from us,” while the latter refers to “a person’s (lower-case) ‘god’ as that which has highest authority in his life... It is not a being, but his ideal, his dream, his hope, his ambition, his calling, his task, and his guiding star, that to which his whole life is oriented” (Cupitt 2002, xiii). Cupitt insists that given the limitations of our human capacities only the relative god is accessible to us. Consequent pursuing of this post-metaphysical line means that also the traditional notions of the soul and afterlife, which require introverted spirituality, need to be discarded. Instead, “an extravertive, solar, expressive spirituality of this life” is to be articulated and practiced; not as a preparation for the next life but as a celebration of the present life (Cupitt 2002, xvii). Although Cupitt is confident that non-realism addresses modern criticisms of religion more efficiently than realism, he acknowledges

that it has not been widely accepted. Pointing out that the non-realist view of God has been denounced as *atheism*, he admits that non-realism “remains unpopular” (Cupitt 2002, xv, xxii). He has higher hopes for the future, however, maintaining that institutional opposition was to be expected: theological non-realism has been rejected by the academic and ecclesiastical establishment just like scientific non-realism has been rejected by the scientific establishment (Cupitt 2002, xiv – xv). Despite the substantial challenges, religious non-realism continues to attract new adherents across the ages: Cupitt highlights the intellectual line which connects Negative Theology, Kant, Bultmann and contemporary radical theology. As I will argue below, Feuerbach belongs to this line, too, as the character of his anthropological theology corresponds to what Cupitt describes as religious non-realism.

II. Feuerbach as a Representative of Religious Non-Realism

The following discussion of Feuerbach is inspired by the insights Jon Stewart presented in his two analyses of Feuerbach’s thinking in *Hegel’s Century* (Stewart 2021b) and *Modern and Postmodern Crises of Symbolic Structures* (Stewart 2021a). While I agree with Stewart’s overall picture of Feuerbach’s anthropological theology, I propose my own emphases pertaining to the aim of my project.

My main claim is that Feuerbach frames his project of anthropological theology in a way corresponding to religious non-realism. Similar to Cupitt and radical theology Feuerbach maintains that his objective is to explain Christianity in a novel way in order to make it more credible to the modern man. The character of modernity requires that theology be cleansed of metaphysical and mythological elements and be reconceived with anthropology at its center. While Feuerbach admits that he is a fierce critic of traditional theology, he highlights the constructive aspect of his project: the aim of his work is “the revelation of religion to itself, the *awakening of religion to self-consciousness*” (Feuerbach 1989, xxi).¹ He makes an effort to present *the essence* and *the truth* of Christianity which ultimately leads him to look beyond its “*unhuman*” elements and discover that Christian mysteries are “not foreign, but native mysteries, the mysteries of human nature” (Feuerbach 1989, xvi, xviii). For this reason theology is not to be placed above anthropology but rather the latter is to be exalted into the former. Transcendent and metaphysical elements, which make religion contradictory, problematic and less credible, are to be reinterpreted in an anthropological way. This will help put Christianity on firm philosophical ground (Stewart 2021b, 94).

Feuerbach insists that if “the true sense of Theology is Anthropology,” then it must be demonstrated that “the antithesis of divine and human is altogether illusory,” or in other words: “the object and contents of the Christian religion are altogether human”

¹ Emphases are original unless otherwise indicated.

(Feuerbach 1989, xvii, 13 – 14). Feuerbach highlights from different perspectives the fact that humans define God by ascribing to him a variety of attributes derived from human experience. Thus, God is an abstraction of human subjectivity, and when contemplating him, man in fact contemplates his own nature. It becomes clear that knowledge of God is a form of self-knowledge, and Feuerbach believes that the historical progress of religion leads humanity to realize this fact: “what was formerly contemplated and worshipped as God is now perceived to be something human” (Feuerbach 1989, 12 – 13, 25, 31, 33). God is thus deprived of his metaphysical status and objective existence and is seen through an anthropological prism: as “a reflection of ourselves and our highest capacities” (Stewart 2021a, 86).

The fundamental orientation of Feuerbach’s anthropological theology is in line with the project pursued by Cupitt and non-realist philosophy of religion. It is precisely this orientation that makes it a target of criticism from two sides: from the standpoints of atheism and religious realism.

