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1



THE FAITH FRAME

Belief has always struck me as the wrong question, especially when it is offered as a diagnostic for determining the realness of the gods.

—Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*

Devout modern Christians talk constantly about not being faithful enough. They bemoan how hard it is to keep God's love at the front of their minds. They complain about forgetting about God between Sunday services. They apologize for not being able to trust God to solve their problems. I remember a man weeping in front of a church over not having sufficient faith that God would replace the job he had lost. When you pay attention, you can see that church services are about reminding people to take God seriously and to behave in ways that will enable God to have an impact on their lives: to pray, to read the Bible, to be Christ-like. And then people say that they go back home and yell at their kids and feel foolish because they have forgotten that they meant to be like Jesus. They report that they run out of time to pray. They confess that they do not behave as if God can help them. They worry that they do not really understand or commit as they should.

In fact, when you look carefully, you can see that church is about changing people's mental habits Sunday by Sunday so that they feel that God is more real, more relevant, and more present for them—so that they believe more than they did when they walked in and hold on to those beliefs a little longer after they walk out. It is one of the clearest messages in Christianity: *You may think you believe in God, but really you don't. You don't take God seriously enough. You don't act as if he's there. Mark 9:24: Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.*

This apparent paradox—believers as the unbelieving—stood out to me when I was doing ethnographic fieldwork with charismatic evangelical Protestants in Chicago and in the San Francisco South Bay (Luhmann, *When God Talks Back*). Here were committed believers, most of whom asserted God’s reality with firm conviction and many of whom had acted and voted according to those convictions (as they understood them) in ways that had real consequences. Yet as I watched and listened carefully as an ethnographer, it became clear to me that they treated the invisible other at the heart of their faith quite differently than they treated visible, everyday things like barking dogs and orange peels. They said that God spoke to them, but they were often skeptical of other people’s reports of hearing God’s word, particularly when that word had specific outcomes. As one pastor said in church, “If you hear God say that you should be calm, take it as God! If God tells you to quit your job and move to Los Angeles, I want you to be praying with me, with your housegroup, and with your prayer circle to discern whether you heard God accurately.” People never asked God to write their term papers or to go shopping for them, even though they said that nothing was impossible with God. They said again and again that God’s power and love were infinite, but they often felt helpless and unlovable; they often said that they forgot to pray for help when they should have prayed; and they often struggled with apparently unanswered prayers. They talked about the mystery of faith, and how little they understood of why God seemed to answer some prayers but not others, and why God allowed such pain in their lives.

My observations suggested that it took these staunch evangelicals effort to keep God present and salient in their lives; that their belief in this invisible other was different in some way than their belief in the everyday reality of visible objects, or even invisible objects like electricity or microbes; and that it was particularly hard to sustain a straightforward faith in God’s deep love because the world so often seemed to deny it.

I saw that these Christians went to church at least once a week. They tried to read their Bibles every day, and they explained the details of their lives through biblical stories. They thought they should pray at least thirty minutes a day. Many of them spent an evening each week with a small group of other congregants, where they prayed and sang and talked about the Bible. They said again and again that unless you did all those

things, your faith would wither and die—that unless people went to efforts to keep God front and center in their awareness, God would simply disappear for them. They never said any of those things about the kitchen table or other ordinary objects in the everyday natural world. There is an obduracy about the world of the visible that means that when inferences about invisible others are not supported by experience, the commitment to them can fade away—and believers know it.

This is not the way many anthropologists talk about belief. To be fair, Christians often state their beliefs with absolute conviction. It is easy for an observer to say, these people neither doubt nor question. They praise the Lord at every other sentence, so why would one even wonder about their confidence in the realness of God? “I believe in Christianity,” C. S. Lewis wrote, “as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else” (1962: 165).

Perhaps because they hear statements like these at home, many anthropologists often write as if their subjects never entertain hesitations about the supernatural and never doubt that the supernatural is straightforwardly as real as the ground they walk on. Anthropologists, often describing people who are not Western and whose societies have never been secular to readers they presume to be both secular and Western, write sentences like these:

[The Andaman Islanders] believe that the spirits feed on the flesh of dead men and women. (Radcliffe-Brown [1922] 2013: 140)

Chiefs for instance are believed sometimes to “rise up” as lions. The belief is consistent with the theory of ancestral presence in animals, trees and artifacts dedicated to ancestors. (Fortes 1987: 136, about the Tallensi of Northern Ghana)

God’s existence is taken for granted by everybody. (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 9, about the Nuer of the Nile Valley)

That last sentence ends, as Clifford Geertz (1988: 58) remarked that all Evans-Pritchard’s sentences end, with an implied “of course.” That’s the way it is. These people think that the gods are real, that they are present, and that they are powerful.

In fact, when anthropologists write this way, they often intend to convey that the people they study are so unquestioning that it would be a

mistake even to describe them as “believing.” That was Evans-Pritchard’s point. He wrote that sentence to reject the very possibility that the Nuer would ever say something like “there is a God.”

