Agnosticism and Fictionalism: A Reply to Le Poidevin

(Penultimate draft, forthcoming in the *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*)

I have always found Robin’s writings on religion delightfully insightful and stimulating, and this piece was no exception. What follows are some of the thoughts that occurred to me, in order of occurrence.

Consider the distinction between a purely aesthetic engagement with religion (‘enjoying the language of scripture as literature, religious art, church music, buildings, etc’, p. 2) and a ‘full engagement’ with religion.[[1]](#footnote-1) The latter, Robin says, is of a deeper kind, which involves the religion’s truly impacting the way one lives one’s life. In a way, it is of course perfectly clear what is meant here. At the same time, I wonder whether this way of putting things may pre-judge some of the issues at hand. Who gets to decide what counts as a ‘full’ engagement, and whether an aesthetic engagement with a tradition (religious or otherwise) can ever be *as deep* as one primarily based on non-aesthetic considerations? How do we settle whether art can truly impact anyone’s life? The worry is that the distinction seems natural to the extent that it is informed by one’s own cultural immersion in a particular theistic (for example Christian) tradition. That tradition may come with ready-made ideas about which ways of engaging with its doctrines and liturgy are the more morally good or meaningful ones and which are less so.

When discussing James, Robin considers the consequences of letting one’s emotions influence one towards the ‘Believe truth!’ policy in religious matters (p. 7). It certainly seems right that we cannot say of any specific view that this policy will direct one towards it. After all, adopting the policy seems to amount to something like a less stringent evidential requirement, a somehow lower threshold for outright belief. For all that has been said, not only could this just as well lead to outright belief in atheism than theism (whether or not one finds atheism noble), but it could lead simultaneously to both. In particular, if my evidence for theism and atheism is equally strong, wouldn’t the principle recommend believing both? Credulity by itself seems to cut every which way.

It’s no fun squabbling over terminology; but sometimes, choices of terminology affect how many philosophical options remain visible in a given discussion. As Robin points out in footnote 4, one important distinction has been that between descriptive (hermeneutic) and prescriptive (revisionary, revolutionary) fictionalism. Note that these are both proposals concerning (the meaning, use, and/or significance of) religious *language*. Moreover, note that even this distinction is as yet rough, since there is a pleasing variety of religious fictionalisms on offer and (hopefully) yet to be developed. For these and other reasons, it does not seem advisable to build the ontological thesis of atheism into either or both of these, at least not in the way it is done here. Take, for example, descriptive fictionalism. And suppose we mean by this roughly the view that religious language ‘is actually understood (even by its originators) as a fiction’ (p. 8). Why should this by itself commit one to atheism, the view that the God of theism does not exist? Why rule out by fiat a position according to which God exists, but actual users of religious language have, for whatever reason, failed to treat God as anything but a fiction? (Admittedly, this presupposes that religious language can in principle be used other than ‘as a fiction’; but there does not seem anything obviously incoherent in the combination; more to the point, the combination should not be obscured from view simply by terminological choice.) Similarly, consider prescriptive fictionalism. And suppose we mean by this roughly the view that religious language, ‘however it […] has been understood, […] should be approached as fiction’ (p. 8). While it is easiest to imagine atheists being attracted to this view, theists might also adopt it. For example, they might hold that it is morally better to have (nondoxastic, non-truth-normed) faith in God than to outright believe in God. In fact, this combination has actually been explored in the literature (Jay 2014). Again, why rule out views simply by terminological choice?

Another reason not to build atheism into fictionalism in the present context would seem to be that if one does build it in, the tension between agnosticism and fictionalism arises in a somewhat automatic fashion. If fictionalism includes the claim that when taken at face value, religious statements are largely false, so that for instance God does not exist, then a conflict with agnosticism straightforwardly follows. The fictionalist ‘has already bypassed the step’ of wagering on a God who may exist, because they have concluded that God does not exist. The tension between agnosticism and fictionalism then arises from ‘opting to treat religion as fictional’ only because we are taking ‘opting to treat religion as fictional’ to include disbelieving that God exists.

Similarly, keeping the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive fictionalism firmly in mind can help one not to see tensions where there are none. According to footnote 4, the focus is on prescriptive fictionalism, understood as the view that ‘however it […] has been understood, [religious discourse] should be approached as fiction’ (p. 8). So the view at issue is roughly that however full acceptance of religious sentences has been understood, it should not or need not be truth-normed. But of course this is quite compatible with its having been truth-normed up to now. So it is compatible with (atheism and) agnosticism, as ordinarily understood, as well as with anything in Pascal’s first step (the pragmatic argument for believing). By contrast, if (contra footnote 4) the focus was on descriptive fictionalism, there would be a clash with (the semantic presuppositions of) agnosticism as usually understood, but equally with those of atheism. In other words, that clash would have nothing specifically to do with agnosticism, nor indeed with make-belief religious engagement.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Presumably what we are really interested in is whether make-believe engagement with religion is open to the agnostic, and to what extent the result is ‘a genuinely religious life’ (p. 2). A natural next question is how the agnostic version of such engagement compares to the atheistic version, the possibility of which Robin himself has engagingly argued for over the years. One option would be to say that what the atheist is able to do here is not entirely available to the agnostic. Perhaps one might think this because confidently treating the religion as a fiction is too frivolous to be acceptable to the agnostic, who after all is not sure there is not something to the God story. However, an obvious objection is then that if atheist religious make-believe really is frivolous, this would seem to be a problem for the atheist too, at least insofar as there too we are after a ‘genuinely religious life’. Alternatively, one might think that something more is available to the agnostic here than to the atheist. A third option would be to say that not all of atheistic religious make-believe is available to the agnostic for reasons other than that it is frivolous, but that something different is available to the agnostic that is valuable in its own right.

