

# Religion for naturalists

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**Abstract** Some naturalists feel an affinity with some religions, or with a particular religion. They may have previously belonged to it, and/or been raised in it, and/or be close to people who belong to it, and/or simply feel attracted to its practices, texts and traditions. This raises the question of whether and to what extent a naturalist can lead the life of a religious believer. The sparse literature on this topic focuses on (a position recognizable as) religious fictionalism. I also frame the debate in these terms. I ask what religious fictionalism might amount to, reject some possible versions of it and endorse a different one. I then examine the existing proposals, by Robin Le Poidevin, Peter Lipton, Andrew Eshleman and Howard Wettstein, and show that even on my version of religious fictionalism, much of what has been described by these authors is still possible.

**Keywords** Religious fictionalism · Critical context · Le Poidevin · Lipton · Eshleman · Wettstein

## Introduction

Can an atheist believe in God?

Obviously, an atheist can't literally believe in God. That's definitional. But to leave matters there is to overlook an interesting question.

Actually, the question I have in mind arises equally for non-theistic religions. By 'theism', I mean the view that there is one God who is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, who created the world, and is still actively involved in the world. By 'atheism', I mean the view that the God posited by theism doesn't exist. I'll take

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‘naturalism’ to be the view that there aren’t any supernatural aspects to reality. I won’t attempt to define ‘supernatural’, but it’s supposed to include any religious claim about reality, and I’ll say a bit about what I mean by ‘religious claim’ in the next section. Naturalists, I’ll assume, actively disbelieve all such claims.

The question, then, is this. When it comes to living the life of a religious believer, embedded within a religious tradition, are there limits to how far a naturalist can go? That is, are there limits beyond which lie self- or other-deception, hypocrisy, mental fragmentation, periodic wavering, or other pathologies? And if so, what is and what isn’t possible within those limits?

My answer will be two-fold. First, there are limits. But second, much of what has been described by those advocating the possibility of naturalistic religious practice is possible within those limits.

As mentioned, I won’t spend too much time clarifying what I mean by ‘religious claim’. The reason is that I think most of us are fairly confident that we can identify religious claims when we see them, even though there may be grey areas. But a more substantial question for my purposes is what counts as religious *practice*. I return to this question at the end. The short answer is that I don’t mind whether what I’ll describe is properly called religious practice or not. It’s intended to be a sui generis form of engagement with religious ideas and rituals, though I think it already exists.

The sparse literature on the topic at hand focuses on (a position recognizable as) religious fictionalism. I’ll also frame the discussion in these terms. In particular, I’ll ask what religious fictionalism might amount to, reject some possible versions of it and endorse a different one. I’ll then examine the existing proposals and show that even on my version of religious fictionalism, much of what has been described by these authors is still possible.

The kind of naturalist I’m addressing feels an affinity with some religions, or with a particular religion. This suggests that in some sense they think religious practice has some value. For my purposes, we can just take this to mean that they think religious practice achieves something that *they* value, such as inspiration, comfort, personal or spiritual or moral growth, a sense of purpose, or a sense of community. My focus will be on the question whether they too can achieve these things by religious means. So I’ll assume, for the purposes of this discussion, that such things are available to some people by religious means. I won’t, however, assume anything about whether religion also has dis-value, or about whether that dis-value outweighs any value it may have, either in the case of believers or even in the case of the naturalist practitioner I’ll describe. So I’m more interested in the possibility, than the desirability, of naturalistic religious practice. A fortiori, it’s no part of my proposal that naturalists who don’t feel such an affinity should become religious practitioners.

A related point to keep in mind is that feeling an affinity with a religion is in principle compatible with taking aspects of it to be deeply problematic. For example, it’s compatible with thinking that the religion in question advocates untenable moral values, has hindered scientific or moral progress, or has tended to devalue human nature. Admittedly, such a combination of attitudes towards a religion may be rare.

The paper has seven sections. I start by making my presuppositions about religious language explicit and introducing a version of fictionalism (weak evaluative fictionalism, WEF) that seems relevant to the topic. I discuss problems with WEF, and show how they apply in the case of religion. Next, I propose a different version of religious fictionalism, which doesn't make use of the notion of non-doxastic acceptance.

I then examine the existing proposals, by Robin Le Poidevin, Peter Lipton, Andrew Eshleman, and Howard Wettstein. I point out where I think their positions rely on WEF, and explain why I think subtracting these elements does no harm. In the concluding remarks, I address some more objections.

## Religious language and fictionalism

Immersing oneself in a religious tradition, and participating in its practices, requires that one somehow uses religious claims, expressed in religious language. Before asking what use a naturalist could have for these, let me mention certain presuppositions of this way of putting the question. I mention these at the outset to set them aside. I think some of them are worth exploring, but I won't be doing that here.

First, there's the assumption that there is such a thing as religious language—sentences with a religious subject matter. Typical examples are sentences that seem to be about entities like gods or angels, and/or about the actions of such entities, like salvation, miracles, or creation, and/or about states of affairs involving holiness or heaven or hell. Second, I'm assuming that it makes sense to enquire into the meaning of such sentences. The third assumption is that (at least) many religious sentences are truth-apt (they can be true or false), and ordinarily express beliefs. And finally, I'll assume that (at least) some religious claims are *not* entirely figurative or metaphorical, and are really about what they seem to be about. In particular, talk of gods is not just an oblique way of referring to aspects of the natural or social world. Note that atheism as it's usually understood includes this assumption, since it's the denial of the existence of something other than aspects of the natural or social world.

If one makes all these assumptions, the prospects for naturalistic religious practice seem slim. Religiously committing sentences have a more or less stable meaning, they describe the world, and they ordinarily express beliefs—beliefs the naturalist explicitly rejects. So what use could a naturalist have for them?

