



UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

Religion, Fiction, and Facts

Koistinen, Timo

2023-10-04

Routledge

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/571948>

Koistinen, T 2023, 'Religion, Fiction, and Facts', *Studia Theologica - Nordic journal of theology*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338X.2023.2264266>

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository. <https://helda.helsinki.fi>
This is an electronic reprint of the original article.
This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.
Please cite the original version.



Religion, fiction, and facts

Timo Koistinen

To cite this article: Timo Koistinen (06 Oct 2023): Religion, fiction, and facts, Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology, DOI: [10.1080/0039338X.2023.2264266](https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338X.2023.2264266)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338X.2023.2264266>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 06 Oct 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 220



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Religion, fiction, and facts

Timo Koistinen 

Religious fictionalism is a philosophical theory that aims to provide an alternative to the metaphysically realistic (theistic or God-centred) view of the nature of religious discourse. Religious fictionalism argues that being an atheist is compatible with a certain kind of personal religiousness because it is possible to understand traditional religious discourse as a useful fiction. In the first part of my presentation, I will outline the central ideas of religious fictionalism. After that, I highlight some key problems associated with it. These have to do with the “make-believe” attitude of the fictionalist account of faith and the problems linked with personal integrity. In the last part of the article, I will turn to metaphysical and epistemic presuppositions that play a central role in religious fictionalism. I will deal with these issues in the light of Bas van Fraassen’s empiricist views on science, secularism and religion.

Introduction

Philosophers of religion working in the analytic tradition have not usually paid attention to the role and meaning of stories in religious traditions. Studies in the field typically focus on the analysis and assessment of the propositional aspect of religious faith, and emphasize the role of beliefs and truth claims as a central and essential part of faith. However, there are analytic philosophers of religion who have argued for an alternative perspective. Recently, a theory referred to as “religious fictionalism” has aroused interest in the philosophy of religion. While there are interfaces with some themes and methodological approaches in modern and post-modern theology, such as narrative theology, the main themes of religious fictionalism arise from the post-positivistic analytic philosophy of religion rather than from theological hermeneutics. The issues under consideration are closely related to the typical topics of the field of philosophy

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

of religion, such as the existence of God, the nature of religious faith, the rationality of religious beliefs, and the meaningfulness of religious language. The debate on this subject touches on the possibility of a kind of religiosity or religious faith for atheists who find deep personal, moral, and spiritual meaning in religious stories.

In contemporary philosophy, fictionalist theories have been developed in several different subfields of philosophy, e.g. in modal semantics, the philosophy of mathematics, the philosophy of science, and ethics. Thus, fictionalism in the general sense of the term posits the thesis that certain claims in a given area of discourse, i.e. “fictionalist discourse”, are not true descriptions of factual reality, although they appear to be such. However, fictionalists consider that this is not a sufficient reason to reject the use of such discourse, as there are good reasons to pretend or make-believe that the claims in the discourse are true. Many philosophical questions linked with fictionalism are not new. Fictionalist elements can be found in the history of philosophy from Pyrrhonian scepticism to Hans Vaihinger’s philosophy “as if”.¹

Themes associated with fictionalism have much to do with the controversy between metaphysical realism and antirealism. However, it should be noted that fictionalism is not understood as a “global” view concerning the general relationship between reality and mind/language, but is restricted to offering a fictionalist account of some particular discourse (religious, mathematical, etc.). This is important for understanding the starting point for religious fictionalism. Namely, atheism is often based on the assumption of a contradiction between the scientific and religious pictures of the world. The assumption that both of these pictures contain truth claims that contradict each other plays a significant role in religious fictionalism. To resolve this contradiction, religious fictionalists propose a fictionalist (antirealist) account for religious discourse and a factual (realist) account for scientific discourse.

A distinction is often made between hermeneutic fictionalism and revolutionary fictionalism.² Hermeneutic fictionalism is a description of how a problematic discourse is actually used. According to hermeneutic fictionalism, language users normally think they are not making factual assertions in the context of problematic discourse, they only appear to do so. Revolutionary fictionalism admits that according to normal understanding, the normal use of problematic discourse does in fact involve factual assertions about things that do not exist. But according to revolutionary fictionalism, we ought to treat these assertions as pretend assertions. We will see that religious fictionalism takes the form of revolutionary fictionalism.

Michael Scott and Finlay Malcolm define religious fictionalism as follows:

Religious fictionalism is the theory that it is morally and intellectually legitimate to affirm religious sentences without believing the content of what is said. Additionally, religious fictionalists propose that it is similarly legitimate to engage in public and private religious practices, such as the observation of religious festivals, going to church, or prayer, without having religious beliefs.³

What motivates the adoption of such a view? Obviously, the historical roots of the discussion are connected with the secularization of modern societies. But while traditional Christian churches have lost their members in the twentieth century in Europe, the cultural, ethical, and spiritual significance of Christianity has not disappeared. As Matthew Arnold said in commenting on the state of culture at the end of the nineteenth century: "Two things about the Christian religion must surely be clear to anybody with eyes in his head. One is, that men cannot do without it; the other, they cannot do with it as it is."⁴ This observation is no longer a wholly accurate description of the place of Christianity in multicultural Europe. Nevertheless, Arnold's dilemma is still relevant for many people today, and religious fictionalism deals with difficulties that have been present in modern theology for a long time now. One famous and powerful formulation of the central theological problem can be found in Rudolf Bultmann's paper, "New Testament and Mythology: The Problem of Demythologizing the New Testament Proclamation":