Robin offers an interesting comparison with historical fiction such as Robert Graves’s Claudius novels. The key feature of these is that even Graves himself cannot be sure exactly which elements of the novels correspond to actual events and which do not. ‘[W]e can never be sure where the line between fiction and reality is drawn […] [and yet] [w]e bring the same level of serious attention to all parts of the text, without needing to distance ourselves […] from those parts which as a matter of fact are fictional’ (p. 11).

Robin argues that this analogy opens the way towards a new kind of, metalinguistic agnosticism. The idea is that this is importantly different both from ‘traditional agnosticism’, which merely treats religious discourse as truth-normed and suspends belief in religious propositions, and from a fictionalism that treats religion are ‘pure make-believe’. On the new kind, we treat religion analogously not to purported historical records, nor to novels, but to historical fiction. Moreover, we ‘suspend belief whether or not to be fictionalists with respect to the discourse, but both recognize its religious value irrespective of whether it is true *and yet* [are not] indifferent to the possibility that it reveals the truth’ (p. 13).

While the analogy with historical fiction is suggestive, I see several problems with the proposal as it stands. The first is that suspending belief about which prescription to endorse about religious discourse does not license engaging with religion along the lines of any given prescription. If I decide to suspend belief on whether religious discourse should be treated as non-truth-normed (thus licensing make-belief), or whether it should (continue to) be treated as truth-normed, then I simply do not have a view about which if any of these should be done or is valuable. I cannot therefore let any such metalevel view guide me in my engagement with religion. If I then sometimes religiously make-believe and sometimes not, then neither of these behaviours is licensed by any linguistic metabelief of mine.

The second problem follows on from the first. It does not seem right to describe readers as in general undecided whether or not to treat historical fiction as fiction (as its name suggests). That is, the situation does not seem to be best understood as one in which readers are simply unsure as to whether to treat the Claudius novels as a purported historical document of dubious credentials or as an instance of a specific kind of novel. Rather, we treat it as a specific kind of novel that may, unbeknownst to us and to our delight, be in addition true to reality in various places. If it is, this is so to speak a supererogatory achievement on the part of the text, not something that we might yet decide to expect of it. So there is no metalinguistic agnosticism in the historical case on which to model a religious one.

I would like to end with a positive suggestion. The metalevel is a bit of a red herring. The ‘hovering’ that Robin describes is an aspect of the phenomenology of reading a historical novel that one treats as a novel. That is, at the metalevel one is a decided ‘fictionalist’ with respect to historical fiction. One treats it as non-truth-normed, like all fiction. But because it is historical fiction, one is (as described above) delightfully aware of the constant intriguing possibility that the novel may also be offering insights into actual historical events. Perhaps it may do this by (more or less) accidentally describing them correctly, or else by indirectly characterizing their modal dimension correctly.

Analogously, an agnostic may read a religious text (or participate in a religiously worded ritual) without holding any of it to truth-based standards, that is, while engaging in religious make-believe. Yet at the same time, the agnostic may be delightfully aware of the constant intriguing possibility that the story may also be offering insights into actual events. Perhaps these insights would be offered partly through the very uncertainty or tentativeness that characterises the agnostic’s engagement with the religious story as a story, because it helps them ‘try out’ the religious world view by selectively seeing what it feels like to suspend the make-believe momentarily. Although an atheistic fictionalist could also do this, the agnostic may be both more inclined to try it (or to try it more frequently) and also may epxerience the suspension as a more serious step. Whether the result would be experientially positive, and whether it would really be possible or disrupt the make-believe by bringing to mind considerations of the probability of the story’s truth instead, are open questions.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Of course the religious story may also offer insights into actual events by making one more emotionally aware of the real connections between oneself and others. But this is something that it can also do for atheists, as Robin himself has beautifully described (Le Poidevin 1996). Ultimately, the lesson may be that religious make-believe is even more full of potential than has so far been recognized.[[4]](#footnote-4)

References

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1. All page numbers refer to Le Poidevin, ‘Fiction and the agnostic’, forthcoming in the *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Le Poidevin (2016) advocates a somewhat different form of religious fictionalism. For critical discussion see e.g. Deng (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It might also be interesting to explore how the analogy interacts with different views of the semantics of proper names like ‘Claudius’ on the one hand, and with different views of the semantics of the term ‘God’, on the other. What does it take for someone to be the referent of ‘Claudius’, and what does it take for someone to be the referent of ‘God’? These questions may then have implications for how little (or how much) one can know or truly believe about the actions of a person while still (not) believing in their existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This work was supported (in part) by the Yonsei University Future-Leading Research Initiative of 2019 (2019-22-0064). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)