Fictionalists about a domain of discourse make all the assumptions I've just made in the case of religious discourse. But, on one variety of fictionalism, they add that although the sentences in question are truth-apt, our attitudes towards them shouldn't be truth-normed. Fictionalists of this kind advocate a distinctive state of commitment that doesn't involve belief: *non-doxastic acceptance*. Although the sentences purport to describe reality, truth or falsity shouldn't matter to how acceptable they are.

It's common to distinguish between prescriptive (or revolutionary) fictionalism and descriptive (or hermeneutic) fictionalism. What I've described sounds like prescriptive fictionalism.<sup>1</sup> But prescriptive fictionalism is quite strong. It says that our current practice in the domain *is* truth-normed; it denies descriptive fictionalism. It also says that not only would it be good if our practice wasn't truth-normed, but all things considered, we should change our practice. Any practical costs involved in changing our attitudes from belief to non-doxastic acceptance don't outweigh the gains.

For my purposes, it will be more useful to focus on a weaker version. Christopher Jay has suggested the term 'evaluative fictionalism' for just the evaluative component of prescriptive fictionalism (Jay 2014, p. 211). Evaluative fictionalism says that there is or would be something good about our practice being non-truth-normed. It doesn't say anything about whether it currently is, nor about what we should do, all things considered. This last point relates to my cautionary remarks in the introduction. Evaluative fictionalism doesn't compete with either eliminativism (the view that the discourse in question should be dropped) or preservationism (the view that the false beliefs in question should be retained by those who have them).<sup>2</sup>

In a footnote, Jay adds that we may need room for an even weaker view, which says that our attitudes can permissibly be non-doxastic. That's the variety of fictionalism I'll focus on. Let's call it weak evaluative fictionalism (WEF). I take this position to say that the value of a given practice is independent of whether our attitudes are non-doxastic.

Weak evaluative fictionalism is still far from trivial.<sup>3</sup> Take a particular set of sentences belonging to the target discourse. WEF says that even though they purport to describe the world, they needn't be true to serve their purpose. But what reason could you have for accepting that particular set? The reason has to be simultaneously good and independent of truth. Suppose you believe that there's a window there, because of a certain visual appearance. Suppose you then find out that you're hallucinating, so that your visual appearance is disconnected from truth. It seems that your reason to think there's a window there has disappeared. A fictionalist has to argue that the reasons to accept sentences in the domain in question survive a disconnect from truth.

The notion of non-doxastic acceptance also merits close attention. Of course we often use claims we don't believe. In many scientific contexts, we use theories we know aren't true, like Newtonian mechanics, or indeed many of our best current physical theories (since they too aren't the final word). In a *reductio ad absurdum*, we may start with a claim we believe is false, like  $2 + 2 = 5$ . What's distinctive about the notion of non-doxastic acceptance is that it's acceptance *in all ordinary contexts*. It's a good question exactly how we should understand this. For now, let's

<sup>1</sup> It's an interesting question whether descriptive fictionalism is defensible for some religious communities, and if so for which. Of course, if the doubts about non-doxastic acceptance I'll express below are justified, *this* version of descriptive (religious) fictionalism can't be correct. But a descriptive version of religious fictionalism as outlined in the section "[Religious make-believe](#)" below may well be, for (some members of) some communities.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Miller (2012) for a discussion of these positions for the case of religion.

<sup>3</sup> The following two paragraphs outline concerns raised in Szabó (2011).

take it to mean that as long as you're not doing philosophy, or otherwise critically probing your beliefs, you treat the claim just as if you thought it was true.

## Problems for WEF

As we'll see now, these two features of weak evaluative fictionalism make it problematic, in a way that carries over to religion.

Take for example theistic religions, such as Judaism, Christianity or Islam. Religious believers embedded in such traditions experience the world as the manifestation of a loving, personal presence. They think of their lives as the evolving relationship with that person, perhaps one that prepares them for eternal life. Loved ones who have passed away may, in their view, be in that better place already. Whether these states of affairs obtain or not is, it seems, literally a matter of life and death. If that isn't the point of those religions, then what is?

There's a quick reply on behalf of WEF that misses its target. That reply consists in an elusive unease about metaphysics within the philosophy of religion.<sup>4</sup> Maybe the question of God's existence is somehow tangential to religious practice. Maybe analytic philosophers of religion are somehow missing the point when they discuss arguments for or against the existence of God. Why not just get on with living life, and practicing religion, and leave it to philosophers to worry about ontology? One problem with this is that it can be read as nothing more than the view that the epistemic status of religious beliefs isn't that important. Perhaps their prudential value outweighs any epistemic disvalue they may have.

Be that as it may, what we were after was a reason to think that not only the epistemic status of religious beliefs, but those beliefs themselves were inessential to religious practice. After all, WEF says that those beliefs could be replaced by non-doxastic states of acceptance, without any significant loss or alteration in religious practice. The claim was that whatever religious beliefs do for those who have them, non-doxastic acceptance can do the same. It's not clear how the reply addresses this.

A slightly more promising line of thought goes as follows. Fictionalism has its name for a reason. The paradigmatic sets of sentences that don't have to be true to be good are those that make up novels. When we read fiction, we immerse ourselves in a story, and in a sense act as if it was true. That is, we imagine the world as the story describes it, and think about what the world would be like if the story were true. That's what allows us to sympathise with the characters, and engage emotionally (or quasi-emotionally) with the events described.

Practicing science or mathematics isn't much like reading a novel. But in the case of religion, the situation is less clear. The point of religious practice does have to do with its ability to engage us emotionally. In that sense it isn't a theoretical endeavour.

That's fine as far as it goes. But we still haven't made it plausible that non-doxastic acceptance can play the same role, and serve the same functions, as

<sup>4</sup> This reply is in line with some of Howard Wettstein's commitments (see below).

religious belief. No matter how moved I may be by immersing myself in a story, it still matters whether in reality, I'll see my loved ones again after death.

But perhaps a proponent of WEF needn't hold that *all* of the value of religious practice is independent of belief. Perhaps it would suffice if non-doxastic acceptance would still serve *some* of the same purposes. After all, what we are interested in is to what extent it can be satisfying, and coherent, for naturalists to engage in religious practice. Surely in order for there to be such a possibility, it needn't be the case that all of the value of religious life can be retained.

