

What is the Practical Value of Non Realism in Interreligious Dialogue?

Peter Stribblehill

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Department of Historical and Social Studies

Faculty of Art, Design and Humanities

De Montfort University

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Abstract

Interreligious dialogue is a matter which is ever more accepted as being of international importance, in terms of its impact on people around the world. The concept of Religious Pluralism and its rival interpretations now dominate the field. Non Realists have had a mixed, often hostile reaction from those of more traditional persuasion when they try to explain their theological positions and contribute to modern theological debate.

Against these two backgrounds, this work poses the question of what the non realist approach has to offer to interreligious dialogue. It starts by examining the history of discrimination against those of non realist persuasion and then setting it against evidence of non realism in other religions. It then examines the development of religious pluralism and the alternative theories of interreligious relations.

The work then takes a practical look at examples of what non realists have accomplished in the field of interreligious dialogue, often over a period of decades and in various guises. It seeks evidence of both positive and negative experiences and reactions to the practitioners. It also examines how the individuals concerned see the subject from their non realist perspectives and whether they perceive non realism as being advantageous to their approach.

The analysis seeks to explain the non realist's position on interreligious dialogue as being constructive as part of the overall debate; not as a proposal that all should adopt it as an approach, but rather seeking acceptance that it has a proper place and a role to play which can be of value to the international progress on promoting understanding between religions.

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Preface

For thousands of years, until relatively recently, interreligious dialogue has been based on the approach that I'm right, you're wrong so let's talk about how you convert to my way of thinking (which may or may not involve coercion). Happily we have mostly moved on from that point of view; the field has expanded rapidly over the past fifty years or so and increasingly sophisticated literature is appearing on the subject. During this time, it has moved from exclusivism, through inclusivism to and arguably beyond pluralism. Similarly, for millennia a supernatural interpretation of God reigned unchallenged in many religions until, for Christians, the enlightenment caused some to look beyond this and question the nature of the divine. This year marks 50 years since John Robinson's *Honest to God* caused a commotion and next year will mark 30 years since Don Cupitt wrote *The Sea of Faith*.

I ask whether the two are (or could be) related. From a non realist perspective it is no mystery that God allows there to be more than one religion; that is not the type of God in which they believe. I shall argue that this allows non realists to take a far more open, neutral stance in relation to all religions without believing that any religion has the benefit of a once and for all revelation and the only correct understanding of the divine.

I shall seek to demonstrate my proposal by speaking with non realists who have been involved, sometimes for many years in interreligious dialogue, seeking examples of their work and of their views.

I shall also attempt to deal with the probably inevitable charge of relativism which may be brought against this approach, suggesting that it is a problem which ceases to exist with a non realist approach.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to the Sea of Faith Network; my spiritual home.

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Abbreviations

CofE: Church of England

LCOF: Loughborough Council of Faiths

OxCoF: Oxford Council of Faiths

SoF: Sea of Faith Network

Definitions

Realism, Non Realism and Anti Realism (Cupitt, 2011, p93)

A theist realist believes that the existence of God can be proved by unassisted human reason. God would still exist out there even if there were no human being alive who actually believed in him.

A non realist is a person who simply refrains from urging God's objective existence and prefers to show that God truly has a sort-of reality for the believer, within the system. On this basis, different religious systems can co-exist peaceably within the same society.

An anti realist takes a somewhat stronger view. The term was invented by Nietzsche, who insisted that the time had come to break with the legacy of Plato and to invent a new way of thinking.

Cupitt has varied over time between the non realist and the anti realist stance.

Chapter 1: Introduction Aims & Objectives, Principal Research Questions

1.1 Background and Self Disclosure

Right at the start of my work, I feel that I must be open about my own background coming to the question posed by this dissertation. I need to self disclose (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p127) my assumptions and beliefs that may shape this inquiry. I acknowledge these to enable the reader to understand my position and to help their interpretation. Twenty years ago, I joined the sea of Faith Network (SoF) and also became interested in interreligious dialogue. It seemed to me that non realists, such as SoF members had a particular viewpoint on the diversity of religions which could be of value to others. After all, if religions are human creations why is it surprising that so many occur around the world? If God is a human creation, then it speaks of humankind's creativity in developing so many different theories about the nature of God. So, we can say that there are many Gods, there is one God or there is no God, depending on what you mean by the term.

1.2 Aims and Objectives

This work is not intended to convert anyone to non realism, any more than I need to be converted to a realistic faith. Rather I want to promote understanding of their position. We should respect each other wherever we are in terms of faith and see how interesting our differences can be.

Looking at the literature on interreligious dialogue, with some notable exceptions most stem from the assumption of a `real` image of God, most do not mention the point.

I start my work with a literature review; a `thought map` following what I hope is a logical progression through non realism, non realist contributions to interfaith dialogue, examples of non realist thought in other religions and then the development of interreligious dialogue, with some modern thoughts. This provides background to the interviews and conclusions.

1.3 Interview Process

I set out to find some stories of non realists who have been involved in some sort of interreligious dialogue in a variety of settings and for a variety of periods. I asked three basic questions of each and then allowed the discussion to go where it wanted to. The questions were:

- What practical experience of interreligious work you have had, over what period and in which locations
- What advantages or disadvantages in this dialogue you feel you had arising from your personal beliefs in the reality of God
- How others reacted to your participation in the dialogue (positively or negatively).

My hope was to find examples of successful involvement of non realists in areas of interreligious dialogue. Firstly, I want my work to encourage non realists to be involved in the field; they may be hesitant to do so and feel they have nothing to offer and / or may encounter hostility from those with realist beliefs (see 2.1 below). Secondly, I wanted to show realists that non realists can participate successfully in interreligious dialogue and are not people to be feared. There is often confusion between the perception of non realists and aggressive atheists of the 'Ditchkins' (Eagleton, 2009, p2) school of thought. There is a lack of awareness that many non realists are sympathetic to the aims of religions and want to work to promote them.

I shall comment later on the extent to which I have achieved my objectives.

Chapter 2: Literary Review – a Thought Map

As stated above, this review demonstrates my thought process, leading a hopefully logical progression through the areas covered and setting out the background behind the interviews.

2.1 The Problem with Non Realism

Some readers may be wondering what the problem is for non realists and why any form of special pleading is necessary. History tells us that the church establishment has an intolerant view of any departures from the norm in doctrine, which stretches back to the days of the early church. Whilst burning at the stake is now frowned upon, those with radical views go public at their own peril.

2.1.1 Strauss (1835), in a precursor of the Jesus Seminar work, speaks of the development of the mythical point of view of the Gospel histories and then applies it to the historicity of Gospel passages, including the birth narratives. He shows their inconsistencies in what was then a revolutionary work. Cupitt (1984, p96) recounts that 'It made him famous and destroyed his career, at the age of only twenty seven.'

2.1.2 Windross (2013) reminds us that it is 20 years since Anthony Freeman was removed from his post as Priest-in-Charge of St Mark's, Staplefield by the then Bishop of Chichester for publishing his book *God in Us*, (Freeman, 1993). He talks of Freeman being inducted in to the pantheon of church infamy which included John Robinson, Don Cupitt, Lloyd Geering, Richard Holloway, John Spong and Andrew Furlong.

2.1.3 Geering (2006, p147-164) tells of his being charged with heresy in the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand in the 1960s and of his ultimate acquittal. Furlong (2003) tells of his being charged with heresy and his resignation from the Church of Ireland in 2002. In his introduction he recalls that 'My root difficulty was that I found it had become impossible for me to believe in a personal God who is a supernatural Being existing independently of creation.'

2.1.4 Holloway (2012, chapter 15) tells of 'a posse of Evangelical clergy in his diocese... calling for his resignation and declaring the Diocese of Edinburgh vacant.' This was after his publication of *Godless Morality*. Although not hounded out, he retired at the end of the following year. In his epilogue, he says 'The mistake was to think religion was more than human. I was less sure whether God was also just a human invention, but I was quite sure religion was.'

2.2 Non Realist Writings

It is appropriate to give some examples of non realists' contributions to theological debate, aside from the area of interreligious dialogue.

2.2.1 After describing his journey towards his conclusions, Cupitt (1984, p275) defines a non realist God as the sum of our values, representing to us their ideal unity, their claims on us, and their creative power. This is picked up by Freeman (1993) who believes in God and one of the things

he believes is that God does not exist. What is meant by the word real? The idea of God is real but it does not have to be about a being that exists independently of the thinker.