That would be for Nuer a pointless remark. . . . There is . . . no word in the Nuer language which could stand for “I believe.” (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 9)

It is a claim echoed by anthropologist after anthropologist. Thus Christina Toren:

We [anthropologists] may characterise as *belief* what our informants *know* and, in so doing, misrepresent them. If I am to correctly represent my Fijian informants, for example, I should say that they *know* the ancestors inhabit the places that were theirs. (Toren 2007: 307–8)

They do not “believe.” They “know.”

When anthropologists insist that the people they study know, rather than believe, that their gods are real, they are often making a claim about the foolish mistakes modern people make. They are often asserting that “believing in” is a Western or Christian thing, an argument made vigorously by Talal Asad (1993). Sometimes they are insisting that when anthropologists talk about the beliefs of other people, it is really a way to dismiss them. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (e.g., 2011), Morten Pedersen (2011), and Martin Holbraad (2009) have written fiery texts about the ways that anthropologists have examined the belief commitments of people like those in Amazonia, Mongolia, and Cuba. They argue that most anthropological observers write as if they presume that such beliefs are wrong—and that view, they argue, is driven by deep-seated colonialist impulses or by a scientific imperialism. This is Viveiros de Castro (2011: 133): “Anthropologists must allow that ‘visions’ are not beliefs, nor consensual views, but rather worlds seen objectively; not world views, but worlds of vision.”

I agree that there is something quite culturally specific about the way that people in the modern West think about what is real, both because of the Enlightenment heritage of their society and because of its Christian roots. I completely disagree that other people do not distinguish between the realness of humans, trees, and rocks and the realness of ghosts, gods, and spirits, and that they do not have to go to any effort to

experience the latter as real. I think that the evidence suggests that all human groups distinguish what counts as natural from what is beyond the natural, even though they may draw the line in different ways and come to different conclusions at different times about what is on which side of the line. As Robert Bartlett points out in *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages*, people can have unstable views about what is natural without rejecting the idea that some things are natural and other things come from a god. In fact, to me it seems somewhat insulting to assume that non-Western people don't think of objects like rocks and gods as being real in different ways, as if they had a less subtle ontology than we moderns. I suspect that all humans have flexible ontologies, and that they hold ideas about gods and spirits (on the one hand) and the everyday world (on the other) in different ways.

FLEXIBLE ONTOLOGIES

To understand the point, let us turn first to what philosophers and psychologists have taught us about human thought in recent years. Over the last four decades or so, it has become clear that humans use two different patterns of reasoning. The terms used to describe these two patterns vary: heuristic and analytic reasoning (Evans 1984); system one (intuition) and system two (deliberate reasoning) (Kahneman 2003); implicit and explicit beliefs (Boyer 2001); unreflective and reflective beliefs (Barrett 2004); and alief and belief (Gendler 2008). Each pair emphasizes somewhat different phenomena, but all point out that humans come to different conclusions when they think quickly, automatically, and intuitively as compared to when they think slowly, carefully, and deliberately.

We call ideas produced by the first pattern of reasoning “intuitions,” the beliefs people generate when they think “from the gut.” Some intuitions seem more part of the package of being human. Even infants expect solid objects that bump into other solid objects to bounce back. They act more surprised if the objects seem to ooze into each other. We seem to have not only an “innate physics” but also an innate biology, an innate psychology, and even an innate mathematics (Spelke and Kinzler 2007). Other intuitions are based on acquired knowledge. When people

are asked whether it is more likely that “a flood caused many people to die in California” or that “an earthquake caused a flood to cause many people to die in California,” many pick the latter because they have learned that California is associated with earthquakes, not floods, even though logically the first is more likely than the second. When they are asked whether a young female Berkeley philosophy graduate became a bank-teller or a bank-teller and a feminist, they often pick the latter because they have learned that people at Berkeley are politically progressive, even though (statistically speaking) the latter is less likely than the former (the existence of something that is both “a and b” is less likely than of something that is only “a”).

These examples are among the many illustrations generated by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky in their remarkable research, summarized in Kahneman’s (2003) Nobel acceptance speech. (Tversky died before the prize was awarded.) They use them to show that our quick judgments are shaped in specific ways: representativeness (earthquakes are more representative of California than floods, feminists are more representative of female Berkeley graduates than bank-tellers); salience (a vertical line and two vertical semicircles can look like a “13” in a line of numbers, but like a “B” in a line of letters); and framing effects (tell people that a program will save half the lives of a population, and they will like it more than a program that leads to the death of half the population). These are principles that help people make rapid decisions based on prior knowledge, and in many settings they help people save cognitive effort and likely help keep them safe.

By contrast, deliberative thinking is what we do when we come to what we call a rational decision, or when we write an analytical paper. At these times, we are aware of the steps in the argument. We think those steps through consciously, and we consider carefully whether they are supported by the evidence. Deliberative thinking may be fueled by intuitions, but when thinking deliberately, people try to lay out the analytical elements clearly enough so that someone else is not confused. Deliberative thinking is hard, as anyone who has written a research paper can testify.