This is a lot more promising. But there's still cause for concern. Recall that WEF is about acceptance in all ordinary contexts, for all ordinary purposes. So far I've proceeded as if it was clear what this meant. The idea, again, is that as long as one isn't critically probing one's beliefs, for example by doing philosophy, one treats the claim as if one believed it. So to count as non-doxastically accepting  $p$ , one has to assent to  $p$  and act as if  $p$  in all ordinary contexts, but dissent from  $p$  in critical, e.g. philosophical contexts. But is there really a principled distinction here?

The reason I worry whether we are sensitive to the ordinary/philosophical distinction is that I don't believe there are philosophical contexts, just as I don't believe there are astronomical contexts, sociological contexts, or stamp-collecting contexts. I think the distinction is a myth. We might retract or qualify some of our ontological commitments in the face of philosophical criticism but this isn't substantially different than retracting or qualifying other commitments in the face of other far-flung criticism we would like to bracket, at least for the time being. (Szabó 2011, p. 13)

I understand this point as follows. Of course we can raise and recognize paradigmatically philosophical questions. But doing so doesn't create a different kind of context from raising other concerns about our commitments. We're always in the same kind of situation, namely one in which a variety of concerns are potentially relevant. So it's not clear how one could non-doxastically accept anything.

Related concerns arise with respect to the other distinctive feature of WEF, namely that of reasons (to accept) that are disconnected from truth. WEF seems to rely on a view of life as a series of situations that can be neatly divided into practical and theoretical ones. In the theoretical ones, we critically probe our beliefs, and the rest of the time we don't. Or if we do, we're not really serious about what we come up with; we're distracted by practical concerns. But it's hard to see how we can make good decisions partly by relying on things that wouldn't survive critical scrutiny. In that sense every practical situation is also a theoretical one.

Richard Joyce, when advocating fictionalism about morality, talks of a spectrum of stances (Joyce 2001, Ch. 7). At the near end of the spectrum, there is the stance we all take with respect to fiction, for example when we tell a story or otherwise engage with one. At the far end, there is non-doxastic acceptance. This involves acting as if  $p$  in all 'non-critical contexts', by thinking and make-believing that  $p$ , sometimes without even being aware of the make-believe.

In my view, this spectrum doesn't extend as far as WEF needs it to. In particular, we don't get far enough away from story-telling to be entitled to let  $p$  guide our

actions by basing decisions on  $p$ . What we get is the possibility of immersing ourselves in the story according to which  $p$ , and letting it influence our actions indirectly by letting it engage us emotionally. But the story won't directly deliver reasons to act.

These problems affect religious WEF even in the form in which it holds only that some of the value of religious practice is independent of belief. What's still problematic is the assumption that the *nature* of religious practice isn't substantially altered when we subtract belief, even if some its *value* is lost. Participants in the practice may have silent reservations, but they 'ordinarily' assent to religious claims, and act just as if those claims were true. That means they take religious claims into serious consideration when making decisions. If they non-doxastically accept that God forbids them to re-marry ( $p$ ), they'll take  $p$  into serious consideration when deciding whether to re-marry.<sup>5</sup> But unless the person is self-deceived (because they really are a believer), they cannot base their decision on  $p$ . Instead they have to base it on their independent moral belief about whether marrying again is permissible. Indeed, that moral belief is what makes  $p$ , rather than a different religious claim about the moral status of re-marrying, worth entertaining.

Nor is the problem confined to situations involving high stake practical decisions. In the case of theistic religions, the question of the existence of God, and an affirmative answer to it, simply isn't tangential to religious life. A theist navigates their experiential world on the assumption that they are in a personal relationship with a divine being, who takes an active interest in the way their life goes. It's hard to imagine how subtracting belief from such a life can leave it largely unaltered.

Even someone who thinks treating the claim that God exists as a 'theoretical assertion' is somehow misleading should agree with this point. David Holley argues that the belief arises primarily at a 'pre-theoretical' level, when one 'tries on' a theistic world view and learns to interpret one's experiences accordingly. But 'God is implicit [...] in the meaning of the practices' (Holley 2010, p. 383), and the arising of the belief isn't tangential to how successfully one manages to 'try on' the theistic frame of mind. As one starts to interpret one's experiences in a theistic light, the belief arises. The processes go hand in hand.

The situation would perhaps be less clear if the topic was agnostic, rather than atheistic engagement in religious practice. As long as theism is a live epistemic possibility, it may make sense to 'try on' the theistic world view. Some (see for example, Alston 1996; Audi 2011; Howard-Snyder 2013; Schellenberg 2009) have even argued that religious faith doesn't require belief. But even if that is right, the situation is different here. Positive disbelief is incompatible with faith as usually understood.

It's arguable whether disbelief that  $p$  is compatible with *hope* that  $p$ . To me it seems that if one has hope that  $p$ , then one doesn't outright believe that not- $p$ . What's possible is *wishing* that  $p$ , while disbelieving  $p$ . I think one can wish or desire that things be otherwise, without any obvious incoherence or irrationality.

But in any case, I don't think these notions are the key to making sense of naturalistic religious practice. Wishing that things were otherwise has an air of

<sup>5</sup> I owe this example to Christopher Jay, who (I think) mentioned it in a talk on this topic.

sadness about it. It's the counterpart to the element of religion whose point essentially depends on belief. Naturalistic religious practice doesn't rely on the naturalist wishing (or hoping) the religion to be true. One can feel an affinity with a worldview, and treasure the stories it contains, without wishing those stories to be true.

## Religious make-believe

So suppose we drop the notion of non-doxastic acceptance, and with it the idea of reasons that are disconnected from truth, but retain the analogy between participating in religious practice and immersing oneself in a story. I'll still speak of fictionalism partly because I think it's not implausible that fictionalism may simply take different forms in different domains, but I wouldn't insist on the label.