2.2.2 More recently, Cupitt (2012, p21-29) explores two messages from Jesus, the 'solar' and the 'catholic.' They exist side by side in Matthew's sermon on the mount where at 5.13-16 the original 'solar' Jesus tells his followers that they are the salt of the earth and should live expressively. Then at 6.1-21, the catholic Jesus tells them the opposite, giving to charities secretly etc. After his death, the catholic teaching won so that Cupitt quotes Nietzsche as saying that there was only one Christian, and he died on the cross. Cupitt's is an optimistic message that we should find the original Jesus and follow him, not the catholic, priest led religion which of course requires a hierarchy and power structure.

2.2.3 In another positive view of the value of non realism, Crocker (2010) explores whether religion still has value for the atheist by developing an atheist spirituality and using religions' teachings and texts as poetry and myth to convey meaning and value.

2.3 Criticisms of Non Realism

It is not the objective of this work to distinguish between technical differences of non realism, anti realism, non theism and various other terms. I concentrate on non realism using the definition provided by Cupitt mentioned above but I suggest that my conclusions are equally valid for anti realism and that some of my participators may prefer to be defined as such.

2.3.1 White (1994) makes a detailed criticism of Cupitt's work and on the basis of the flaws he detects, he proposes to revert to a system of critical realism. It is interesting that he approves of criticisms of Cupitt of claiming to establish two mutually exclusive alternatives, showing that one is logically impossible and thus leaving the other to reign supreme. White then attempts to do the same to Cupitt's arguments, claiming that a third alternative (critical realism) is the correct option. Unfortunately, attempting to illustrate his point by reference to the atonement, he runs into the problem of assuming that a 'real' God exists which I suggest misses the whole point of Cupitt's argument (p209).

2.3.2 Hick (1989) provides a constructive approach to non realism. In parts two and three, he reviews many so called proofs of God's existence or non existence, from Anselm (p75), Durkheim (p117), the challenge of evil (p118), and many others.

At p227, he talks of the right to believe:

'the universe as it confronts us is ambivalent, in that we can construe it either religiously or naturalistically; but when one option has been adopted it constitutes one's life'

That is, you make your choice, as long as you accept the consequences. He acknowledges that the proofs are not of God's existence, but rather that it is reasonable to believe in God's existence. He also criticises the non realist option as being welcome news for the few, but denying salvation to the huge majority of humankind as it does not sustain a religious message that is good news for all. In other words, it's not fair. I find his argument that thousands of millions have already lived and died, their highest potentialities unfulfilled to be remarkable. I feel that it has unconscious

echoes of the use of religion by the powerful to keep the 'poor man at the gate.' As Cupitt (2013) says, ... 'many people have an expectation that life would make sense; they need God to exist, but there is no reason to suppose that it has to add up.'

2.3.3 Heim (1995, p18) cites Hick (1964) as saying that both the realist and non realist conclusions are justified but once one has decided, they run a risk as only one can be right. This, it seems to me is the only justifiable conclusion to this endless debate; what White and many others overlook is that non realists have come to their justifiable conclusion and that arguments based on how God interacts with the world will not be found convincing.

2.4 Non Realists Approaches to Interreligious Dialogue

2.4.1 Hart (1995) provides an important early contribution to a non realist perspective on interreligious dialogue. He describes Hick's understanding of the 'Real' as the 'Ultimate Mystery' but has to comment (p33) that he is not radical enough. At p36, he talks of traditional advice to Christian Missionaries being translated into a modern academic equivalent that we should not explore alien traditions without the pre-supposition that a Real God lies behind them all. He explores non realist tendencies in various religions and makes a telling observation at p152:

'The existence of a number of different religions provides no *prima facie* evidence to suggest a single underlying cause of religion or object of theological description. If anything, the very diversity would signify the opposite.'

Hart (2006) follows this up by using the metaphor of trading as a useful model for interreligious exchanges in the modern world. At p132, he says 'A non realist approach would follow the postmodernist consensus that there is no single overarching universal metaphor. All our understandings are located within our particular cultural contexts.'

2.4.2 Knight (2001) proposes that most non realists would describe themselves as religious pluralists but would not agree to some of the 'realist' or representational arguments used by many who have developed the ideas behind it. At p87, He cites Swidler (1987, p16) describing three reasons for participating in interreligious dialogue: firstly to address the practical needs of human communities, secondly to promote spiritual understanding and thirdly as a quest for truth and understanding through a universal theology of religions. Knight suggests that non realists are likely to be attracted to the first two issues but the third is superfluous.

At p92, he suggests dumping the project of adjudicating between beliefs on the basis of the representation model. 'Ascribing truth to one's own religious beliefs will not show that they possess a privileged quality which the religious beliefs of others lack... (it) will simply show that those beliefs are commended by a particular social audience.'

2.4.3 Firth (2012) tells of his ordination as a Roman Catholic priest in 1967. He subsequently left the priesthood in 1985 having decided that his views on religion were no longer compatible with his office. He develops the 'both / and' model, seeing it as a way of reconciliation between the apparently contradictory truths of different religions (p70 – 77).

2.5 Approaches to Non Reality by Those of Other Faiths

I searched for relevant writings showing the attitudes of those from other faith backgrounds to non realism. This has its difficulties as particularly the Eastern religions have very different models of God so that to look at their attitude to non realism may not be a question that they would identify with or understand in the same way as those from Abrahamic faiths.

2.5.1. Buddhism

Batchelor (2010) tells of his training as a Bhikku, a monk in the Tibetan tradition of Buddhism, his growing unease with the supernatural element of their beliefs and eventual departure from his vows of ordination. At p40, we hear of his realisation that even if there is no life after death, then that would have no effect at all on his practise of the Dharma. He found a lack of comprehension among his teachers when he raised his doubts; although claiming to be open to doubt and questions, they thought his doubt meant that he had not meditated for long enough about the issues.

Back in Europe (p58) he studied philosophers including Bultmann's ideas of demythologising Christianity and pondered applying a similar process to Buddhism. In an echo of the work of the Jesus Seminar on Christianity, he searched for the original Buddha (p100 et seq). At p135, he describes the Buddha as a dissenter, a radical, an iconoclast who wanted nothing to do with the priestly religion of the Brahmins. There are parallels here with Cupitt. Batchelor at p182 refers to him, stating that 'I have a greater affinity with Don Cupitt than with any living Buddhist thinker.'

2.5.2 Hinduism

It is not difficult to find examples of the Hindu equivalent of non realism. Sharma (2005, p16) talks of the personal and impersonal aspects of God, giving rise to Vedantic Theism (personal) and Vedantic Absolutism (impersonal). He suggests that the two extremes tend to meet in modern Hinduism. Hart (1995, p82) describes the concept of Brahman as 'Nirguna' (without qualities or attributes) and argues that this is 'remarkably close to the position described as non realism.'

As will be seen from the analysis of my meetings below, points about 'non realism' are perhaps the wrong questions to ask of Hinduism.

2.5.3 Sikhism

Chahal (2001, p13) complains of misrepresentation of the original Sikhism message due to the literal understanding by many of eighteenth and nineteenth century writings. He says that these are full of 'unauthentic, unscientific and illogical information.' They have been imprinted on the minds of many as literally true. Citing specific examples, he says that they ignore the allegorical system in the writing of Guru Nanak. Chahal and Grewal (2006) expand on this work writing at p17 that Guru Nanak did not preach that the Vedas were literally true but rather that they contained truth. The metaphorical truths have been understood literally which was contrary to the basic philosophy of Guru Nanak. God is inaccessible, ineffable, imperceptible and without form or feature. At p 25, they point out that the Veda stories are not reconcilable to history or science.

Whilst not being an explicitly non realist proposition, it lays great emphasis on the non literal interpretation of Sikh tradition.

2.5.4 Judaism

Cohn-Sherbok (2001, p30) tells of two American-Jewish communities who reject the belief in a supernatural deity, whilst not being condemned by either Orthodox or non-Orthodox Jews. He cites Kaplan (1970), founder of the Deconstructionist movement as describing God as 'The sum of all the animating organising forces and relationships which are forever making a cosmos out of the chaos'. To him, the Torah was not a record of God's dealing with his chosen people; rather it reflected the Jewish search for God. Cohn-Sherbok cites Wine (1985), founder of Humanistic Judaism as regarding the traditional conception of Jewish history as mistaken with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob never existing as actual people and the Exodus account being a myth. Cohn-Sherbok postulates (2001, p36) that these branches of Judaism may be more accepted than their Christian counterparts such as the Sea of Faith Network because Judaism is seen as an ethnic, as opposed to religious character.