III. The Double Critique of Feuerbach

Well-known atheist critiques of Feuerbach’s anthropological theology are found in Friedrich Engels and Vladimir Lenin. The former writes in his work *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (1886) that Feuerbach is an idealist who “by no means wishes to abolish religion: he wants to perfect it” (Engels 1941, 33). Engels argues that Feuerbach’s project is futile, because a purely immanentist Christianity and a materialist theology are contradictions in terms. Feuerbach neutralizes key elements of the Christian religion – pretending that it “can exist without its god” – and suggests that it can not only continue to operate but even be strengthened by this extensive reduction (Engels 1941, 34). Thus, after abandoning traditional Christianity, Feuerbach instead of embracing atheism makes a desperate and absurd attempt to place Christianity on an unreliable immanentist foundation.

This critique was taken up by Lenin in his essay *The Attitude of the Workers’ Party to Religion* (1909). Lenin describes Feuerbach as a thinker whose aim was to revitalize Christianity and therefore places him in opposition to Marxism, whose aim is an absolutely atheistic materialism:

Let us recall that in his essay on Ludwig Feuerbach, Engels reproaches Feuerbach for combating religion not in order to destroy it, but in order to renovate it, to invent a new “exalted” religion, and so forth. Religion is the opium of the people – this dictum by Marx is the corner-stone of the whole Marxist outlook on religion. Marxism has always regarded all modern religions and churches, and each and every religious organisation, as instruments of

bourgeois reaction that serve to defend exploitation and to befuddle the working class (Lenin 1963, 402 – 403).

Thus, according to Lenin, Feuerbach is ultimately an ally of the forces of reaction, as he refuses to fight religion with unequivocal atheist means. It is evident that both Engels and Lenin are entirely unimpressed by Feuerbach's project to make Christianity and theology more acceptable to the modern man by reformulating them according to non-realist principles.

Feuerbach's non-realism is problematic also from the perspective of religious realism. His interpretation of God, the Trinity and transcendent realities as human projections appears to the realist eye as latent atheistic humanism. Reacting to the frequent comparisons of Feuerbach and Marx, Augusto del Noce claims in *The Problem of Atheism* (1964) that both thinkers are in fact proponents of atheism, albeit of different kinds. Del Noce rejects the interpretations that trace back Marx's atheism to that of Feuerbach as though the former simply adopted the main tenets of anthropological theology (Del Noce 2021, 102).² According to Del Noce, Marx's atheism contains a strong revolutionary component,³ which is lacking in Feuerbach, and thus its ultimate aim is the obliteration of the question of God rather than its reinterpretation along humanist lines: "[F]or Marx [atheism] means the disappearance of the problem of God (so that one could also say that, rigorously speaking, for him the very figure of atheism disappears), whereas for Feuerbach it is a matter of transferring into mankind the object of religious love" (Del Noce 2021, 196). We are thus faced with two different kinds of atheism: according to Del Noce there is no doubt that Feuerbach's anthropological theology is genuine atheism.

Jon Stewart is similarly skeptical whether Feuerbach's project really is what it purports to be. He highlights repeatedly Feuerbach's stated goal "to put Christianity on a solid footing" but shows that the radicality with which Feuerbach achieves this goal makes his entire project self-defeating (2021b, 94; 2021a, 82). Stewart notes that from an existential point of view Feuerbach's deflation of the traditional concept of God is

² Del Noce attributes this position, for example, to Henri de Lubac, who emphasizes the continuity between Feuerbach's and Marx's atheism. See Lubac (1995).

³ Del Noce writes that according to Marx "full atheism does not consist in the atheistic answer to the question of God but in the suppression of the question of God. This will be possible only when the need for God will have vanished because of the full realization of man. That is, full atheism, as the affirmation of humanity without any trace of God, will be made possible only by the social revolution... In this sense, where Marx goes beyond Feuerbach is in the rediscovery of revolutionary thought" (Del Noce 2021, 104). In the Slovak context an interesting discussion of philosophy that is developed on the borderline between non-realism and atheism can be found in Vašek (2022). Also, for a Slovak treatment of the Marxist emphasis on discontinuity in historiography of religion see Hunčaga (2020).

not just unacceptable to the religious believer, it is even “shocking and offensive” (Stewart 2021a, 91). This is due to the fact that Feuerbach offers his anthropological theology as a form of help to resolve problems inherent in the religious system. Contrary to other interpretations Stewart refuses to take Feuerbach’s stated goals at face value. He suggests that Feuerbach’s anthropological theology may contain an element of insincerity: “But here the question in the eyes of his critics is whether the cure is worse than the disease since in order to save Christianity, Feuerbach must interpret it so radically that it seems to have lost most all of its most important features. One can really wonder if Feuerbach is speaking in good faith when he claims that his theory will serve as a support for religion” (Stewart 2021a, 91; Stewart 2021b, 94). We can add that if religious realists took Feuerbach’s interpretation of Christianity seriously, fundamental religious practices, such as personal prayer, liturgy, or sacramental life would be rendered unimportant or even absurd.