The world picture of the New Testament is a mythical world picture. The world is a three-story structure, with earth in the middle, heaven above it, and hell below. Heaven is the dwelling place of God and of heavenly figures, the angels; the world below is hell, the place of torment. But even the earth is not simply the scene of natural day-to-day occurrences, of foresight and work that reckon with order and regularity; rather, it, too, is a theatre for the working of supernatural powers, God and his angels, Satan and his demons. These supernatural powers intervene in natural occurrences and in the thinking, willing, and acting of human beings; wonders are nothing unusual.⁵

According to Bultmann, the mythical world picture of the Bible is not believable for educated people in the twentieth century, and the question

for the modern theologian is how to interpret the Christian Gospel for modern culture. The perspective of religious fictionalists differs from Bultmann's biblical theological hermeneutics – I will return to this question in the last part of this paper – but here it is worth noting that religious fictionalism is closely related to themes which are at the heart of modern theology. Like Bultmann and many other theologians, religious fictionalists seek an answer to the question of how the valuable elements of a religious faith can be maintained in a situation where religious beliefs and doctrines appear to be unbelievable in the light of a scientific view of the world.

In the first part of this article, I outline the central ideas of religious fictionalism. After that, my intention is to highlight some key problems associated with it. First, I refer to problems with personal integrity. After that, I turn to problems which are to be found in the assumptions – which are common in the current analytic philosophy of religion – concerning the understanding of the concept of reality in a religious context, and how these assumptions are related to metaphysics and science. I deal with these questions by referring to Bas van Fraassen's views, as developed in his work *The Empirical Stance* (2002), in which he offers an analysis of the relationship between science, secularism, and religion in light of his empiricist approach to philosophy. Van Fraassen defends a version of fictionalism (anti-realism) about scientific theories and offers a view concerning the relationship between science and religion that differs from religious fictionalism. His account of the nature of truth claims in religion and science calls into question the assumptions that govern not only religious fictionalism but also the prominent theism-atheism debate in analytic philosophy of religion. In my opinion, his approach has not received enough attention in current studies.

Religious fictionalism – Robin Le Poidevin

In the analytic tradition, philosophical theists and atheists commonly suppose that the Christian faith – or, more broadly, the faith of Abrahamic religions – entails the acceptance of some metaphysical claims about the nature of reality. According to this theological realism, the central claims in religious discourse are thought to refer to an “objectively” or “independently” existing divine reality. In view of this, it is irrational or even absurd for a philosophical atheist – who is convinced that central religious doctrines are not true – to participate in religious practices. This assumption is, however, disputed by advocates of religious fictionalism.

Robin Le Poidevin is one of the most prominent exponents of this view.⁶ In an early work, *Arguing for Atheism: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (1996), he argued that the abandonment of theism and theological realism does not make a Christian religious form of life impossible. He has returned to this topic in his most recent book, *Religious Fictionalism* (2019). In both books Le Poidevin defends the possibility of being an atheistic religious believer by developing a fictionalist account of religious faith.

Le Poidevin holds that the rejection of religious metaphysics does not mean that one should draw the practical conclusion that it is irrational, nonsensical, or morally illegitimate to participate in religious practices. He defends taking a religious position based on an instrumentalist account of religious language and argues that instrumentalism (associated with fictionalism) provides a better justification for religious practice than theological realism, because the former is not based on “dubious metaphysical assumptions”.⁷

In this case, participating in religious practices means something other than a purely formal participation in worship. It is common for atheists who do not have any kind of faith to participate in religious ceremonial services (e.g. in baptisms of children, funerals, or the weddings of their relatives), and there is of course nothing irrational or morally reprehensible in that. The central question concerns the legitimacy of adopting a certain kind of personal religious faith that involves an attitude of make-believe.

The make-believe aspect of fictionalist faith distinguishes it from the usual way of understanding the nature of religious commitment. Le Poidevin openly admits that in this respect, religious fictionalism differs from the way that religious people have generally thought about their religious faith. However, he holds that the fact that religious believers have (in the past and today) thought that metaphysical beliefs are essential elements of genuine faith is not a fatal problem for religious fictionalists.⁸

Le Poidevin distinguishes fictionalism from some other non-realistic interpretations of religious language. The most important of these is a view called “expressivism”, whose best-known advocate is Richard Braithwaite. In a much-discussed article that was published in the middle of the last century, “An Empiricist’s View of the Nature of Religious Belief” (1955), Braithwaite developed an expressivist or “non-cognitivist” view of religious language, according to which religious discourse does not describe facts, but the use of religious language has to do with a commitment to an agapeistic way of life.⁹

Although fictionalism and expressivism come close to each other in some ways, according to Le Poidevin, there are significant differences between them. Braithwaite thinks that the meaning of religious statements is not propositional, and thus not fact-stating, i.e. they are not capable of being true or false. In contrast, religious fictionalism treats religious statements as propositional and fact-stating. According to fictionalism, religious statements are “truth-apt”: they can have a truth value, but they are only true within a fiction.¹⁰ A truth value can be attached to worlds of fiction, for example, in the following way. Think of the case when someone describes the content of Kafka’s novel *The Trial* to others, and says that “Josef K. is arrested and accused of a crime, but he does not know what the crime is.” It is undeniable that this claim is true within this story. So, this is one way in which we can apply a truth-value in fictional sentences. Using Le Poidevin’s terms, the language of fiction is “truth-apt” but is not “truth-normed”, i.e. it is not answerable to the world. In a similar way, the notion of truth can be applied to religious narratives. He says: “The religious narratives (in which category the fictionalist will include the more obviously doctrinal elements) are not to be taken as attempts to describe the world as it really is, but rather how it is in fiction.”¹¹

Another important characteristic of religious fictionalism concerns the attitude of pretence and make-believe that one adopts towards the world of fiction. This phenomenon is familiar to all of us from children’s games. When children play the game “cops and robbers”, they take on roles in this game world, and to be fun, this of course requires immersion in that world. However, children obviously know that they are pretending to be someone they are not. This, and many other ordinary human practices, are examples of cases where “pretending that p is perfectly acceptable when p is known to be false”.¹² Religious fictionalists argue that this attitude is also acceptable in religious contexts: an engagement in religious practices can be understood as an engagement in a “make-believe in God” game. Immersing oneself in religious narratives can be emotionally and practically relevant for us in the same way as other fictions are. Religious stories, teachings and doctrines illustrate deep ethical and spiritual questions in human life, and by generating emotions, these stories influence peoples’ lives and conduct in a useful way.