What I have in mind is a position on the near end of Joyce's spectrum, where we tell stories and engage in the equivalent of children's games of make-believe. Clearly, much of the comfort religion ordinarily provides is lost when belief is replaced with make-believe.<sup>6</sup> But the alternative can still be interesting and emotionally satisfying for those so inclined. They can choose to walk in the world of a religious story they like.

In other areas of life, this kind of activity is quite familiar. Joyce describes a Sherlock Holmes fan who spends time in London retracing their favourite detective's steps. They are fully aware that Holmes is fictional. But they are choosing to bring the story to life, and to walk in the world it describes, by imaginatively re-creating it.

She visits the London sights that Holmes is said to have visited; she says, "If Holmes saw Moriarty here, and then lost track of him there, then he must have followed him down this street"; she pictures Holmes being there. For the space of the day, perhaps, she gives into the fiction and "forgets" all about Conan Doyle. She may even become slightly annoyed at the mention of the writer in the course of her London sightseeing, since it spoils the atmosphere that she is creating. (Joyce 2001, p. 196)

Why think this can't be done with religion? Imagine participating in a religious service, a discussion of a religious text, or another kind of religious ritual. As Joyce says, mere thoughts can elicit (what at least feels like) an emotional reaction. If one sits thinking vividly about one's house and all one's possessions burning down, or about some other calamity, the result is anxiety, even if one doesn't believe that that event is a non-negligible epistemic possibility. The same is true of thoughts that one resonates with positively—including, for some people, religious thoughts. For example, thinking that there is a purpose to everything, that 'whether it is clear to you or not, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should', can be emotionally engaging even if one doesn't think such states of affair are non-negligible epistemic

<sup>6</sup> Of course, other things of value may be gained. Le Poidevin suggests that if theism is false, then the effect of theistic belief on one's spiritual life may in part be a negative one (Le Poidevin 1996, p. 120).



possibilities. Similarly, if one feels an affinity with ideas and stories about a perfectly loving divine person who is actively involved in one's own and other people's lives, then entertaining and staying with such thoughts, for as long as one chooses to on any given occasion, can be experientially worthwhile. As another mundane example, consider the practice of throwing coins in wishing wells. Suppose you firmly disbelieve that this has any effect on whether the event wished for comes about. Does this bar you from participating in the practice and getting some of the same enjoyment from it as a believer would? No. You can enjoy it in the same way people enjoy plays or other performances, or art installations in which the audience may play a part.

All these are more or less short-lived episodes, apparently of little significance; what do they have to do with religious practice? The answer is that while the nature of religious practice is fundamentally altered when one treats it as make-believe, and much of the comfort it provides is thereby lost, there is an experientially significant remainder. If religion ordinarily provides a sense of purpose, or a sense of community, the way it does this is not entirely dependent on its metaphysical presuppositions. Partly, it's simply a matter of providing tools for creating the right atmospheres - namely ones that will, for those so inclined, instil a sense of something sacred. And of course it doesn't detract from the experiential significance of such episodes that they are short-lived. Music too is such that one enjoys it only in a given moment; but people choose to consume it repeatedly.

So religious fictionalism can be more than merely a device for humouring religious conversation partners or for doing religious anthropology. There are many different elements of religious practice, from different religious traditions, that can in principle be re-appropriated by the make-believer. The result will be a broad spectrum of activities and habits, some of which outwardly mimic the religious believer's activities and habits while being nonetheless fundamentally different in kind.

As we'll see now, the possibility of this sort of activity has been advocated, especially for theistic religions. What's interesting is that the most natural interpretation of the existing proposals is as defenses of WEF. Since I reject the latter, I can't take on board all of what's been suggested by any one of them. But it also seems to me that the bits I'll reject can't have been that important. For the most part, these authors seem to me to be describing perfectly intelligible and meaningful activities. So what I'll do is indicate where I think their proposals depend on elements of WEF, and explain why I think subtracting these elements does no harm.

## Robin Le Poidevin

Robin Le Poidevin has defended a position he calls theological instrumentalism, recognizable as religious fictionalism.<sup>7</sup> The heart of the account is the religious version of the kind of activity described above:

<sup>7</sup> Le Poidevin sometimes claims that theistic discourse isn't truth-apt (cf Harrison 2010). Jay notes that this isn't in line with what other religious fictionalists, and fictionalists in other areas think, and suggests it may be due to conflating not being truth-normed with not being truth-apt (or assuming an entailment from the former to the latter) (Jay 2014, p. 209).

To engage in religious practice, on this account, is to engage in a game of make-believe. We make-believe that there is a God, by reciting, in the context of the game, a statement of belief. We listen to what make-believable accounts of the activities of God and his people, and we pretend to worship and address prayers to that God. [...] [W]e locate ourselves in that fictional world, and in so doing we allow ourselves to become emotionally involved, to the extent that a religious service is capable of being an intense experience. The immediate object of our emotions is the fictional God, but there is a wider object, and that is the collection of real individuals in our lives. In the game of make-believe (for example, the Christian one), we are presented with a series of dramatic images: an all-powerful creator, who is able to judge our moral worth, to forgive us or to condemn, who appears on Earth in human form and who willingly allows himself to be put to death. What remains, when the game of make-believe is over, is an awareness of our responsibilities for ourselves and others, of the need to pursue spiritual goals, and so on. (Le Poidevin 1996, p. 119)

This strikes me as the key to making sense of naturalistic religious practice. One of the objections Le Poidevin considers is that this sort of activity is impossible to sustain over longer periods, and that religion ‘is not merely something to dip into’, but rather a life-long commitment. His response is to reject this contrast. He replies that religious observance, even of an informal kind, needn’t be constant either. Moreover, an interest in a story can be a life-long concern.

That response seems basically right: if the concern is just how much time can be spent, or how involved one can get with either, then there is no principled contrast. But perhaps the objection should be read as having moral overtones. From the perspective of a believer, fictionalist observance may seem not only frivolous but blasphemous. However, as long as we suppose that the fictionalist is not engaged in a relationship with a divine being, where the notion of commitment plays an important role, the objection doesn’t have much force.