The double critique of Feuerbach from the standpoints of atheism and religious realism shows that his project might have a hard time serving as a bridge between traditional religion and modern skepticism.

IV. Buber’s Critique of Non-Realism as a *Restless Position*

For the present discussion I find inspirational Martin Buber’s depiction of the non-realist position as *a place of restlessness*. In his book *Eclipse of God* (1952) Buber explores the notion of non-realism (without using the term) in the Kantian tradition. He examines closely the intellectual developments of Immanuel Kant and Hermann Cohen.⁴ Let us recall that Cupitt included Kant in the non-realist intellectual line winding through history claiming that “Kant, after demolishing the traditional ‘proofs’ of God’s existence, had put forward a non-realistic idea of God as a regulative ideal of reason” (Cupitt 2002, xi).

Buber identifies in Kant’s philosophy of religion several non-realist elements. He points to Kant’s dictum “God is not an external substance, but only a moral condition within us” as well as to passages in Kant’s works where he denies that God is an entity outside of ourselves (Buber 2016, 12, 41). Buber explains, however, that Kant’s view of God was not entirely consistent and especially his late writings were characterized by intellectual *restlessness*. Kant became uncertain of his non-realist interpretation of God as an immanent moral principle and new dialogical elements emerged in his philosophy of religion. Not only did he speak of God as the authoritative “source of all moral

⁴ In this part I am building on the ideas I presented in Šajda (2020). It should be noted that in his discussion of non-realism in *Eclipse of God* Buber does not refer to Feuerbach. He became acquainted with Feuerbach already in his student years but paid attention primarily to the dialogical structures of Feuerbach’s thought. See Buber’s own account of his reception of Feuerbach (Buber 1954, 287 – 289, 295, 304 – 305).

obligation” but he even developed a concept of a living and personal God (Buber 2016, 12, 41 – 42). Buber maintains that Kant’s late notes are a testimony to his inner struggle with the issue of God which he failed to address in a satisfactory way.

Buber traces a similar intellectual and spiritual struggle in the life and work of the neo-Kantian philosopher Hermann Cohen. On the one hand, Cohen describes God as a human idea and a moral ideal that plays an important role in ethical thinking. He insists that God is neither a person nor an existence and refuses to connect the concept of God to the concept of life in any way. On the other hand, Cohen’s study of the sources of Judaism led him to an ever deeper internalization of the commandment of love for God (Buber 2016, 43 – 45). Cohen reflects on the nature and forms of human love for God, and while he rejects the notion of a personal and living God he appropriates some traditional attributes of God which cause a split in his view of God. Inspired by the Hebrew Bible, Cohen claims that God is to be loved as “[the] avenger of the poor and the father of man” (Buber 2016, 45). These attributes make sense in relation to the living and personal God of Abraham but are hardly compatible with the abstract non-realist concept of God. The rift in Cohen’s view of God deepens with time as he continues to approach God in two contradictory ways: he thinks of God as *an idea*, but he loves God as *a person* (Buber 2016, 48). Buber believes that the notion of a personal God in the end implicitly prevails: “Cohen did not consciously choose between the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, rather believing to the last that he could succeed in identifying the two. Yet his inmost heart, that force from which thought too derives its vitality, had chosen and decided for him” (Buber 2016, 51). Thus, according to Buber, both Kant’s and Cohen’s religious non-realism proved to be a position of restlessness causing inner confusion. The ultimate result of Kant’s intellectual struggle remains unclear while Cohen at least implicitly embraced religious realism.

V. Conclusion

Jon Stewart’s reflections on Feuerbach’s anthropological theology raise the intriguing issue of religious non-realism and its status vis-à-vis religious realism and atheism. Feuerbach’s attempt to reinterpret Christianity in order to make it compatible with modern skepticism was met with hefty criticism from both sides to which he aimed to appeal. I attempted to demonstrate that his intentionally *weak* position of religious non-realism had little success, because it became a border zone between two *strong* positions that were not seeking this kind of compromise. As I showed drawing on Buber’s analyses, religious non-realism is often characterized by restlessness which can become a motive for embracing a *stronger* and more stable position, such as religious realism. Whether this *weak* border zone has more to offer than just a failed compromise and restlessness is a topic for further debate.

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