2.5.5 Islam

Hart (1995 and 2006) suggests that the mystical Sufis have an approach consistent with non realism. My literary review has not found evidence of a modern 'non realist' Islam. It will be interesting to see whether modernisation of the religion changes this position in the future. Perhaps a more typical reaction is Shaha (2011) who describes himself as a humanist and atheist, brought up as a Muslim. At p196 he sees God as an inevitable part of human culture and says:

'But I have every hope that, with better education, greater freedom, and the same rights for everybody, humanity may eventually adopt a different take on religion.'

This reflects a cautious optimism that there can be dialogue between his kind of Humanism and realist religions, including Islam.

2.6 The Development of Interreligious Thought

Space does not permit an exhaustive review of this subject so that I must confine myself to looking at contributions which may be of some relevance to my project.

2.6.1 Hans Küng (1997, p92) issued his famous response to the challenge of the clash of civilisations:

'There will be no peace between the civilisations without peace between the religions!
And there will be no peace between the religions without a dialogue between the religions.'

He also added a less known statement in response to the polarisations between believers and non-believers. Often overlooked, perhaps this is the most important leg of the three:

‘There will be no survival of democracy without a coalition of believers and non-believers in mutual respect.’

I shall seek to argue that non realists form a bridge between believers and non-believers and are well placed to form a link between them, seeing the value of religions whilst not going along with the traditional supernatural beliefs.

2.6.2 Race (1983) is credited with first using the terms ‘exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism’ in relation to interreligious dialogue. I do not intend to spend time on exclusivism and inclusivism; as a non realist, I do not see such approaches as helpful in dialogue and indeed they can be part of the problem. However, the edges of each approach are blurred. Also, as we shall see below, the concept of pluralism is still developing and is far from straightforward. Pluralists are accused of both exclusivism and inclusivism and elements of those two approaches are sometimes described as being pluralist.

At p70, Race cites Cantwell Smith (1972) in relation to the exclusive and inclusive positions:

‘The fallacy of relentless exclusivism is becoming more obvious than is the right way of reconciling a truly Christian charity and a perception with doctrinal adequacy.’

The move to a pluralist position describes attempts to seek this reconciliation. This went with a growing liberal approach of ‘toleration’ to other faiths; tolerant pluralism accepts that knowledge of God is partial in all faiths. This leads to the danger of ‘debilitating relativism’, a thread running through interreligious literature. If all religions are equally true, are they then also equally false? How can one distinguish between the good and bad religions (p78)? My response to this question is given later.

2.6.3 Hick (1989, p233) develops his ideas of pluralism with a list of Gods from across the planet and ages. He asks if they can all exist and at p235, rules out the non realist answer which would see the phenomenon as an example of Humankind’s creativity. He goes on to postulate the existence of the ‘Real’ (p248). This is explained as the single ultimate, ‘The One without a second.’ His justification at p235 is basically simple – he has rejected the idea that it is all delusory and the dogmatic view that it is all delusory except for one’s own tradition. Thus the third possibility is that the great post axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing the ultimate divine reality; The Real.

2.6.4 D’Costa (1990) edited a criticism of pluralism, as expressed in the publication *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, (Hick & Knitter Eds, 1987), with a number of distinguished contributors. His contribution comprises five theses based on a doctrine of the trinity. It adds little to the debate from the perspective of a non realist. Cobb (1990, p81-95) makes a contribution which is of more interest to a non realist. In essence, he opposes Hick’s model of pluralism not because ‘Christianity is the end of all religion realised’ but to emphasise the fundamental differences between religions. He sees no evidence to support the idea of a single ‘essence’ or ‘real.’ He wants each religious tradition to be free to define ‘its own nature and purpose and the role of religious elements within it.’ He affirms Christian uniqueness but also the uniqueness of other religions. At p93, he states:

‘My view is that none of the central claims made by any of the traditions are likely to be literally and exactly correct... My goal is to transform contradictory statements into different but not contradictory ones.’

I find this to be a version of pluralism to which a non realist could identify. Later in this book, Hellwig (1990, p108) says with amazing clarity that:

‘the difference between the devout peasant and the fundamentalist is that the former holds a formidably integrated and resilient worldview because the critical questions have never been raised, while the latter clings to an essentially brittle dogmatism maintained only by a determined refusal to acknowledge the force of the questions that throng in from every side. Not many of us are granted the opportunity nowadays to be devout peasants.’

She goes on to acknowledge the challenge posed by Hick and others and the problems with ultimate truth claims.

2.6.5 Heim (1995) in *Salvations* comments on Hick’s version of pluralism and his rejection of the non realist stance due to its being ‘cosmically pessimistic’ (see above). The clue to his solution is in the title as he wants to recognise that each religion will have its own ultimate truth, its own salvation. He sees different religions as asking different questions and having different ends (salvations).

2.6.6 Straus (2002) picks up on salvation. She suggests using a different definition of salvation as meaning liberation or deliverance. She sees the first priority as being the needs of people in their daily lives, moving towards a global society and ethic. She sees theological claims as irrelevant in the move towards global humanism, a perspective which more attractive than Heim to non realists.

2.6.7 Griffin (2005) introduces the term ‘deep pluralism’ after criticising what he terms ‘identist’ pluralists such as Hick, Smith and Knitter (p24). He accuses Hick of being condescending, with the bringing of others to Christian values (p25), stating that Hick’s pluralism is not pluralism and, (p31), not Christian as he calls for ‘an unequivocal denial of Christian uniqueness.’

At the conclusion of his critique of Hick’s position on pluralism, (p38) he suggests that Hick’s approach leads to a ‘neutral universality’ and hence to ‘debilitating relativism’ which is not really Christian. In a footnote he goes on:

‘A finally convincing answer to this issue would of course involve showing that a theology can be adequate to Christian faith without presupposing supernatural intervention.... this is beyond the scope of the present volume.’

Like so many, he sees a solution but cannot let go of his realist preconceptions to grasp it.

2.6.8 Hospital (2007) refers to the encouragement of dialogue between the religions, but questions its basis in the modern world. He asks whether it is should be possible for views to change

as a result or whether there are limits to the dialogue. What if the views heard are seen as problematic or even dangerous? How does this affect the position that all religions are equally valid? At p363, he argues 'for a full appropriation of the implications of historical consciousness for our religious life.' We need to enter a mature dialogue with other religions, leaving behind absolutist thoughts.

2.6.9 Knitter (2011) makes a thoughtful contribution, with statements such as the following (p120)

'If in a functioning civil society, no race, or gender, or sexual preference, can hold itself up as superior over others, neither can a religion. Religious citizens will therefore have to affirm the equal validity of other religions not just as citizens but as religious believers, i.e., on the basis of what they believe and on the basis of theology. Otherwise there is a contradiction between what they affirm as citizens and what they affirm as believers. A functioning liberal democracy, you might say, demands a functioning liberal theology!'

2.6.10 Knitter (2002) provides an excellent review of the methods of interreligious dialogue. He goes through the many phases and labels of work, for example describing many types of pluralism. His divide between Hick, Knitter, etc on the one hand and Heim, Cobb, etc on the other hand would be to describe the former as the 'mutuality model' and the latter as the 'acceptance model.' At this point it becomes clear that there are not just many religions and many ways of considering the differences but also many labels for the same ways of looking at them, which can make things confusing.

At p173, etc. he describes the postmodern approach as part of the acceptance model. The central pillar (p175) is that 'people and their cultures are more different than they are alike. *Vive la Difference!* If differences flourish, so will humanity.' So truth is always truths.

He goes on to describe the work of Lindbeck (p180). Lindbeck talks about the central role of language in human experience and the filter of language. He refers to the unbridgeable gap between the religions: they're untranslatable (p181).

2.6.11 As a comment on untranslatability, Moyaert (2008] examines this issue, citing Ricoeur (2006). Here he looks at linguistic diversity and linguistic hospitality. Moyaert suggests that this may be a model for interreligious dialogue making translation between religions possible.