Le Poidevin’s fictionalism differs from agnostic and non-doxastic views linked with theological realism, according to which having religious faith or being a religious person does not necessarily require that one believes that central religious claims are true. It has been argued that genuine and epistemically acceptable religious faith does

not necessarily entail belief, but only some epistemically weaker attitude such as “acceptance”, as William Alston has suggested, or the “hope” that religious statements are true, as Louis Pojman and Simo Knuuttila have suggested.¹³ Adherents of non-doxastic positions do not think that genuine religious faith requires epistemic belief in the existence of God.¹⁴ However, this does mean that pretending to believe that God exists is an adequate attitude in religious life. For adherents of non-doxastic views, the question of the truth of religious beliefs is still a crucial matter. This is what fictionalists deny. A fictionalist may think that the probability of religious claims is so low that even hoping and accepting are not adequate attitudes. A fictionalist does not hope – or at least he does not need to hope – that God exists, but nevertheless make-believes that there is a God. Thus, in uttering religious statements, for example in reciting the Apostle’s Creed, fictionalists pretend to assert them. In reciting the Creed, in addressing prayers to God, etc., they locate themselves in a fictional world that they do not think of as a real world.¹⁵

An interesting feature of the theory is a certain kind of traditionalism. Religious traditions offer a starting place for adopting religious fictionalism. Religions are culturally established practices and institutions; a fictionalist does not invent them, but takes them as given. A fictionalist does not construct his own religion, but is obliged to choose between different religious traditions. Le Poidevin borrows a quote from G. K. Chesterton: “A man can no more possess a private religion than he can possess a private sun and moon.”¹⁶ In addition, when one takes a fictionalist attitude to religious stories, these stories can be taken as they are. This attitude does not require much hermeneutic reflection. This is well illustrated by Peter Lipton, who has developed a version of religious fictionalism that comes close to Le Poidevin’s views.¹⁷ Lipton distinguishes between two ways of solving the tension between science and religion: adjusting the content and adjusting one’s attitude. Lipton argues for the latter option. He does not want to adjust the content of religious claims. Although he considers Biblical stories to be false, he takes these stories as they are and, in this respect, adheres to a “literal” interpretation of the Bible.

Personal integrity and the usefulness of playing the God game

One obvious problem with fictionalism is linked with the question of whether pretence and make-belief are compatible with being honest to oneself and others. For many people, this is and has been a serious question. The ethics of belief and personal integrity have not only been a

significant theme for philosophers, but they have also touched the lives of many people in different social and historical contexts. One culturally prominent example can be found in Victorian Britain. In those days, a public break between citizens and religion became a real possibility for the first time, and religious doubts arose in an unprecedented way. Struggles with religious doubts, intellectual honesty, and questions associated with hypocrisy grew, and these struggles were strongly represented in many novels and autobiographies of that time, as has been shown in many literary studies.¹⁸ In the context of these intellectual and moral controversies and inner struggles, solving this problem by pointing to the possibility of make-belief would have been – and still is – a somewhat strange option for many people. In fact, when such an attitude has been adopted, it has not been something that one actually wants to do. Instead, by pretending, individuals have often wanted to protect themselves by keeping their own beliefs hidden. There are those who have wished to avoid conflict with religious or political rulers. There are also those make-believers who have wanted to avoid causing grief to their religious parents or friends. In these cases, questions linked with personal integrity cannot be ignored.

Anthony Kenny's life story echoes these issues. Kenny was a priest of the Catholic Church before he became a world-famous philosopher. In his autobiography, *A Path from Rome* (1985), he relates his inner struggles during the time when he started to doubt essential doctrines of the Catholic Church and finally renounced his priesthood. For many years he had put aside his doubts, but over time, his doubts only intensified, the central problem being that he felt he was living the double life of a hypocrite. After leaving the priesthood, Kenny, who has taken an agnostic stance, still continues to attend church services, although he states that he does not recite any creed.

Interestingly, Le Poidevin rejects the possible accusation that fictionalists are insincere when they recite a creed. He thinks that "sincerity is to be judged according to the intentions of the participant," and "if those intentions are to deceive, [...] then this is indeed insincere. But if it is a means to moral and spiritual improvement, to the benefit of all, it is not."¹⁹ He claims that, in this respect, there is an important difference between an agnostic, such as Kenny, and fictionalists, for "an agnostic cannot utter these words without hypocrisy or self-deception."²⁰ This is because Kenny assumes that genuine faith requires that one believes that God exists, and this belief, according to Kenny, is epistemically virtuous only if one has convincing evidence of the existence of God. He does not have such evidence, and in this case, the ethics of belief

prevent him from reciting the creed. Fictionalists or instrumentalists need not restrict their religious activities on the same grounds, because for them, religion has a valid point because it is useful, and its usefulness is independent of the truth of religious beliefs. Strangely enough, fictionalists are thus not guilty of self-deception, because they consciously pretend to believe something they know to be untrue.

