

## A Note on Critical Realism

A large number of criticisms have been made of my own particular version of religious pluralism, the view outlined in the previous pieces; and I have developed it in response to some of them. Because of its implications for traditional Christian beliefs most of the criticisms have come from the Christian right, the evangelical and fundamentalist wing of the churches. But some, usually more significant ones, have come from outside theology, voiced by contemporary philosophers. I have replied specifically to the latter in *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, and have replied to both in *The Rainbow of Faiths*, where both philosophical and theological criticisms are presented and responded to.

But this is now an additional note on the central epistemological issue. I have suggested that the humanly thought and experienced God figures and non-personal Absolutes are different manifestations formed jointly by the universal presence of the Real and our different human conceptual systems and associated spiritual practices. In Kantian terms the Real is the noumenal reality-in-itself of which we experience the phenomenal forms which our cognitive equipment enables us to experience. Kant was analysing specifically sense perception, but I want to apply the noumenon-phenomenon distinction to religious awareness. This suggests that we cannot directly experience the Real as it is in itself but only the varying phenomenal manifestations of it to which its universal presence, responded to by the spiritual dimension of our own selves, comes to human consciousnesses in the varying ways formed by the varying cultures of the earth.

This has led some to ask whether this is a non-realist position according to which religious people are worshipping figments of their imagination? Since I have long argued against the religious non-realism of such theologians as Don Cupitt and such philosophers as D.Z. Phillips, the question is a pertinent one.

The answer involves critical realism. The term is much used today in the philosophy of science but comes originally from a group of epistemologists in the USA in the last century working on the problems of sense perception. Here it was a rejection of both the naïve realism which held that we experience the world just as it is, and the idealism which held that we experience only the contents of our own consciousness. Critical realism was the view that we do perceive a world that exists independently of our perceiving it, but not it as it is in itself, unperceived, but always and necessarily only as humanly perceived. Thus it is true both that we are only directly aware of the appearances made possible by our distinctive cognitive equipment and also that mediated through these we are aware of the world beyond us. At the physical level the process is determined by biological need and is accordingly attuned only to a minute proportion of the information flowing all the time through us and around us. (For example, out of the electromagnetic spectrum extending from cosmic rays as short as four ten-thousand-millionths of an inch to radio waves as long as eighteen miles, our bodily receptors only respond to those between sixteen and thirty-two millionths of an inch; and we are likewise deaf to most acoustic stimuli and

insensitive to the great majority of chemical differences). And then the physically selected aspects of the world are interpreted in terms of our culturally formed conceptual systems and our intellectual, aesthetic and valuational capacities, which can vary widely.

In its application to the epistemology of religion, critical realism enables us to understand how it can be that there are very different culturally formed human awarenesses of a transcendent religious reality. This is immune to the major problem that Kant's position provoked, namely how can the noumenal reality *cause* its phenomenal appearances when causation is itself a feature of the phenomenal world? This problem does not arise in the religious case as understood by the pluralistic hypothesis. For it is part of this religious 'big picture', presented by the mystics of all traditions, that there is a spiritual dimension to our own nature which is continuous with the spiritual nature of the universe as a whole. The only causation involved is thus at the human end, in our thinning of the ego barrier between the conscious self and our deeper spiritual nature. And critical realism explains how it is that the resulting religious awareness can take such a range of differing forms within human consciousness.

All this is developed much more fully in *An Interpretation of Religion*, and less technically in *The Fifth Dimension*.

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