2.6.12 Knitter (2002, p211) cites Fredericks (1999) in *Faith among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non Christian Religions*. Fredericks:

'...warns mutualist theologians that by viewing Jesus as one among many saviours or incarnations they so dilute and deform Christian identity that it becomes difficult to see how they are really carrying out a Christian dialogue with other traditions. And that's not just his opinion, he points out, but the verdict of many Buddhists and Muslims who have told him that they want to talk with Christians out of their tradition rather than those who remove whatever might be offensive to the dialogue partners.'

He goes on to admonish theologians such as Hick when his mythological interpretations end up with a religion that not only Christians but also those of other faiths do not recognise as Christian. This is an attitude which I shall seek to counter by examples from my meetings.

Lindberg holds (Knitter, 2002, p184) that the only worthwhile approach is a 'good neighbour' policy where we all stay in our own back yard and talk over the fence, whilst not telling the neighbour how he should design his own garden. This may not be as exciting as the mutuality model with its seeking for the common core, but it means they can accept difference and proceed in exploration without engaging in invidious comparisons. Knitter cites Placher (1989) as describing this as 'good natured and liberal muddling through,' a description and an approach that really appeals to me.

2.6.13 I was intrigued by what John Hick thought of all this criticism. One answer is given by Hick (1995, p50) where he suggests that 'critics who don't like it should occupy themselves in trying to produce a better one.' This book is also referred to by Race (2012, p11), where he says:

'The caricature that he thought all religions were essentially the same could not be further from the truth. The pluralist hypothesis is much more subtle than that caricature supposes.' Race refers to Hick taking up the criticisms in his 1995 work, but notes that: 'I have observed that repeated critiques since that date have not generally taken into account John's responses...'

Hick also shows how close his position is to non realism although staunchly realist in his outlook. At p46, he refers to the Real as being 'partly a human projection.'

Race (2001) emphasises the need for a 'twin track' approach to interreligious relationships, theological and dialogue. He defends the pluralist approach (p20) albeit one that allows for expansion and modification.

2.6.14 So, now it is time to reflect on the above and then move on. There are indications of multiple approaches to interreligious dialogue, much scope for theological arguments and much giving of subtly different terms for similar activities. There is much certainty about uncertain issues and explanations of why one version is more consistent with the observable facts than the others. No-one can take a fully independent overview (a God's eye view) as they are all dependent on their own background. This will include those who take the non realist view.

On the other hand, there is promising evidence that dialogue is entering a new phase with Straus (2.6.6), Hospital (2.6.8), and Knitter (2.6.9) suggesting some more practical and constructive methods of working together in action rather than dogma.

To take the fact of the existence of many religions seriously, is to take K  ng's message seriously and so we must move on to see how this has been done by a group of people who claim the label 'non realist.'

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

I wanted my research to examine in depth real life experiences of interreligious activity, exploring participants' attitudes, behaviour and experiences. I was aware that the potential sample size available to me (known non realists engaged in this work) was quite small. It was therefore apparent that a qualitative research methodology was appropriate (Dawson, 2002, p14). I thought it inappropriate to conduct a survey exercise, as the sample size was small and their range of experiences likely to be wide.

3.1.1 Given the small size of the potential sample, the sampling technique was quite basic. I approached members or past members of SoF who I thought were engaged in the interreligious field and asked for a meeting. I also contacted two local SoF groups and asked for volunteers, producing one extra participant. These approaches provided nine participants, a number thought by my supervisor to be satisfactory. I did not seek to rigidly define what was meant by the term 'non realism,' leaving it for the participants to accept that it applied to them. To have interrogated them on their interpretation would have been to miss the point of the exercise. Similarly I did not seek to rigidly define what form of interreligious dialogue I was seeking; I wanted to be inclusive of any form of activity.

3.1.2 The best approach seemed to be by interviews; I used a technique which lay between unstructured and semi structured interviews (Dawson, 2002, p27). I used three basic questions to each participant, as a catalyst to suggest their line of thought. I then let the meetings follow their course, relying on the rapport we had and lightly bringing them back to the subject if necessary. No time limits were set and the meetings lasted between just less than an hour to three or four hours. I wrote up notes soon after each meeting, sending copies to the participators for corrections and comments.

3.1.3 I feel that a short note on my personal background information may clarify my approach. I recently retired as a civil servant after 35 years experience as manager and practitioner in compliance with the Inland Revenue (now HMRC). During this time, I conducted many interviews, both where I was helping interviewees to express themselves and also where they were reluctant to give me information. I developed my technique of gaining information by interview from a wide range of staff and customers by varying my questions between open and closed. My preparation for meetings would range from setting out one or two open questions to a detailed brief with every word carefully considered. I learned the ability to depart from my script when necessary, to listen attentively and follow up with detailed questions when necessary.

I have not felt it necessary to seek detailed advice on how to conduct my meetings. A successful interview to me is one where the subject does not think I have asked many questions but I have all the information I need.

3.2 Research Validity

Creswell & Miller (2000) talk about the importance of determining validity in qualitative analysis exercises and the need to demonstrate that the studies are credible. They mention (p124) the array of works on the issue which, they say, can confuse researchers in their attempts to understand the concept of validity. They do however accept the need to show that results are credible. They propose a framework to help researchers identify appropriate validity procedures for the work. They track the paradigm assumptions against the lens of the researcher as shown below. (Table reproduced from the paper):

Validity Procedures within Qualitative Lens and Paradigm Assumptions

Paradigm Assumption / Lens	Postpositivist or Systematic paradigm	Constructivist Paradigm	Critical Paradigm
Lens of the Researcher	Triangulation	Disconfirming evidence	Researcher reflexivity
Lens of Study Participants	Member checking	Prolonged engagement in the field	Collaboration
Lens of People External to the Study	The audit trail	Thick, rich description	Peer debriefing

They describe the three models of paradigm assumption, post positivist, constructivist and critical, followed by the nine methods. They use the framework of the above grid to show that each paradigm had three methods that tend to that approach.

On reflecting on these approaches in the context of my work, I found that it was best defined by the constructivist paradigm described (at p125) as 'pluralistic, interpretive, open ended and contextualised...', presenting criteria with labels such as trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability), and authenticity / fairness.'

The three methods within this paradigm do indeed feature in some measure in the work described in this dissertation.

3.2.1 Disconfirming Evidence. (p127)

Part of my questioning was aimed at finding both positive and negative experiences of the participators of others' reactions to them in interreligious relations. I wanted to have a balanced approach and it was important to seek evidence in both directions.

3.2.2 Prolonged Engagement in the Field. (p127)

This would normally relate to researchers in field work spending a long time with the participants. I relate to this as I have been a member of SoF network for some 20 years, thus acquiring a knowledge of people in general who are non realists and their ways of thinking, though not usually in the interreligious context. This, I suggest enabled me to look for consistency in the information I received during the meetings with my knowledge of the wider group of people.

3.2.3 Thick, Rich Description (p128)

This procedure for establishing credibility is to describe the setting, participants and themes in rich detail. The purpose is to create `verisimilitude` (p129) that produce for the readers the feeling that they have, or could experience the events described. The process is to write as much details as possible to bring the situation to life. My reports of the meetings are lengthy, deliberately so, hopefully with the result that they give the `feel` of what was said as authentic experience.

3.2.4 Other Techniques

Other techniques described in the paper have been used as appropriate. Researcher reflexivity (p127) was used (see my introduction and conclusions). This entails the researcher self-disclosing their assumptions beliefs and biases. Triangulation (looking for convergence from different sources) formed part of the analysis where I looked for consistency between the participants in their overall conclusions. This was limited by their quite varied experiences and so is not a major part of the work.

Creswell and Miller (2000, p129) conclude by acknowledging the importance of all of the lenses and that their emphasis will vary depending on the project.

3.2.5 I was heartened to read (Hanson et al, 2005, p226) that a pragmatic approach to methodology is to be encouraged – use what works.

3.3 Meetings

3.3.1 I met with nine people, (one was a telephone discussion), each of whom accepted the label of `non realist.` In order to preserve their anonymity, I have referred to them as `participants A – I.` Some of them have supplemented the interview notes by email. I also facilitated a focus group comprising the trustees of SoF, talking about the subject. Where there are quotes from these people, they are not personally attributed. I also met with Don Cupitt who was kind enough to share some thoughts on the issue.