It’s passages like the following that are reminiscent of WEF:

Just as the moral truths and responsibilities that emerge from theistic discourse are truths that will affect our real, not merely fictional lives, so the context of our real lives will appear in the theistic fiction. I cannot simply exclude real suffering from the theistic fiction [...] because it would be inconvenient to include it, for if I do exclude it, I weaken theism’s authority to speak to real dilemmas, real decisions, real lives. (Le Poidevin 2003, p. 280)

Le Poidevin is here rejecting his own earlier statement about how much suffering to include in the fiction:

[S]ince we not only participate in, but also to some extent create, the game of make-believe, we can choose what to include in it. We may well include the idea of suffering. Indeed, for most theistic outlooks, suffering plays an important role in spiritual development. But we do not need to include the idea that the world contains an appalling amount of apparently pointless suffering.

We will, in fact, simply avoid introducing anything which would result in tensions within the fiction. (Le Poidevin 1996, p. 121)

Note that this early statement actually didn't recommend excluding *all* suffering (especially not of the kind perhaps most likely to be part of 'our' real lives). The suggestion was just not to include 'an appalling amount of apparently pointless suffering'. Nonetheless, in the later paper, Le Poidevin vehemently rejects this solution as 'rather obviously inadequate' and 'far too glib' (Le Poidevin 2003, p. 280).

What's reminiscent of WEF in this is the insistence on deriving moral insights from the religious fiction, and to do this in a way that accords *authority* to that fiction. Claims that are merely non-doxastically accepted are playing a role in substantiating non-religious beliefs. However, as we have seen, that's also what's problematic. Suppose I contemplate an important moral dilemma, and play the game of religious make-believe to help me with the decision. Suppose I then end up with a new moral (or other non-religious) belief. I must have been warranted in holding that other moral belief before I ever adopted the religious fiction. If not, why should I be warranted in the belief now?

I'm not denying that we can learn from fiction. From a religious fiction, a person may learn things about themselves, about their relation to other people and to the world as a whole. Perhaps the person considering whether it's permissible for them to re-marry might even change their mind after pondering the system of religious beliefs they are interested in. Perhaps something about the religious story helps them better understand themselves, and/or the purpose of marriage, and/or the meaning of their life.

But, if the person really rejects the relevant beliefs, the religious story is not providing independent warrant. Rather, it is functioning as a tool for an emotional and moral self-exploration. That exploration may re-configure my (non-religious) beliefs. But the new beliefs ultimately derive their warrant from the same source as the old ones, such as their relation to my other (non-religious) beliefs, and my emotional resonance with them. The story helps me explore those relations, test the strength of the emotional resonances, and build motivation to give greater weight to some than to others. It can do this, for example, by making vivid the relative significance events in my life would have, if the religion were true.

Since this is so, I don't think much is lost if WEF is dropped. And in fact, I think some of Le Poidevin's discussion suggests that he might agree. Consider his reply to the charge that just like a religious believer, the make-believer still acts without moral autonomy if he appeals to a fictional God to justify his actions.

If I imagine God's requiring me to act in a particular way, and act because of that imagined requirement, then I am no more acting for truly moral reasons than if I act because I think God really is requiring me to do so. [...] [T]his objection [...] is misplaced. The make-believe game in which I pretend that God is requiring me to do certain things does not affect my actions directly. Rather, in engaging with the game, I am led to certain true (not fictional) beliefs about what I ought to do. It is these beliefs on which I act, and I do so as a fully autonomous agent. When I decide what to do, I no longer do it on the

basis of some make-believe requirement, but on a requirement I come to recognise when I play the game of make-believe. In general, fiction may influence the way we act, but our reasons for so acting need not involve any fictional beliefs. (Le Poidevin 1996, p. 122)

This sounds like the story is functioning in the way I described above. I just come to *recognize* a moral requirement, which is a requirement for reasons other than that I was led to it via the fiction. I don't inspect the fiction in order to see which moral requirements it creates for me, solely because that is what the imagined deity demands. Not only would that be odd (for the reasons mentioned above), but it would make me no more autonomous than the theist. I would be acting in certain ways because of the fictional God's wishes. If the theist lacked moral autonomy, then so would the fictionalist.

The most obvious concern one might have about dropping WEF, and with it the idea that the religious fiction must deliver new insights about our lives, is that it may seem to demote the religious make-believe to a status of frivolous irrelevance. The make-believe might then threaten, in Le Poidevin's words, to 'become a mere diversion from the 'rack of this tough world''.

But not all diversions are frivolous. It's important not to let the make-believe become so pervasive as to blind one to aspects of reality that should be accepted and faced in solidarity with others. But within those limits, the religious imagination, like other aspects of the imagination, can be worth embracing and celebrating.

Seen in this light, Le Poidevin's make-believer has little need of a principled way of avoiding tensions in the fiction. He doesn't need a theodicy, unlike the religious believer. Nor does he need the fiction to be otherwise free of contradictions. Presumably a story can be both beautiful and inconsistent. It needn't be a problem if there are tensions arising for example from the idea of the incarnation, the Trinity, or the thought that God is both the creator of, and an actor within, space and time. That may, to them, merely make the story more intriguing.

## Peter Lipton

A similar interpretation fits Peter Lipton's proposal. Lipton, too, seems to be exploring a religious version of WEF. His starting point is an analogy with Bas van Fraassen's constructive empiricism. But he departs from the position at key points.

In accepting a religious text, one believes parts of it while disbelieving others. Moreover, one commits oneself to using it in its entirety 'as a tool for thought, as a way of thinking about our world'. I'll return to this idea in a moment.