Le Poidevin's view that this religious make-believe game is sincere, insofar as its intention is moral or spiritual improvement for the benefit of all, brings out the deeply instrumentalist nature of fictionalism. In order to receive the moral and spiritual – or psychological – benefits of religious faith, one has to make-believe with regard to religious doctrines and act as if one believes in them. The appeal of religious narratives for a fictionalist is that they are devices which strengthen behaviour through the emotions. Instrumentalism here takes a rather extreme form, and this raises the question of the religious or spiritual aspect of the theory. The idea that an expression of moral commitment is a central element of religious language plays a central role in Le Poidevin's thought, although he explicitly rejects the view that "theistic language is really moral language in coded form".²¹ At any rate, the fact that he rather often appeals to the idea that religious stories are useful for offering a lively expression of ethical values and ideals²² leaves us with doubt as to whether his approach does justice to the religious meaning that these stories possess. It is possible that in the utilitarian make-believe game, the religious point of a story is lost. The words one uses might be the same, but the meaning is different.

Of course, religious discourse may contain elements that an atheist (or more broadly an unbeliever) finds useful. An unbeliever can learn morally important insights and aspects of the wisdom of life from the teachings and stories of religious traditions. However, for me it is hard to see that this requires that the unbeliever pretends to believe them. Learning something from religious stories may require sensitivity and imaginative openness towards religious matters, but this does not require an internally fragmented attitude connected with pretending to believe in something that one does not believe in.²³

Religion, secularism, and objectifying inquiry

I next turn my attention to issues that I find central in evaluating the fictionalist approach. These have to do with the semantical and epistemological questions concerning the notions of reality and unreality in science and religion debates.

Le Poidevin points out in the epilogue of his book *Religious Fictionalism* that he has left out of his examination some possible questions related to religious fictionalism. One of them concerns whether the central distinction in his discussion between realistic and anti-realist attitudes is meaningful.²⁴ He refers here to D. Z. Phillips, who has criticized this distinction (as it is usually understood in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion) in many of his writings.²⁵ According to Phillips and other Wittgensteinian writers, such as Rush Rhees and Peter Winch, the way many philosophers (metaphysical realists and anti-realists) use such expressions as “reality”, “the world” or “a referent” is misleading because they do not have fixed meanings, but are context-dependent. These expressions are used in various ways in different contexts, and these uses are not unified. Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion have emphasized the multiplicity of reality that is intertwined with forms of life and the ways of using language that belong to them: “reality” is not limited to the world of scientific facts.²⁶

There has been a lot of discussion about the Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion in the contexts of controversies over realism, and I find the topic extremely relevant to religious fictionalism.²⁷ However, I am not going to deal with these debates now, but instead I want to explore somewhat similar views developed by Bas van Fraassen, whose ideas are much less discussed in the philosophy of religion. Van Fraassen, like Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion, represents a philosophical thought that deviates from naturalistic and supernaturalistic metaphysics. Van Fraassen criticizes the naturalistic approaches in contemporary philosophy and also considers metaphysical idea of God to be erroneous. Rejecting metaphysics does not mean that he defends atheism or that he regards God as a useful fiction. Of particular interest to the discussion of the relationship between science and religion is that van Fraassen’s philosophical starting point is the empiricist tradition, which he develops in an original way.

Van Fraassen is best known for his studies on the philosophy of science. He is classified as an adherent of fictionalism in the philosophy of science. His most extensive writing on religion is *The Empirical Stance*, published in 2002, which has received surprisingly little attention in the philosophy of religion.²⁸ This is no doubt the case because his thinking differs significantly from mainstream philosophy of religion. What is interesting here is that, like the fictionalists, van Fraassen’s aim is to reflect on the nature of religious faith in the light of the challenge of the secular scientific worldview. He also has a very critical attitude towards the metaphysical idea of God. However, his ideas about religion differ significantly from religious fictionalism.

Van Fraassen's most influential contribution to philosophy is the theory of "constructive empiricism", which stands in contrast to scientific realism. Scientific realism and constructive empiricism understand the aim of science in different ways. According to scientific realism, "Science aims to give us, in its theories, a literally true story of what the world is like; and acceptance of a scientific theory involves the belief that it is true."²⁹ Constructive empiricism, in turn, claims that "Science aims to give us theories which are empirically adequate; and acceptance of a scientific theory involves as belief only that it is empirically adequate."³⁰ The fictionalist elements in van Fraassen's conception of scientific practice are connected to the criticism of the philosophical tradition of "realist metaphysics". From the perspective of an empiricist, the metaphysical tradition goes wrong in postulating theories concerning unobservable entities or aspects of reality, which are then offered as explanations of things.³¹ This speculation goes beyond science. However, he thinks that in practising science, scientists treat theories as if they fully believe in them – this is the fictionalist aspect of van Fraassen's thought. He describes this attitude in terms of immersion in the scientific world picture. But this immersion does not mean that scientists fully believe in the theory that they are working with; they only "accept" it. Immersion in a world picture does not "preclude 'bracketing' its ontological implication".³² In this respect, scientific fictionalism is reminiscent of religious fictionalism,³³ but Fraassen ends up with a different view concerning religion than Le Poidevin and Lipton. He does not think of religion as a fictional world of imagination that is the opposite of the real world.