I asked the nine the same basic questions:

- What practical experience of interreligious work you have had, over what period and in which locations.
- What advantages or disadvantages in this dialogue you feel you had arising from your personal beliefs in the reality of God.
- How others reacted to your participation in the dialogue (positively or negatively).

3.4 Ethical Permission

I sought and received ethical permission from the faculty to carry out my interviews.

Chapter 4: Findings and Preliminary Analysis

To separate the findings from the analysis would be to use a tortuous approach of first quoting from the meetings at length and then doing the same again with my analysis. I have therefore made analytical comments as I proceed, summarising the comments in chapter 5.

4.1 Biographical Details of the Participants

I shall start with a few words about the background of the participants. Although not one of my main questions, points of interest emerged during the meetings. It is difficult to attach labels to people as often they would identify with several; Christian, Humanist, Atheist, etc.

4.1.1 Three broad groups emerged from within the nine participants. Firstly, Four (A, B, C and E) started as Christians and remained within that heritage although the lines had seriously blurred and three were deeply influenced by Hinduism. Secondly, One (G) had a non Christian (Jewish Atheist) background and was now a Quaker and two (D and I) left their Christian roots early in life for Humanism and Paganism (Eclectic Wiccan) respectively. Thirdly, that left E, who was committed to church life before resigning her roles and now regarding herself as a Humanist and H who had been a Humanist for many years but attended his local church. Participants A and B were retired Anglican Priests and F a retired Methodist Minister.

4.1.2 All have clearly shown an independence of thought, which had led them into involvement with other faiths. None had any formal training in interreligious matters. For example, participant B said that they were self taught on interreligious issues and made the point that this did not mean that they knew less than others.

4.1.3 I have looked for examples of how the various backgrounds may have affected responses to my questions. These have been difficult to identify, partly because I suspect that most would accept at least two of the various labels.

4.2 What practical experience of interreligious work you have had, over what period and in which locations?

I now describe the information gathered at the meetings under the first question. I have deliberately given space for the impressions I received from each of the people I met of the depth of their experience and thoughtfulness to emerge.

What emerged was evidence of a remarkable breadth of experience over a long period of time and also in areas wide in both geography and experiences.

Three of the contributors had extensive knowledge of travel to India and I shall start with these meetings.

4.2.1 Participants A and B (Conversation 6 March 2013)

I met with participants A and B together. They had known each other for many years and worked together professionally for some of that time.

Whilst working together at a school, they had invited other religious leaders to take part in a 'shop window' for sixth form pupils which went well and was seen as having a good influence on local community relations.

Also in the school, the lower sixth form had general studies afternoons. They had decided to have sessions of meditation with input from various faiths. This had appealed to students including the rugby team and musicians and been very successful. They had gained permission to use the school chapel for the sessions which was not popular with some Christian teachers. They also visited the Sri Lankan Buddhist Temple for tea and meditation.

They had attended their local Interfaith Group, whose leader wanted to set up links with Indian schools and asked for a teacher to go with the group. B had offered to do this and so had her first visit to India.

A first visited India in 1996 and had been there about 18 times. He went originally with a Hindu friend, who was keen to develop links with Educational agencies, mainly in Delhi. Back in UK the friend set up some exchanges with pupils at schools in the local area. In Delhi A joined in worship with various religions, and then travelled to the Himalayas and shared the community life of a Hindu monastery.

His subsequent visits to India built on the first. He had been to about ten major Indian cities, bathed in the Ganges and witnessed cremations on her banks. Sadly interfaith dialogue was still not significant. Tolerance was the best word to use about Indian attitudes to religious difference. But he felt that Eastern philosophy itself sees no essential differences. A said that these apparent differences are all part of 'Maya' - the illusion that what seems to be so is actually the case.

A had experiences of Muslims in India where he had been welcomed as a guest by the family of a rickshaw driver. He had invited A to his Mosque, to follow what he did in purification and prayer. A had learned more about Islam in a few minutes than his entire learning previously.

More recently, he had travelled with his wife to Tamil Nadu in the south of the country. A week was spent in a village near the southernmost tip of India where they witnessed the devastating effect of the Tsunami and the extraordinary self-help of one community, coordinated by the village Catholic priest. There was a strong interfaith movement confronting the reality of suffering caused by natural disaster.

B had been to India a number of times, mainly on private visits, staying at numerous centres across the country. She had become increasingly interested in their languages, learning Hindi and Sanskrit. She had made numerous local friends and went with them to temples, ceremonies, weddings, art collections, holy men, musical events etc., learning how the different religious traditions 'think' and the disparate groups interact. Strangers often became friends very quickly. In

general the Indians were fascinated that any 'Britisher' was interested in India, and had taken the trouble to learn Hindi. She felt most at home with Hindus and with Sufi-type Muslims although she tended to find many Christians rather hard work.

4.2.2 C (Conversation 13 March 2013)

C became a Vicar in Loughborough in 1964; just after he arrived there were influxes, from the Punjab and then a little later East African Gujarati Hindus. To get to know them seemed a natural extension of ecumenism. At first this was on a practical level – there was much racism around and he wanted to be welcoming to the newcomers. For example he allowed the Punjabi Hindus to meet in his church hall, initially jointly with the Sikhs.

Around 1968/69, interfaith meetings started on an informal basis. They met as a group of friends, sometimes taking part in the worship. People would tell their stories; there was a culture of 'suspended disbelief' with people just listening and not arguing.

He had formed the LCOF, including the so called main religions, and later other faith groups. It had grown organically without external drivers; people listened to those with a different approach in culture and religion. The various beliefs were interesting but not central.

There was a danger that children of the immigrant population might be caught between two cultures. To counter this, C responded to an invitation by a visiting Gandhian organisation to live with them for six weeks and explore ways of linking Loughborough to a town in Gujarat. The result was the 'Charnwood Community Link' with Bhavnagar. Parties of young people, their teachers, social workers, Councillors and many others exchanged visits with Gujarat annually for over 20 years. The visits still continued.

The other contributors talked of their experiences with people of other faiths, mainly in the UK.

4.2.3 D (Conversation 14 March 2013)

D was a trustee of the Sea of Faith Network, the National Secular Society and All Faiths & None. He was a member of the Leicester SACRE and had held the position of Chaplain to a former mayor of Leicester. He was a member of the Chaplaincy team at Leicester College of Further Education. He attended St Phillip's Multi Faith Centre events and, with representatives from various religions was on its Religion & Belief Road Show which went around various venues such as schools. People were attracted by the displays of religious objects. It provided an opportunity to get to know one another and show others that those from different faiths can be friends.

He had addressed the Christian Moslem dialogue group at St Phillips and felt he had been well received.

4.2.4 E (Conversation 23 March 2013)

After she left her church, an acquaintance had recommended that she be appointed to the SACRE as a Humanist representative. She became involved in completing a re-write of the local R.E. syllabus. They had also produced a booklet of ideas for school assemblies.

She moved house in 2005 and joined the local Humanist group and became their representative on the Interfaith Forum. She had started quietly but been made very welcome including by a Baptist member of whom she was wary. She had gone out of her way to be helpful and had offered to build on the work of a 'Harmony Group' offshoot of the Interfaith forum, as she had teaching experience. They had a regular programme where schools would write in for a week long course where each of the several faiths would take a class.

The school visits had been very rewarding, dealing with a wide range of questions raised by the children on what it means to be a Humanist concerning everything from belief in the tooth fairy to more serious questions about prayer and Life after Death. She had been accepted by teachers and pupils who knew little if anything about Humanism.

A couple of years ago, the interfaith group realised that it needed a proper constitution and she was invited to join the sub-committee which did this task. She had occasionally chaired the management group for the development of the local Interfaith Forum. There had been tension between two different faith representatives and she had been seen by both as a neutral whom they could respect and trust. She had been the mediator along with a Quaker (Universalist) member.

4.2.5 F (Conversation 20 March 2013)

His first interreligious experience had been as Superintendent Minister in the Aylesbury Methodist Circuit. He had been involved with the Multifaith centre and the Centre for racial Equality. Through this he had been involved with the annual multi cultural day from 1986 – 1993. The first Mosque had arrived during his time there and they had shared gifts of a Bible and the Koran.