The parts that are believed are the analogues of van Fraassen's 'observable content' of scientific theories, but they are picked out in a piecemeal way (and the rest is disbelieved, rather than just not believed). One doesn't believe all and only the religious text's observable content, since that would include miracles, and exclude some welcome normative content. One doesn't believe all and only the text's normative content, since that includes some unwelcome normative claims, and excludes some welcome factual claims (e.g. about one's own nature and one's

relations to other people). Rather, one believes just those parts of the religious text that one believes anyway—for independent (moral or scientific) reasons. And importantly, unlike on constructive empiricism, the warrant for those claims flows from those external sources. So accepting the text does *not* allow one to deduce and warrantably believe claims one didn't have warrant for before.

In spite of this, certain passages are reminiscent of WEF. It's important to Lipton that one accepts the text in its entirety, and immerses oneself in it and the associated religious tradition. He rejects what he calls the 'selection view', on which one selects those bits of the religious text one believes, and leaves those one disbelieves. The problem with this, for Lipton, is that it would 'leave far too many holes in the religious text', which can 'do us the most good' in its 'full, unexpurgated form' (Lipton 2007, p. 45).

But exactly how does his view differ from the selection view? What is it to use the entire text as a tool for thought? I suggest it's simply to engage in religious games of make-believe whenever one participates in a religious ritual or other part of the religious life. One attends services or blessings or other gatherings, one studies and discusses sacred texts, one observes religious holidays in the way the tradition prescribes, and one engages in the equivalent of prayer (on which more in the next section). But what one does on those occasions has a substantially different character from what a believer does. The activities matter because they allow one to walk in the world of the religious story one treasures.

As Lipton says, one treats the religions's sacred text(s) as a kind of novel. The religious game of make-believe based on that novel can be extensive, but it can't amount to living just as if the religion was true, in the sense that one derives moral responsibilities from the story. It's true that Lipton talks of an active engagement even with parts of the religious text whose moral content one finds difficult, or even unacceptable. It's important to him that those parts are not ignored or interpreted at anything less than face value. But I think my interpretation can accommodate even this 'struggle' with difficult material.

The struggle may consist of different things in different situations. It may consist in choosing to continue to keep before one's mind a set of ideas one rejects, simply because they are part of the tradition one wants to belong to. One lets those ideas sink in, that is, one lets them make an impression. It may consist in letting oneself fully experience the atmosphere that the community creates when engaging with those parts of the text. Admittedly, they won't 'do one good' by actually altering one's views. But there can still be value in not getting distracted from the make-believe by focusing on one's rejection. For those who want to belong to a tradition and participate in an intense engagement with those texts, it may be good to be able to stay in a place of partial cognitive dissonance, by repeatedly thinking through and 'struggling' with ideas they reject.

## Andrew Eshleman

Andrew Eshleman's proposal is also reminiscent of WEF. But again, I'll suggest that a non-WEF-based interpretation of his proposal is more defensible, and accomplishes many of the same aims.

Like Le Poidevin, Eshleman describes naturalistic religious practice as participation in a religious game of make-believe. However, Eshleman strongly emphasizes the instrumental value of that participation. By engaging in religious practice, one enables an ongoing ethical self-transformation, which is not available through other, non-religious means.

This certainly looks like WEF. The religious fiction is supposed to allow one to derive moral insights not available by other means, and to generate warrant for believing and living by those insights. Moreover, the resulting process of self-transformation is thought of as identical to the one that, according to Eshleman, characterizes the life of a believer:

A central aim of religion [...] is to bring about an inner transformation of one's self and a corresponding change in one's conduct. [...] The religious aspiration to imitate God is not an aspiration to wield god-like power or obtain perfect knowledge, but to construct a life in which the internal aspects of one's self (e.g. one's desires and values), as well as its relation to others and the wider natural world, are fully integrated and harmonious. (Eshleman 2005, pp. 190–192)

Naturalistic, and atheistic, religious practice may not be as effective at bringing about this self-transformation as theistic religious practice. But the theist and the atheist are engaged in the same project. That project requires not belief in, but only a conception of God, and the ambition to be 'recreated in the image of God'.

Eshleman also emphasizes the expressive function of religious language. The make-believer needs religious language in order to express his commitment to 'a distinctively religious ideal':

Discourse about such an ideal requires symbolic representation for the same reason realist theologians have stressed the need for symbolic, metaphorical, and/or analogical description when referring to God. It is a kind of existence of which we may have some inkling but one that eludes full articulation, for our experience, and thus understanding, of such an existence is always at best partial and fragmentary. (Eshleman 2005, p. 192)

This, too, is reminiscent of WEF. The fiction allows us to at least partially understand things that we could hardly put into words without it. One uses the fiction to navigate those aspects of the world, and to develop one's moral character accordingly.

But these elements threaten to render the position incoherent. Perhaps it's not easy to say why theologians need symbolic or metaphorical language. But it's hard to see how the reason, whatever it is, can be identical with the reason why a make-believer needs to employ the theistic fiction. After all, the make-believer rejects theism. He doesn't think that our ability to talk about and understand an existing divine being is limited, but that there is no such being.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Some passages suggest that what's hardly articulable isn't the nature of God, but rather that of the state one aspires to when imitating God: 'This aspiration does not require that God exist, but it does require a conception of God, i.e. a representation of a perfected state of being.' (Eshleman 2005, p. 192) But this 'i.e.' is problematic if, like Eshleman, one takes ordinary talk of God to be about a purported divine being.

Similarly, it's hard to see how the believer and the make-believer can be engaged in the same project. The believer isn't using God-talk to express his commitment to an ideal, whether distinctively religious or not. If religious language has an expressive function for him, that function is to express love and trust in a divine being. For him, any moral progress depends on having a right relationship with that being.

Eshleman is concerned to show that for the make-believer, religious language isn't eliminable. The perceived threat here is that a religious fiction isn't the only kind of fiction capable of being used to foster personal growth. It has to be shown that a religious story is uniquely able to help one to grow, otherwise one might start using a different story instead, especially if that other story doesn't require 'a significant degree of self-sacrifice'. This concern is what drives the portrayal of the religious fiction as allowing us to navigate an ineffable reality that is somehow able to substantiate moral insights.