What van Fraassen means by empiricism is a complicated matter. Constructive empiricism is not committed to the problematic doctrines of earlier logical positivism, such as the verificationist theory of meaning or the doctrine that sense experience is the only source of information about reality. He argues that empiricism should not be understood as a single philosophical position, but rather as a historically developed tradition consisting of a variety of approaches. He understands empiricism as a stance, as an antidogmatic philosophy that is not committed to metaphysical or scientific theories, doctrines, or theses. Thus, empiricism does not consist of some statement about what the world is like, although "Such a stance can of course be expressed, and may involve or presuppose some beliefs as well, but cannot be simply equated with having beliefs or making assertions about what there is."³⁴ Empiricism is not committed to certain scientific theories of reality, although it takes a positive attitude towards science as

an activity, but this “is not directed so much to the content of the sciences as to their forms and practices of inquiry”.³⁵

Van Fraassen does not think that the interests of science and religion are the same. It is a mistake to think that they can be treated and evaluated by the same epistemic standards. He develops his position by offering an analysis of some central aspects of scientific thought, and with this he seeks to find an answer as to how a secular orientation is related to science and how it differs from a religious orientation. Van Fraassen’s basic insight is that scientific research has certain general limits, and it is a mistake to limit cognitively meaningful thinking and experience only to science. A key issue is linked with the notion of “objectification”, which is a central characteristic of scientific research. Van Fraassen’s analysis has explicit affinities with Rudolf Bultmann’s theology, in which the notion of objectifying thinking plays a very important role.

One main feature of objectifying inquiry is delimiting an inquiry beforehand. This means that an objectifying inquiry must be linked to a certain domain, and the domain of the inquiry is initially limited to questions linked to certain parameters. When scientists decide to conduct research, they define its subject and what is being studied about it. To use van Fraassen’s own example: if someone is conducting research on frogs, the study is limited to frogs, and to be meaningful it must address certain kinds of questions concerning the properties of frogs, for example frogs’ jumping abilities.³⁶ The field of scientific research is always necessarily limited because in testing theories, one must determine beforehand what kind of answers might be possible. This means, according to van Fraassen and Bultmann, that scientific study is not open to a radically new kind of reality. Nothing radically new – i.e. that which was not foreseen in the context of the domain to which the object belongs – can emerge.³⁷ An essential feature of objectifying inquiry is the avoidance of subjective parameters in scientific research. The parameters used in scientific studies are independent of the people who are carrying out the research. In “objective distancing”, a researcher is taken out of the picture; the results of a study must be independent of a particular researcher.³⁸

According to van Fraassen, it is arbitrary to think that only science and objectifying inquiry can provide us with cognitively significant activities. For many secular thinkers, this idea has been a part of their scientific and naturalistic worldview, but van Fraassen argues that it is not based on scientific inquiry. According to him, there are forms of human activities and thought that are not limited in the same way that scientific research is. Concrete examples of this are poetry, the creation of new

kinds of art, interpersonal communication, and religious texts. These activities and forms of thought open up new perspectives in a very different way than science and objectifying inquiry does. They also involve a subjectivist element. Personal experiences and the activities associated with them are cognitively significant, without offering viewer-independent knowledge about reality. They do not give us theories, but offer us a radically new understanding of reality.³⁹

According to van Fraassen, there are questions that cannot be solved by the investigation of scientific facts, but that are no less real than scientific problems. Examples of these include certain questions concerning personhood: "What are persons?" and "Is someone a person or not?" These questions have been very real and burning questions in various historical contexts; for example, when it has been asked whether members of some ethnic group (e.g. slaves in America and in Europe, Jewish people in the Holocaust) are persons and what rights they have in society. It is a mistake to seek answers to these questions from a purely scientific perspective by exploring scientific facts concerning the organisms of the entities in question. Therefore, scientifically oriented naturalistic and materialist philosophies have nothing to offer to those who ask these questions. These questions are moral and existential questions: they are solved by taking a stand, and their solutions involve an element of choice.⁴⁰

Van Fraassen's approach to religious matters is strongly influenced by existentialist religious thinkers such as Emil Fackenheim, Martin Buber, and Rudolf Bultmann. All of these thinkers held that there is a strong tension between religious faith and a modern culture that is dominated by a secular, naturalistic perspective on reality. These thinkers take the problems linked with this tension seriously. Their position, van Fraassen notes, was "radically different from the so-called neo-orthodox view of Karl Barth, who refused a dialogue with scientists, because theologians' and scientists' topics of concern are disjoint and unrelated to each other".⁴¹ Like religious fictionalists, these thinkers try to respond to the challenge posed to religion by the secular worldview. However, van Fraassen's account of the ideas of these existentialist thinkers offers an understanding of religious faith that goes in a different direction than religious fictionalists' insights. The central concern here is the attitude towards religious experiences and their "real" meaning.

Fackenheim pays attention to the way in which modern secular persons understand religious events in the Biblical stories and how their perspective differs from the perspectives of the persons in these stories. The attitude of Biblical figures in these stories is characterized by "abiding astonishment": for them, these events were historic

moments of divine presence in the world. For secular critics, things are different. For in light of their presuppositions, these stories are about subjective experiences, and the task of the secular critic is to explain them. In this case, astonishment is replaced by scientific or historical curiosity, which seeks out information about facts, and this “curiosity ceases to abide when the facts are explained”.⁴² Thus, there is a deep difference between the secular scientific attitude and the religious attitude towards these stories and religious experiences linked with them. However, van Fraassen argues that it is a mistake to assume that a secular scientific attitude is itself based on science. The secular account of the nature of religious experience, as Fackenheim describes it, is not part of science as science, but it is a worldview, “it is the secular standpoint, which is merely one possible orientation for the participants in science”.⁴³

In *Eclipse of God* (1952) Buber speaks about the loss of belief in secular culture, where belief in a reality that is absolutely independent of us is replaced by the subjective and fictitious existence of God. Van Fraassen quotes Buber, who equates secularism with subjectivist reductionism:

In some periods, that which men “believe in” as something absolutely independent of themselves is a reality with which they are in a living relation. [. . .] In other periods, on the contrary, this reality is replaced by a varying representation that men “have” and therefore can handle. [. . .]