He then moved to Harlesden where he had become the chair of the City Community Association which gave him a wide range of contacts. He was the mayor of Brent for a year. A multi faith centre was set up for the 12 faith groups. The multi faith forum was a voice to speak to the people in power, such as the local authority about what the faith community thought on issues. As mayor, he found that he was one of those who could speak on important issues including interfaith.

He had journeyed to the Indian Subcontinent on a Sabbatical. He was looking at Liberation Theology in various religions. He looked at Dalit locations, and various places of worship, living at the Tamil Nadu Theological Centre and visiting Sri Lanka.

4.2.6 G (Conversation 20 March 2013)

G had been involved in meetings 20 years ago in Loughborough with participant C and others. He and his wife were involved with interfaith discussions previously when they lived in SE London where there was also a lively interfaith scene.

He mentioned the LCOF 'Festival of Faiths' event last autumn. This took the format of speed dating; every table would be visited by a representative of different faiths and have 3 or 4 minutes with each to ask questions. This was one of several social and religious activities promoted by LCOF.

At a Quaker gathering in 2003 in Loughborough, he led an interfaith evening with at least 10 different faith contributors. He was able to introduce them all as friends and this was important. Interfaith relations were not about tolerance but friendship.

I referred to his being of Jewish descent but a Quaker, asking how he thought in interreligious matters, as a Jew or as a Quaker. He felt that Jewish insight was stronger than Quaker (it was older). He still felt his Jewish roots in Poland as a second generation arrival in England. A group of 'second generation Jewish arrivals' was formed around Leicester, meeting in each other's houses. They talked about their origins, histories and the essence of being Jewish. He had written a book on his search for his Jewish heritage.

He described three stages of interfaith relations; First the awareness that we are different; second the awareness that we have things in common. The third and important (more difficult) stage was to realise that we are actually different but friends.

4.2.7 H (Conversation 5 April 2013)

He spoke of his background in interreligious matters. He had been on the Board of Trustees of the (Buddhist) Amida Trust when it was located in Narborough. His interest in Buddhism grew from his student interest in Eastern matters.

He also attended events at the St Phillip's Centre in Leicester, including the Moslem Christian dialogue group, which he found challenging but important. He found the Moslem religion particularly challenging though he accepted that there was a spectrum of Moslem beliefs including those of the liberal perspective. He was interested in how to forge a genuine multi cultural society.

He agreed that not all religions or religious practices were of equal value. He attended Secular Society meetings in Leicester and described himself as a 'failed atheist.' He had started off as a Humanist and then been drawn to the Eastern religions. He thought that many Humanists were strongly against religions, but had also seen more thoughtful approaches.

He felt closer to Buddhism but always a step away from total commitment. He didn't need the 'cosiness' that went with full commitment, preferring to see himself as on a journey.

His involvement in interfaith dialogue went back to his time in Kenya where he was a teacher. He despaired of getting close to the Africans who kept him at a distance but was involved with the Asian community. He attended a group discussing passages from the Bhagavad Gita. When he asked if they saw the stories as mythical, he found that many took them literally.

4.2.8 J (Conversation 25 June 2013)

Participant J said that recently she had been involved with Oxford Council of Faiths (OxCoF). She had been involved from the Oxford Pagan Group in its initial stages during its setting up and was currently the minutes secretary for the council. She talked of the core members of OxCoF, some members were much more engaged than others. Those more involved were some of the Christians, two Jews from different groups, a Hindu, some Moslems, a Sikh, a Baha'i and a Quaker.

There was a sense that OxCoF members had more in common with each other than just co-religionists – each would see it as important that they were friends as well as colleagues. They didn't talk about each others' beliefs though she had been to various acts of worship. Their central business was to demonstrate the ability of people of different faiths to get on with each other.

4.2.9 Summary and Reflection

Taken individually the stories are perhaps unremarkable – just tales of quietly committed people 'getting on with getting on' with people of other faiths. However, their cumulative effect is, I suggest good evidence of their success in the interreligious field. By and large, they have not proclaimed (nor made a secret of) their non realism, it has rather been part of their way of approaching others.

4.3 What advantages or disadvantages in this dialogue you feel you had arising from your personal beliefs in the reality of God?

I turn now to the second main question I asked of the participants. Having given the references in full in the previous section, I do not repeat them here. As will be seen below, they felt that it gave them a useful, different perspective on a number of issues. They tended to approach other faiths without thinking that they had 'the answer,' some problems just became non issues. There is already some evidence of this in the preceding section, but the following information was given when I approached this question:

4.3.1 A Feeling of Empathy

Many of the participants expressed their feeling of empathy towards all aspects of religions, A and B saying that an outsider learned best by 'keeping the ears and eyes open and the mouth shut.' for example, in a Hindu Temple the walls would have pictures which told stories; they would say that the story teaches us something, not that they were literally true. They are selected from many examples in the meetings to best show the behaviour described.

A felt that as a non realist he did not have the `baggage` and worries that caused barriers to other ideas and faiths. It was not articulated but there was a feeling of being on the same wavelength. He had not been quizzed on his beliefs but found others intent on openness, not ticking boxes on beliefs before treating him as a human being. It was a matter of how you talked to people of other religion, having empathy and not enquiring further.

Participant I perceived herself as being on a path, not at a destination. She was not a literalist but saw deities in different ways on different days. Her beliefs affected her approach to other faiths in that she sensed that anyone's path was valid for them. She was predisposed to respect what others believed (subject to some clearly bad practices).

As will be seen shortly, this feeling of empathy does not make non realists into relativists.

4.3.2 A humility and lack of arrogance in the attitudes displayed.

This was stated explicitly by some, though I felt that the feeling came through implicitly with all participants.

For example, C said that as a non realist there was also the motivation to have an inclusive understanding of what it meant to be human, including both science and myth using story and ritual fellowship. To see them all as human creations made them more important, not by saying that the only way of looking at it is that God exists and having right and wrong answers.

F felt that with other faiths, he learned and listened, seeking what they had in common. He did not believe in assimilation but also not in having ghettos for faith groups. Consensus rather than division was important.

H said that the non realist approach meant that he felt lacking in arrogance in his approach to other faiths. There was a genuine sense that they were all equal; it was an accident of birth that they each had their own religion. He could be true to his own religion and not leave it behind. Others seemed to sense his openness; it would not be genuine if there was any arrogance. Pure Land Buddhism gave him an insight into where Christianity was coming from, not expecting to find answers.

4.3.3 Issues became non issues through non realist eyes.

Some participants expressed this in some way but the following examples express the sentiments.

A and B questioned whether matters of belief were as central to those of other faiths as to Christians. It was not a Hindu idea to accept something creedal. One could become a devotee of a guru who would teach of attachment to one aspect of God but not entail believing anything in

particular. This was contrasted with fear especially among Christians of the `pick and mix` approach to religions, perhaps fearing heresy.

A suggested that Eastern religions had a better grasp of immanence whereas Western religions tended to be hung up about transcendence (the other). For a non realist, issues became non issues; A and B both felt that there was not a parallel radicalism in other faiths.

C felt that with the non realist approach some questions disappeared; it motivated interfaith dialogue in a valuable way. One could enter dialogue in a way that valued others and their ideas – creating faiths together. Interfaith dialogue was not about comparing beliefs; it worked as an open exploration, with empathy. The next stage was `I can understand why what you believe is important to you,` not thinking that the other must be crazy to think in their way.

4.3.4 A new way of looking at things

A was saddened by the fact that the Christian/Western world had little appreciation of what could be termed Indian Spirituality. In many ways the most sophisticated Hindus were non-realist already.

He felt that Western culture had a different way of looking at what it means to be human from Eastern. Christians have a linear view of history. This was in contrast to the Oriental circular view of history. The West tended to use the left hemisphere of the brain and the East the right. Both were needed and valuable.

C suggested that much dialogue was on the basis of an assumption of monotheism, only including the Abrahamic faiths. He thought that non realists opened the debate for people such as Hindus. He felt he was not trying to prove a particular faith, nor claiming that religions had a core in common. One reason for different religions was that they were asking different question about different aspects of life. This extended understanding of what humanity was doing in the world, especially the West / East split.

D said that non realists accepted that the idea of God had a use; faith members tended to think that the stories reflected something outside as opposed to something inside. God was produced by the individual and shared between individuals but as a human creation. The idea of punishment and reward by God had been successful in building and maintaining empires but this was less possible in the modern world.