But if anything is motivating the make-believer here, it's his independent commitment to the moral ideals he finds encapsulated in the religious fiction (such as helping the needy, loving one's neighbor, and so on). He thinks that living in this way is a good way to promote his own 'flourishing', and that is why he strives to do it.

A religious tradition, and its sacred text(s), provides just one among many stories that are in principle able to stimulate and aid personal growth. But that doesn't mean that for any given person, any of these stories can replace any other. The religious fiction contains many distinctive ideas a person may find inspiring, comforting, emotionally satisfying, or otherwise attractive. For example, they may like the idea that the metaphysical nature of reality not only requires but supports their efforts to live well, and that those efforts are part of a guided process that gives their life meaning. They may even like to aspire to imitate the divine person lovingly portrayed in the fiction.

Granted, no mere story will by itself transform anyone's character. But if one thinks that making certain life choices, observing certain periods of rest, and fostering virtues such as loving kindness or charity can promote human flourishing, then one has reason to strive for these things. And if the religious fiction reminds one of their importance, and re-inspires one to continue to strive for them, then that can be useful. It's just that it takes independent motivation to continue with that process, and, as part of that process, to continue to engage with the religious fiction.

Compare this to Joyce's claim that treating morality as a fiction can help combat weakness of will (Joyce 2001, Ch. 8). Joyce points out that vivid images of the consequences of our actions are more powerful motivators than dry thoughts, and that thinking 'must do fifty' while doing one's push ups aids motivation, even if really, one knows that around fifty is enough. None of this shows that thinking 'must act morally', while believing that there are no moral requirements, can by itself create virtuous impulses. But that's not to say that thinking fictional thoughts can't play a role in the battle. It's just that I have to already be motivated to do the right thing in order to have the fictional thought at the right time, and to let it both express and, thereby reinforce, my resolve.

On my version of religious fictionalism, the make-believer can still participate in religious practice. Much of what Eshleman says here can be carried over without

loss. One speaks and acts as if the fiction was true—not in all ‘ordinary contexts’, but whenever one wants to exercise one’s emotional capacities, be inspired, and express one’s heartfelt wishes for oneself and others. This last function is especially salient when it comes to the naturalist’s equivalent of prayer:

[The make-believer] may engage in intercessory prayer for those in some dire need, not because she believes there is some chance thereby of effecting some aid, nor because she believes that in doing so she will contribute to the further development of her own moral and spiritual self, but simply because in doing so she symbolically declares that she is *for* those in need. (Eshleman 2005, p. 195)

Make-believe prayer, as I understand it, involves mentally going through the motions of prayer. It involves imagining that, and speaking and acting as if there was an addressee, in the full knowledge that there is not. In principle, one can of course do something like this with any fictional character. But if one finds the theistic story powerful, and resonates with it, then one may well be able to elicit intense emotional reactions when bringing the theistic story to life. Kneeling before or calling out to an imagined deity may allow one to fully experience and express a sense of dependence, helplessness, or gratitude.

It may seem odd to want to express a sense of gratitude to a being one doesn’t think exists. This relates to the more general question of how best to explain our emotional responses to fiction. If all we experience in response to fiction are quasi-emotions, then it’s only quasi-gratitude, or imagined gratitude, the make-believer feels. But even that may seem puzzling.

Eshleman suggests an analogy with athletic practice, in which one imagines one is already playing the game. The analogy would be that the make-believer imagines addressing a divine being, perhaps on the basis of the memory of what it felt like, if they used to be believers. And as Le Poidevin allows, there may well be a wider object that goes beyond the fictional, namely real individuals in one’s life. After all, people are dependent on each other, and may feel gratitude for each other on many occasions. Indeed, some may feel they are in a sense dependent on, and owe gratitude to, many individuals they’ve never met and will never meet. Momentarily dedicating such feelings to a fictional God, who within the fiction is the source of all good things, can make enough sense to be experientially significant. I suspect Petru Dumitriu expresses a related sentiment in the following passage: ‘I cast my gratitude into the void, I want to call out in the void. If there is no one there, I want to address myself to that strange absence.’ (Dumitriu 1979, p. 106)

Benjamin Cordry raises an important objection to Eshleman’s position that has to do with the make-believer’s ability to mean things differently from everyone else in a religious community. Suppose the make-believer participates in a group discussion on the content and significance of a particular passage in a sacred text. If he doesn’t utter constant disclaimers, he may end up expressing beliefs he doesn’t have—that is, he may end up lying. Or else, communication between him and the other participants may simply break down.

Eshleman replies that the make-believer isn’t using the language in entirely new ways, because in many religious communities, religious language already has



‘expressive and instrumental functions’, in addition to descriptive ones (Eshleman 2010, p. 94).<sup>9</sup> The idea is that the make-believer merely removes this descriptive function and raises the others to greater prominence.

This won’t quite do as a response. If a religious sentence ordinarily expresses belief in God, any attitude it expresses in addition is likely to be an attitude *towards God*. And unless we think ‘God’ refers not to a divine being but to something else (like a moral ideal or a perfected state of being), the make-believer uses such sentences very differently from the believer.

Joyce also discusses this problem. He points out that fictionalism of the kind he’s defending (which is prescriptive, and thus stronger than WEF) is a reform proposal, intended to get more and more people to use the language in question in the new way (Joyce 2001, p. 204). And of course, there is no problem in communities in which the language is already used in fictionalist ways (if there are such).<sup>10</sup>

Since neither religious WEF nor my version of religious fictionalism includes a reform proposal, the first of these points doesn’t straightforwardly carry over. Moreover, while religious fictionalism may accurately describe some (members of) some religious communities, it doesn’t describe all. So the second point also doesn’t address all of Cordry’s worry.