Men who are still “religious” in such times usually fail to realize that the relation conceived of as religious no longer exists between them and a reality independent of them, but has existence only within the mind – a mind which at the same time contains hypostatized images, hypostatized “ideas.”

Concomitantly there appears, more or less clearly, a certain type of person, who thinks that this is as it should be: in the opinion of this person, religion has never been anything but an intra-psychic process whose products are “projected” on a place in itself fictitious, but vested with reality by the soul.⁴⁴

Van Fraassen agrees. He holds that the significance of religious faith is lost “if we think of the [subjectivist] experience of God’s presence as what is immediate to us, rather than God.”⁴⁵ God’s reality is not the reality of an object, but neither is it fiction.

What van Fraassen says about the reality of God should be understood in the light of his empiricist understanding of how we are in contact with reality. The difference between subjectivist religious experience and the objective reality behind it is misleading. Experience shows what things are; experience is not something that hides some deep metaphysical facts that are behind the phenomena. In other words, religious experience is at the heart of religiousness. Van Fraassen considers that the real question is not the “worn-out” question of the existence or reality of God, which is burdened “by the concepts in which philosophers have simulated religion.” The real question is not whether the God of philosophers exists. What, he says, is the real question is “Does it ever really happen that anyone anywhere encounters God?”⁴⁶ This is, however, a question that is outside the limits of objectifying inquiry. The crucial difference between the secular and the religious is not in the theories they hold or their beliefs about the facts of the world, but “an attitude, in how we approach the world and experience.”⁴⁷ For van Fraassen, religious faith is a matter of decision in the face of the wholly Other. It is a matter of living “differently within the world” and “within divine presence.”⁴⁸ This does not mean that God is a fiction, and that having religious faith is a matter of immersing oneself in a fictive world of make-believe.

However, van Fraassen shares the concern of Bultmann’s theology. He holds that a religious person living in a culture permeated by science and objective thinking cannot ignore Bultmann’s problem. The concepts and beliefs of the Holy Scriptures belong to a world picture that is foreign to educated persons in the twenty-first century. Van Fraassen as a philosopher does not give an answer to this question, but he merely highlights some aspects that he considers relevant to Bultmann’s theological problem. The valuable feature of Bultmann’s thought is, on the one hand, a rejection of the fundamentalist’s attempt to hold the ancient mythological world picture, and, on the other hand, a rejection of the attempt to make the gospel “hygienic” by replacing the gospel message with idealistic ethics.⁴⁹ Bultmann thought that the correct solution was not to eliminate the myth from the Gospel, but to interpret them. When the mythical language of the New Testament describes human life as under the power of demons and gods, this language expresses a certain conception of existence. The myth makes it apparent that “our knowledge that the world in which we live as human beings is full of enigmas and mysteries, and that we are not lords over the world and our own life”, and in this way, “demythologizing seeks to bring out the real intention of myth, namely, its intention to talk about human

existence as grounded in and limited by a transcendent, unworldly power, which is not visible to objectifying thinking".⁵⁰

Conclusion

Religious fictionalism seeks an answer to the question of how to maintain the valuable aspects of religious faith and life in a secular culture where religious beliefs appear implausible to many people in the light of a scientific worldview.

From a historical perspective, the origins of religious fictionalism can be traced to Kant's critique of proofs of God's existence and metaphysical theism, which has had a significant impact on modern Protestant theology. Le Poidevin's theory is heavily influenced by earlier British analytical philosophy of religion, particularly Braithwaite's expressivist theory of religious language. Le Poidevin's approach represents an alternative to the prevalent analytic philosophy of religion and "the return of metaphysics" associated with it. It is an important aspect of religious fictionalism that it considers the function and significance of stories in religious traditions. In this regard, the theory offers perspectives that have not been extensively investigated in analytic philosophy of religion.

The problematic aspects of religious fictionalism are, on the one hand, the combination of religious faith and a make-believe attitude, and, on the other hand, an instrumentalist understanding of the meaning of religious language and action. Even nonreligious individuals can find moral or other value in religious narratives, without having to pretend to believe in the doctrines of religions. The instrumentalist perspective on religion relates to the question of religious language's meaning and its connection to reality. This subject has been discussed at length in theological hermeneutics and Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion. Le Poidevin and Lipton pay little attention to the viewpoints expressed in these discussions.

One of the most significant philosophical problems of religious fictionalism is the question of how to understand the nature of religious reality and its relationship to science. Van Fraassen, who has been characterized as a representative of fictionalism in the philosophy of science, has developed an original perspective on the relationship between religion and science, and it is intriguing that his perspective differs from religious fictionalism. Van Fraassen is critical of the metaphysical God of the philosophers, but unlike Le Poidevin, he does not regard God to be a fictitious being.

Instead, he approaches the relationship between science, secularism, and religion from an existentialist theological perspective. Van Fraassen's combination of existentialism and empiricism provides a perspective that is thought-provoking and guides philosophy of religion in a different direction than mainstream analytic theism, but it does not result in religious fictionalism. Religious faith is directed to the divine reality, but it is not an attitude toward a metaphysical object or a theory, it is distinct from objectifying thought. In this regard, van Fraassen's empiricism not only converges with continental philosophy and existentialist theology, but also Wittgensteinian thought. Van Fraassen's distinction between objectifying and non-objectifying inquiry illuminates some important methodological problems in the scientific and historical study of religion. It provides a basis for the view that the secular and purely factual study of holy texts is in some respects irrelevant for religious belief. What is religiously relevant – what is real for the believer – belongs to a completely different level than the probability of historical facts. Religious faith is a matter of embracing a perspective about the world, it is not a belief that is subjected to rigorous historical testing. Van Fraassen does not refer to Wittgenstein in *The Empirical Stance*, but it is interesting to note that some of Wittgenstein's remarks about religion come close to what has been said above. Wittgenstein – who read diligently and appreciated William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* – wrote in 1937:

Christianity is not a doctrine, not, I mean, a theory about what has happened and will happen to the human soul, but a description of something that actually takes place in human life. For "consciousness of sin" is a real event and so are despair and salvation through faith. Those who speak of such things (Bunyan for instance) are simply describing what has happened to them, whatever gloss anyone may want to put on it.⁵¹

Timo Koistinen
 Department of Systematic Theology
 University of Helsinki
 Helsinki 00014
 Finland
 timo.koistinen@helsinki.fi

Notes

1. Eklund, "Fictionalism."
2. Eklund, "Fictionalism" and Stanley, "Hermeneutic Fictionalism".
3. Scott and Malcolm, "Religious Fictionalism," 1. It is worth noting that the expression "without having religious beliefs" is ambiguous. When "belief" is understood as a propositional attitude, one can make a distinction between two cases: 1) "a believes that not p", and 2) "it is not the case that a believes p, and it is not the case that a believes that not p". This distinction can be used to illuminate the difference between atheism and a certain form of religious scepticism or agnosticism (when p = "God exists").
4. Arnold, *The Complete Prose Works*, 378.
5. Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 1.
6. In addition to Le Poidevin, there are several other recent writers who have developed ideas linked with religious fictionalism: Eshleman, "Can an Atheist Believe"; Lipton, "Science and Religion"; Harrison, "Philosophy of Religion"; Deng, "Religion for Naturalists"; and Sauchelli, "The Will to Make-Believe".
7. Le Poidevin, *Arguing for Atheism*, 119–20.
8. Le Poidevin, *Religious Fictionalism*, 7–8.
9. Le Poidevin, *Religious Fictionalism*, 59.
10. *Ibid.*, 25.
11. *Ibid.*, 31. Incidentally, the question of how "key religious truth claims" are identified is, of course, a difficult theological problem in Christianity with a long – indeed, a very long – history.
12. *Ibid.*, 29.
13. Alston, "Belief, Acceptance"; Knuuttila, "Usko, järki"; and Pojman, *Religious Belief*. See also Eklund, *Faith and Will*.
14. In this context, it is interesting to note that according to Kant, the "minimum" of theology is not that God exists, but that it is possible that there is a God. See Kant, *Religion within*, 6:153-4/142.
15. Le Poidevin appeals here to Kendall Walton's theory of the nature of emotional responses to fiction. Walton, "Fearing Fictions."
16. Chesterton, "Introduction to the Book," 9; Le Poidevin, *Religious Fictionalism*, 33.
17. Lipton, "Science and Religion," 43.
18. See e.g., Barbour, *Versions of Deconversion*, chaps. 4 and 6.
19. Le Poidevin, *Religious Fictionalism*, 38.
20. Le Poidevin, *Arguing for Atheism*, 118.
21. Le Poidevin, *Arguing for Atheism*, 112; see also Le Poidevin, *Religious Fictionalism*, 23–4.
22. Le Poidevin holds that morality is independent of religion, in the sense that religion is not required as a basis for morality, although religious stories are useful from a moral point of view. See Le Poidevin, *Arguing for Atheism*, chap. 6.
23. An especially strange suggestion is posed by Andrew Sauchelli, who argues that appreciating religious art may require one to make-believe in something that one considers morally wrong. According to him, fictionalist behaviour can be based on "the desire to appreciate some of the artistic works belonging to certain religious traditions despite the irrationality, falsity or even immorality of the beliefs." Sauchelli, "The Will to Make-Believe," 621.
24. Le Poidevin, *Religious Fictionalism*, 56.
25. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion* and Phillips, *Religion and Friendly*.

26. Rush Rhees writes: "What I am trying to get at is the point that to talk about the reality of God as illusory – or rather, to talk about belief in God as illusory – is a misunderstanding; that the whole distinction between illusion and reality, which belongs to the physical object language, is out of place here. Although Freud and others have taken belief in God to be an illusion, that is not the matter that is really in question here [...] 'The reality of the spirit' would be more in place. It would be exactly in the same sort of way if one said that the preoccupation with moral issues is illusory." Rhees, *Rush Rhees on Religion*, 26.
27. I have also dealt with it myself before: Koistinen, "D. Z. Phillips' Contemplative Philosophy".
28. Van Fraassen has not written much on the philosophy of religion. His most extensive treatment of the subject can be found in *The Empirical Stance*. See also van Fraassen, "Three-sided Scholarship" and van Fraassen, "Response: Haldane". One treatment of van Fraassen's philosophy of religion is Jaeger, "Bas van Fraassen on Religion".
29. Van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image*, 8.
30. *Ibid.*, 12.
31. Van Fraassen, "The World of Empiricism," 114.
32. Van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image*, 80–2.
33. Le Poidevin and Lipton describe the religious fictionalist attitude in a similar way: they suggest that religious fictionalists "immerse" themselves in religion. Le Poidevin, *Religious Fictionalism*, 32 and "Lipton, Science and Religion," 41–3. Lipton explicitly borrows the idea from van Fraassen.
34. Van Fraassen, *The Empirical Stance*, 47–8.
35. *Ibid.*, 63.
36. *Ibid.*, 160.
37. "[O]bjectifying thinking [. . .] understands its object in the context of the domain of objects to which it belongs. Thus, for objectifying thinking a phenomenon is not understood and is a mere x or enigma until it can be located in some definite place in the order proper to some domain of objects. Nothing can be new here in a radical sense; each individual thing is to some extent already foreseen in the outline that always guides the study of objects in a particular domain." Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 142; Van Fraassen, *The Empirical Stance*, 165. Even in the case where scientists are constructing new theoretical models and parameters, there must be connections to older theories and models; scientific revolutions, as van Fraassen points out, "do not take us out of science". This means that after scientific revolutions, the key features of objective inquiry in testing new scientific theories remain. Van Fraassen, *The Empirical Stance*, 167.
38. *Ibid.*, 156–64.
39. Van Fraassen refers to Aristotle's view that poetry and plays, such as tragedies, may offer experiences and perspectives that reveal deep truths to us. In this case, both the viewer and its writer are involved in the subjective inquiry. Van Fraassen, *The Empirical Stance*, 170–1.
40. *Ibid.*, 190–1.
41. *Ibid.*, 179.
42. This quote is taken from Fackenheim's second Deems Lecture. Van Fraassen, *The Empirical Stance*, 181.
43. Van Fraassen, *The Empirical Stance*, 182.
44. Buber, *Eclipse of God*, 13; van Fraassen, *The Empirical Stance*, 183.
45. Van Fraassen, *The Empirical Stance*, 183–184.