G thought an advantage of non realism was that it made it easier to translate what people say. He could accept that ideas are manmade so his own version was less likely to be threatened by others. There was a lot of arrogance in Christian views.

He had problems when God was referred to as a person; he saw a difference between the head and the heart where it was not always possible to translate. He once visited the Musee D'Orsay in Paris and saw a model of the Paris Opera House. Theatre was like religion, a performance. The church (Mosque, Temple) was very important to the performance as the setting for the ritual. What

happens if we take the ritual out of its container? It wouldn't work. There was a simple step from ritual to God.

There was a Jewish compulsion to repair the broken world but we can't repair it for ourselves, only for others. Israel's problem was that it was trying to fix it for themselves. And this would fail.

A SoF trustee (Meeting 23 March 2013) said that non Realists were asking questions, taking the whole metaphysical aspect out of the answers. This removed one possible area of disagreement, so that it was easier to look for agreement.

There was a reference to the use of stories and myths. God is unreal but the stories are real and have importance. Most faiths had a mixture of the literal and the myth and it should be possible to live with this. There was a difference when religions claimed a privileged position which was not justified.

4.3.5 A feeling that 'bad religion' existed and should be challenged

The above themes should not be taken as an uncritical approach to other religions. There was a strong, recurring theme that the 'bad' in religion should be challenged. The challenge was to establish an open relationship where this could be done in friendship. To me, this is a better way of looking at it than by using the term 'relativism,' an echo of Hospital at para. 2.6.8 above.

For example A and B emphasised that their empathy did not make them 'relativists' who regarded all religions as equally valid. There were good and bad religious ideas and practices.

H thought that we still needed to get to the stage when we can talk to them about what they really believe. He felt that an interest in all religions helped to deepen his understanding of his own.

He recalled a meeting of an interfaith forum where there was a discussion on forced marriages. There were strong speeches on the issue but many well known figures were absent from the meeting. A dialogue was needed with Moslems about the gay issue but the response seemed to be that there was no issue as they were all agreed on the point. We needed to open up discussion about issues such as these, disagreeing in friendship.

E reflected on this issue, looking at disadvantages of the non realist approach, she thought some people were over-polite and non-confrontational but this was probably common to all such delicately balanced groups where members could all too easily inadvertently give offence to others by making an insensitive remark or asking an ill-judged question. Above all such groups are afraid of undoing dialogical progress made.

The question about practices which we found abhorrent was also raised by the SoF Trustees. I suggest that 'bad' religion exists across all faiths. Non realism may assist here in labelling it as such

from a perspective that also takes a particularly critical view of its own cultural background. it is a part of the problem in reaching consensus on a global ethic (see for example K  ng (1997)).

4.4 How others reacted to your participation in the dialogue (positively or negatively).

This was my final lead question. I found that reactions to involvement by the participants were generally positive or neutral with just one or two reservations. They were accepted for what they were and what they did, rather than their creedal beliefs. Participants did not go into interreligious activities headlining their identities as non realists, though neither did they keep it secret. I suggest that this reflects most groups of religious people; exactly what they do or do not believe is rarely on the agenda, and there is usually an unspoken assumption about what others believe.

4.4.1 Acceptance / Welcome into Interreligious Activities

There was evidence from all the participants that they had been accepted into their roles.

As reported at 4.4.1 above, D was accepted as a Humanist participator in the St Phillip's Religions and Belief Road Show and as a speaker at its Christian / Moslem dialogue group.

H had felt reluctant to admit in his church to his attraction to Buddhism and other faiths. He found that many took their faith literally and did not want to upset his own congregation. He had confided to his Rector who had told him of his own pluralist outlook and that he was doing the MA course at St Phillip's.

Against this, there was the experience of B who had stayed with a Christian family in India. She felt that they were checking up on her because they felt she had sympathy with Hinduism, asking about her beliefs in Krishna. This was the only actual negative reaction (if it deserves that label) from all of the meetings.

D suggested that all religions tended to combine against the secular although this was not the case at the `people` level. There was a concern that Christians spoke of `their values.` The values may have developed within Christianity but that didn't give them copyright on them. They were repeated in many religions and most had developed their version of the Golden Rule.

4.4.2 Additional Roles Offered / Suggested

I also found strong evidence that, not only were they accepted into the interreligious context, but typically they were given or asked to take on extra responsibilities:

For example, participant E was apprehensive going into her new role on her Interfaith Forum, fearing some adverse reaction to her role as a humanist (see 4.2.4 above) but was not only welcome but asked to take on new work and even to act a mediator in a dispute between two representatives.

Participant J had been accepted as a Pagan onto the OxCoF and had taken on the role of minutes secretary.

F had become mayor of his borough. Although this was a political appointment, he had used his position to further his work in the interreligious field.

4.4.3 Evidence of Innovative Approach

There is also evidence that they were innovative in their contributions, adding value to the events.

C, as evidenced in para 4.2.2 above was instrumental not only in setting up LCOF but also the civic link with India which has clearly been successful.

H spoke of a meeting between faith members where it was possible to engage with them and make friends. He felt he needed to be more open about this with his acquaintances, challenging some of their assumptions about Moslems (e.g. the recent election of Police Commissioner which had a Moslem candidate). He had been able to talk about this person as an individual having seen him on several occasions.

As seen above in para 4.2.1, A and B invited other religious leaders to take part in a `shop window` which was seen as having a good influence on local community relations. They also introduced meditation to the school's rugby team and musicians.

G, as mentioned in 4.2.7 above led an innovative interfaith event at a Quaker gathering in Loughborough, which was well received.

4.5 A Meeting with Don Cupitt (8 April 2013)

Cupitt made some observations about the plurality of faiths. They are summarised below. Simply stated, they represent some profound observations about the plurality of religions. I let them stand without further comment.

4.5.1 In a typical book about religions, there would be lots of description about the customs and practices of each religion but no reference to the existence of God (taken as a given). In actuality, all religions took a non realist view of faiths other than their own – the difference with a non realist was that they would take a similar non realist view of their own religion in that God had no independent existence `outside.`

4.5.2 A religion was a culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated supernatural beings. We need to exist outside of religion. When we speak of the dead, they are in the same place as the supernatural beings of religion who belong with the dead.

4.5.3 Many people had an expectation that life would make sense; they needed God to exist, but there was no reason to suppose that it had to "add up." The problem of suffering was tied

up with evolution – that happened because things went wrong and genetic mutations occurred. If you said yes to life then that accepts its hard side.

4.5.4 On the perceived problem in pluralism with “debilitating” relativism, he pointed out that the opposite of relativism is absolutism; which do we prefer? We have to refer to faults where they exist in religions.

4.6 Other Responses

There were some comments by the participators which do not fall squarely within the scope of the subject of this paper. On reflection, most such responses may be placed in category 4.3.4 above (New way of looking at things). However, I must give a small flavour of their wisdom and scope for contributing to the wider interreligious dialogue:

4.6.1 G recalled that he had an experience in Manchester Exchange Theatre which was a modern theatre, where he had seen Hamlet. Hamlet had spoken his monologues in the round and Gimpel wondered who he was talking to. It became apparent that he was talking reflexively to himself and in dialogue with others; the interaction was in the space between them (a sacred space).

Chapter 5: Discussion and analysis of Findings

5.1 Veracity of Findings

What direct external evidence exists for the work done by the various contributors and its value as perceived by others? I suggest that to an extent they are self confirming. I was given numerous examples of original ideas and their effect on various communities. They were offered freely at our meetings and I have had no suggestion that they were not all genuine. In particular:

5.1.1 My placement last year (Stribblehill, 2012) was with the LCOF. My conclusions included a reference to the vision of those who founded the movement and the relaxed, trusting feeling between the faiths. This was largely the work of participant C.

5.1.2 I also encountered participant G during that review. The LCOF annual report (Loughborough Council of Faiths, 2012), shows that he has the status of 'Friend of LCOF.' This status is given to acknowledge those people who have made a major contribution to the work of the LCOF.

I would also refer to his recently published book which was introduced at a book launch in Leicester by participant C and contains a forward by Alan Race, showing the regard in which G is held.

5.1.3 Internal evidence contained within the meeting notes. These show that all nine participants were welcomed into their interreligious environment, all displaying initiative in setting up or participating in activities.