However, I think the worry is less pressing on my version of religious fictionalism than on WEF. A WEF-based proposal has the religious make-believer acting and speaking just as if he were a believer, in all ‘ordinary contexts’. It may even involve the make-believer not being aware of the make-believe unless he ‘critically reflects’. Half the worry here, I suspect, arises simply because it’s not clear how to understand this, and so how to think of non-doxastic acceptance. A group discussion of a sacred text doesn’t seem to create any less ‘critical’ a context than a private reflection on that text. In contrast, my proposal has the make-believer treating the religious story as a story at all times, and will full awareness. As long as he doesn’t hide his naturalistic commitments, or the make-believe nature of his engagement, there is no threat of immorality, or miscommunication. In some communities, that may mean that he won’t be regarded as a ‘full member in good standing’ (Cordry 2010, p. 84). But perhaps the danger of him being viewed as a subversive influence is lessened somewhat if he doesn’t (attempt to) assent to religious claims in all but ‘critical contexts’.

So has dropping WEF resulted in a loss of potential identification with fellow community members? It’s true that on my version of religious fictionalism, the fictionalist member of the community won’t be coy about his naturalism, nor about the fact that he thinks neither he, nor anyone else in the community, is in a relationship with a divine being. But I don’t think anything is really lost by greater transparency. What Cordry’s objection highlights is that the make-believer was always an unusual member of the community. Any group identification that was possible on WEF is still possible.

<sup>9</sup> He sometimes describes these as *expressivist* functions, but I don’t think expressivism is what’s at issue, either as a descriptive or a prescriptive view.

<sup>10</sup> See footnote 1.

## Howard Wettstein

Howard Wettstein has written extensively on what I've been calling naturalistic religious practice. I'll comment briefly on some elements of his view.

Wettstein too, compares religious practice to being an actor in a dramatic story. But it's not clear how he tries to negotiate the tension between a rejection of the supernatural and participation in the religious life. For him, naturalistic religious practice seems to involve developing one's relation to God. "[E]xistence"—pro or con—is the wrong idea for God' (Wettstein 2014). Ontology is as irrelevant to religious practice as it is to the practice of mathematics.

Why think this is a good comparison? Suppose the right way of framing metaphysical questions is as questions about the nature of entities, not their existence. Then it's even easier to see why mathematicians don't need to do metaphysics first—the metaphysical nature of numbers isn't that relevant to mathematical practice. Yet it still seems relevant to religious practice what kind of entity God is, and in particular, whether he is fictional.

One interpretation of Wettstein's position might be as a position located beyond the far end of Joyce's spectrum. The 'critical context' has disappeared altogether. Of course such a position would incur all the problems of WEF in their starkest form. And the interpretation makes nonsense of Wettstein's self-description as a denier of the supernatural. But it makes sense of a number of his other claims, such as that when prayer goes well, it gives one 'the sense of the presence of the divine, of making contact' (Wettstein 2012, p. 211).

The problem may be that the religious game of make-believe is ruined by any interruption, even when writing philosophy, perhaps because it's part of the story that talking about it as *merely* a story damages one's relationship with the central character. But it's hard to see how to avoid that, with or without WEF.

## Concluding remarks

I've outlined and defended a version of religious fictionalism that doesn't rely on the notion of a 'critical context', but just on the familiar notion of engaging with and bringing to life stories.

On this view, just like on (what I've called) weak evaluative fictionalism, the naturalistic religious make-believer can spend as much time engaging in religious practice as he chooses. But he isn't living just as if a religion were true. In particular, moral and other decisions may be pondered in relation to a religious story, but the story isn't providing independent warrant. A religious story may play a role in moral growth, but only in the way other stories can too. The make-believer can decide what to include in the fiction, and in principle he can include ideas from different religious traditions. His is a *sui generis* form of engagement with religious ideas and practices.

I'll close with a brief look at some more objections. As mentioned in the introduction, I don't mind whether what I've described is still properly called

religious practice, or whether it perhaps amounts merely to a ‘religiously tinged morality’.<sup>11</sup> The claim is that there is a set of seemingly coherent activities that can function as outlets for what their naturalistic bearers would be inclined to describe as religious sentiments.

I don’t know whether treating religious texts as fiction needs to be seen as radically discontinuous with the intentions of the authors in the case of every text. Le Poidevin argues that it’s rather more plausible to think of paradigmatic religious texts as *also* being works of the imagination, since imaginative effort seems required even to conceive of a deity one believes in.<sup>12</sup> Whether he’s right or not, what I’m describing is clearly not what’s ordinarily known as religious practice, or typically advocated through religious institutions. But I don’t mind that. No matter what it’s properly called, some of it can take place in places of religious worship and within (certain) religious communities. It thus presents directions in which what is ordinarily called religious practice might evolve (although a recommendation is no part of either WEF, or of the version of religious fictionalism I’ve endorsed).

Does my proposal amount to a recipe for more deeply entrenching one’s existing moral and political commitments, in a way that keeps them immune from criticism? Even though my main topic has been the possibility, not the desirability (or otherwise) of naturalistic religious practice, such a consequence would be troubling. The objection has also been put to me in the form of a dilemma: in so far as what I’m describing is religion, it’s objectionably conservative.<sup>13</sup>

Though *sui generis*, naturalistic religious practice can involve a significant degree of psychological entrenchment, so both horns of the dilemma are potentially relevant. But it’s not clear that there’s a danger here. First, as we saw with Lipton, often the situation is that some of one’s moral and political commitments *don’t* find expression in the religious tradition. Second, even when they do, and when one’s affinity with a religion derives from them, that doesn’t necessarily mean one is less able to reflect on those commitments. In fact, giving religious expression to them, and engaging with a religious story that embodies them, encourages a greater degree of self-awareness. It seems as likely to lead to more reflection on one’s commitments as to immunize them from criticism.

As mentioned however, I leave open whether naturalistic religious practice is overall desirable, including whether it’s objectionably conservative because it perpetuates (something relevantly like) religious practice.

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<sup>11</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this objection.

<sup>12</sup> (Le Poidevin 1996, p. 120).

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this objection.

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