46. Ibid., 255, note 32.
47. Ibid., 194.
48. Ibid., 189.
49. Ibid., 187.
50. Ibid., 228; 260 n. 43; Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 98–9.
51. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 28e. This article is based on my presentation at the Nordic Society of Philosophy for Religion Conference, “Symbolizing Transcendence: The Limits of Language”, at the University of Tartu, October 2021. I thank the various participants at this meeting and the anonymous reviewers of this article for their helpful comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Timo Koistinen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3548-7683>

Bibliography

- Alston, W. “Belief, Acceptance, and Religious Faith.” In *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality: Philosophy of Religion Today*, edited by J. Jordan, and D. Howard-Snyder, 3–27. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996.
- Arnold, M. In *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold vol. VII: God and the Bible*, edited by R. H. Super. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1979.
- Barbour, J. D. *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1994.
- Braithwaite, R. “An Empiricist’s View of the Nature of Religious Belief.” In *Ninth Arthur Stanley Edington Lecture (1955)*. In *Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Basil Mitchell, 72–91. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Buber, M. *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy*. 1952. Reprint. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015.
- Bultmann, R. *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*. Translated by Schubert M. Ogden. London: SCM Press, 1986.
- Chesterton, G. K. “Introduction to the Book of Job.” 1916. Reprinted in *The Chesterton Review* 11 (1985): 5–15.
- Deng, N. “Religion for Naturalists.” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 78 (2015): 195–214.
- Eklund, M. “Fictionalism.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019 Edition). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/fictionalism/>.
- Eklund, D.-J. *Faith and Will: Voluntariness of Faith in Analytic Theism*. Leuven: Peeters, 2017.
- Eshleman, A. “Can an Atheist Believe in God?” *Religious Studies* 41 (2005): 183–199.

- Harrison, V. "Philosophy of Religion, Fictionalism, and Religious Diversity." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 68 (2010): 43–58.
- Jaeger, L. "Bas van Fraassen on Religion and Knowledge: Is There a Third Way beyond Foundationalist Illusion and Bridled Rationality?" *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 80 (2006): 581–602.
- Kant, I. In *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Translated by Theodore M. Greene, and Hoyt H. Hudson. New York: Harper & Row, 1960.
- Knuuttila, S. "Usko, järki ja tulevaisuus." In *Tulevaisuus: Georg Henrik von Wrightin juhlakirja*, edited by Ilkka Niiniluoto, and Heikki Nyman Keuruu, 294–315. Helsinki: WSOY, 1986.
- Koistinen, T. "D. Z. Phillips' Contemplative Philosophy and Theological Realism." *Philosophy, Culture, and Traditions: A Journal of the World Union of Catholic Philosophical Societies* 11 (2015): 43–56.
- Le Poidevin, R. *Arguing for Atheism: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Le Poidevin, R. *Religious Fictionalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Lipton, P. "Science and Religion: The Immersion Solution." In *Realism and Religion: Philosophical and Theological Perspectives*, edited by Andrew Moore, and Michael Scott, 32–46. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.
- Phillips, D. Z. *Wittgenstein and Religion*. Houndmills: St. Martin's Press, 1993.
- Phillips, D. Z. *Religion and Friendly Fire*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.
- Pojman, L. *Religious Belief and Will*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986.
- Rhees, R. In *Rush Rhees on Religion and Philosophy*, edited by D. Z. Phillips. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Sauchelli, A. "The Will to Make-Believe: Religious Fictionalism, Religious Beliefs, and the Value of Art." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 96 (2018): 620–635.
- Scott, M., and F. Malcolm. "Religious Fictionalism." *Philosophy Compass* 13 (2018): 1–11. doi:10.1111/phc3.12474.
- Stanley, J. "Hermeneutic Fictionalism." In *Figurative Language*, edited by Peter A. French, and Howard K. Wettstein, 36–71. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.
- van Fraassen, B. *The Scientific Image*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.
- van Fraassen, B. "Three-sided Scholarship: Comments on the Paper of John R. Donahue, S. J." In *Hermes and Athena: Biblical Exegesis and Philosophical Theology*, edited by Eleonore Stump, and Thomas P. Flint, 315–325. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993.
- van Fraassen, B. "The World of Empiricism." In *Physics and Our View of the World*, edited by Jan Hilgevoord, 114–134. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- van Fraassen, B. "Response: Haldane on the Future of Philosophy." *New Blackfriars* LXXX (1999): 177–181.
- van Fraassen, B. *The Empirical Stance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002.
- Walton, K. "Fearing Fictions." *The Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1978): 5–27.
- Wittgenstein, L. In *Culture and Value*, Translated by Peter Winch. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980.