5.2 Creswell & Miller (2000) Analysis of Validity

5.2.1 Disconfirming Evidence. (p127)

I was careful to ask the participants whether they had noticed any negative reactions to their participation, or perceived disadvantages that their non realist stance caused them. Almost universally the answer was that there had been little negative reaction and that they perceived few disadvantages. Participant B felt some concern from her Christian hosts in India that she may be getting too close to Krishna. Participant E was quite wary of a Baptist minister on her local Council of Faiths. She went out of her way to show that she had a positive contribution to make and was eventually seen as a trusted member of the council.

5.2.2 Prolonged Engagement in the Field. (p127)

I have been involved with SoF for around twenty years so that, although I have not known these individuals for that long. My impression was that the replies I received were consistent with the non realist outlook on theology and life in general. This may appear to the external observer as a highly subjective reaction. I would have to accept this criticism but nevertheless, I saw no contradiction to what I would expect.

5.2.3 Thick, Rich Description (p128)

The meetings were allowed to proceed at a leisurely pace, allowing time for participants to go off on tangents, occasionally being gently brought back to the issue. I gauged that this would encourage them to be more relaxed and open to questions. This gave rise to some lengthy descriptions of their experiences which were internally consistent and reinforced my impression that the information given was accurate. I have deliberately used this technique when reporting my talks with people about their experience in section 4.2 above in order to really give the chance to appreciate their deeds.

5.3 Other points:

During chapter 4, I have commented at every stage on the findings and how they support my quest. I do not propose to repeat the detail of this here. To summarise, the evidence shows that:

5.3.1 There was a remarkable breadth of experience over a long period of time and also in areas of both geographical and subjects.

5.3.2 There was a tendency not to evangelise their non realist views but rather to go about the work quietly and reflectively.

5.3.3 There was a feeling of sympathy and empathy to people of all religions.

5.3.4 Issues became non issues when seen through non realist eyes.

5.3.5 There was a humility and lack of arrogance in the attitudes displayed.

5.3.6 There was a feeling that `bad religion` existed and should be challenged though this needed to be done thoughtfully.

5.3.7 There was little evidence of ill feeling towards them from others involved in the work, although there was suspicion from some Christians of their activities.

5.3.8 There was acceptance of non realists – they were suggested / accepted in roles of greater responsibility

5.4 Comparison of evidence sources

It may be expected that there would be more of a comparison of the various contributors' evidence, looking at why some had said things in common whilst others did not. As stated in 3.3.2 above, I used a matrix analysis of the responses. Although I show this below, caution is needed when considering its contents.

In semi scripted interviews, I deliberately did not lead them into answers; rather I wanted to hear their unprompted, spontaneous responses. They were nine individuals with very different experiences and thought patterns. I expect that if I reported everything that was said by anyone to the others, there would be broad agreement, or at least respect for the replies of others. Had I prompted them to fill in the gaps then I would have had replies but they may have lacked the spontaneity I observed in reality. The table therefore shows whose replies covered each area on which I have reported. I emphasise that a gap means exactly that – I could find no specific comment about a particular issue. This has two weaknesses; it relies on my subjective judgement on the contents of the notes and significant contribution could have been provided had I raised the issues specifically.

Matrix Analysis of Responses

Participant / Response	A&B	C	D	E	F	G	H	J
Simple Biographical Details	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Relevant I/R Experience	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Empathy	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Non Arrogance	x	x		x		x		x
Issues / Non Issues	x	x				x		
New Approach to Theology	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
Tackling `Bad Religion`	x		x	x		x	x	x
Acceptance in I/R Role	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
New Responsibilities	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Innovative Actions	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

It shows that most people mentioned most areas I have highlighted. It does not show that they had no views on any of the gaps.

5.5 Summary

Taken together, I believe that the evidence provided by the participants shows that non realists have an important role to play in interreligious dialogue. I shall comment at greater length on this conclusion in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: Conclusions & Recommendations

6.1 Self Disclosure

In my introduction above, I made it clear that I was approaching the question posed by this work in a positive manner, hoping to be able to provide examples of success. This could make me open to the criticism that I have only sought positive evidence and not approached those of a realist persuasion for contrary views. I would respond that I have made my position clear for the reader to take into account. I have also (chapter 2.1 above) given examples of negative reaction towards non realists both outside and inside of the interreligious field. I have not set out to persuade realists to become non realists, merely to show them that non realists have a valid part to play in the dialogue between religions and should be encouraged rather than excluded.

6.2 Relativism

Relativism is, I suggest one of the problems that disappear with the non realist approach. Race (2.6.2 above) defines the problem. If all religions are equally true, are they then also equally false? How can one distinguish between the good and bad religions? Griffin (2.6.7) at the conclusion of his critique of Hick's position on pluralism, suggests that Hick's approach leads to a 'neutral universality' and hence to 'debilitating relativism' which is not really Christian. On the other hand, Hospital (2.6.8) calls for a more mature approach to difference in religions.

If religion is a human creation, then it is unsurprising that humans around the world have created different religions; being human creations, none is perfect and some will be less perfect than others. Humanity has evolved criteria of ethical behaviour so that the bad elements are recognised. Honesty is then needed to address these in dialogue – part of the reason we have interreligious dialogue. The non realist equivalent of relativism becomes the bad practices which occur in most, if not all religions. These exist mainly because of interpretations put on the original message. They need to be challenged not from a religious perspective but rather from the perspective of Küng's global ethic.

As Cupitt (4.5.4 above) said, the opposite of relativism is absolutism; why is this so desirable?

6.3 A Watered Down Faith?

It is suggested above by Fredericks (2.6.12 above) that a 'watered down faith' does not go down well with people of other faiths, and indeed is not recognisable as Christianity. I suggest that this is a false conflict. To take the view to its (illogical) conclusion, it could mean that only those with a fundamentalist / literalist approach are qualified to be involved in interreligious dialogue. This is the very group that many have observed to tend to be exclusivist and not involved in such dialogue.

Thus, this approach is itself divisive as it effectively suggests that the speaker's position is the only valid one – it moves away from literalism to its chosen point and then declares 'thus far and no further.' Any further movement is defined as being a 'watered down faith' and labelled as 'debilitating relativism.'

This is the same false divide which seeks to exclude non realists, confusing them with the Ditchkins anti religious stance. Non realists by and large have a thought out theology and are dedicated to their own religion, promoting a new but positive way of looking at it which does not require the theological knots of realism.

As will be seen from the analysis of the meetings, there were few reports of antagonism from those of other faiths.

It is perhaps not surprising that Fredericks received the reply stated (that dialogue partners want to talk with Christians out of their tradition). It all depends on what question you ask; if asked whether you prefer to have dialogue with a `true believer` then most people would consider themselves as `true believers` and respond in the positive. This would be unconsciously ignoring all the splits in their own religion and all the ways in which their position does not reflect the original position of their religion which is probably lost in the mists of time.

Most of us find ourselves somewhere along the spectrum which runs from literalism to militant atheism. Most of us would see our own position as being well thought out, subject to change with experience and moderate. Non realists' moderate, thought out position is at the liberal / radical end of the spectrum but not to be confused with an anti religious approach.

The third, less well known element of K  ng's statement (2.6.1) is often overlooked in the all too common calling together of religious people to unite against secularism. Yet in terms of social progress, liberal secularists are decades ahead of many religions on issues such as gender and sexuality and have much to teach their religious friends.

6.4 Conclusions

The reader may by now be wondering what the problem is with non realists being involved in interreligious activities. Evidence has been produced which shows that they have participated without resistance or problems. Was this a foregone conclusion and not worth all the work involved? I hope that I have demonstrated the antagonism which non realists have experienced from the church establishment over the years which make them feel unwelcome. There are references above to the non realist option being ignored or dismissed by authors writing on interreligious matters.

Non Realists have a (possibly) uniquely open position in their attitudes to people of other faiths. Atheists typically cannot see the point of religion and many would prefer it not to exist; realists tend to cling to their own faith and be incapable of taking a neutral stance to others. This unique non realist perspective is of great value and can be a platform for involvement in the globally important work of interreligious dialogue.

I hope that the work will provide encouragement to non realists to become involved in interreligious activities and also provide realists with reassurance that we are not here to subvert the whole exercise but rather in an attempt to approach issues in a novel, constructive manner, which may be of value to progress in the field of activity.

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