The models behind these two modes of thinking suggest that humans are constantly generating intuitions to help us solve all kinds of problems: where to sit on the train, whether there is anyone else in the house,

whether we should trust the person we are talking to. More information will usually help us to overturn initial intuitions. If I hear a crash in the next room, I might initially worry that an intruder is there—but if I go into the room to investigate and see that the dog has knocked something down, my fear would give way to annoyance. We have intuitions about all sorts of things that we quickly decide are not true when we learn more—intuitions that we trust someone, or that the shirt on the rack on will look good on us, or that the dish we ordered will be tasty.

The great achievement of the field now called “the cognitive science of religion” has been to show that our evolved mental habits generate many intuitions that might support more reasoned, deliberative commitments to a supernatural presence. Pascal Boyer (2008) summarized several of these features for a paper in *Nature*.

First, he pointed out, humans are wildly anthropomorphic. Humans see agents everywhere—at least when thinking quickly. Humans see faces in the clouds and eyes on cars. When two geometric shapes move sequentially around a computer screen, people ascribe intentions to them. Second, humans are not only able to hold people in mind when they are absent, but they form enduring relationships with absent and even imagined others. Third, when humans are young, before they develop an understanding that humans have minds, they assume that what they know, everyone knows. The idea of an omniscient knower, then, is in some sense familiar to anyone who has been a child. Fourth, humans form groups in which they are sensitive to trust and to hard-to-fake signals of commitment. The willingness to assert claims for which there is no evidence but that entail costs (tithing, scarification, time) may facilitate the building of those groups. Fifth, humans are highly alert to danger. They seem to be acutely aware of the possibilities of predation and contamination. Our ancestors were probably more likely to survive if they treated unfamiliar noise as a signal that a predator might be present. Possibly as a result (although perhaps there are also other causes), we do see agents everywhere.

The intuitions that these mental habits produce likely do, indeed, make the apparently irrational idea of an invisible agent seem plausible. “When a reflective belief nicely matches what our nonconscious mental tools tell us through nonreflective beliefs,” Justin Barrett (2004: 13) remarks, “the reflective beliefs just seem more reasonable.” In fact, when

people hold a deliberative commitment (God is everywhere always) that does not seem to make intuitive sense, you can interpret some of the work they do (seeking to find God's presence all the time) as an attempt to make these deliberative commitments feel more intuitive (Boyer 2013).

But the observation that people have different patterns of reasoning—system one and system two, Kahneman and Tversky called them, or thinking fast and slow, to borrow the title of Kahneman's (2011) famous book—should not only tell us that there is a difference between the plausibility of an idea and sustained commitment to that idea, but also remind us that belief is not one kind of thing. People have all sorts of ideas they call beliefs. They believe that the train will arrive at 10:12; that the coffee at Pete's is better than the coffee at Starbucks; that in the Harry Potter series Hermione should have fallen for Harry and not for Ron; that gravitational force draws all objects; that there's a carpet on the study floor; that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His prophet. These are beliefs with different kinds of ontological commitments: expectation, preference, pretend, scientific, factual, and religious. The mere existence of these differences should invite us to ask whether there might be something consistently different in the ways people hold different beliefs and that people are able to move flexibly among these ways with ease. In short, these differences should lead us to ask whether different kinds of beliefs might consistently be held with different ontological attitudes.

ONTOLOGICAL ATTITUDES

The philosopher Neil Van Leeuwen (2014) argues that religious beliefs and mundane beliefs are held with different "cognitive attitudes." That is, people evaluate these beliefs using different evidence, commit to them for different reasons, and draw different kinds of inferences from them. To be clear, there are no doubt many kinds of belief commitments held with many different kinds of cognitive attitudes: beliefs about fiction as opposed to beliefs about facts, beliefs about doing as opposed to beliefs about knowing, beliefs about matters that define one's identity as opposed to beliefs about the mundane world. But the argument that cognitive attitudes toward beliefs in spirits are different in kind from

cognitive attitudes toward beliefs about the ordinary world has proved controversial (Boudry and Coyne 2016). I am persuaded by five of the arguments Van Leeuwen makes.

First, people use language differently when they talk about spirits, and in a way that suggests that they think about the realness of spirits and mundane objects differently. You do not say, “I believe that my dog is alive.” The fact is so obvious that it is not worth stating. You simply talk in ways that presume the dog’s aliveness. You say that she’s adorable, or hungry, or in need of a walk. Van Leeuwen contrasts these two beliefs:

“Jennifer believes that Margaret Thatcher is alive.”

“Sam believes that Jesus Christ is alive.”

The first is a mundane assertion. If Jennifer held her belief about Margaret Thatcher after Thatcher died in April 2013, she’d just be wrong, and it likely would not take much effort to get her to admit it. Sam, however, asserts his belief against his own sharp awareness that there was a man called Jesus who died and was buried some two thousand years ago. His statement “Jesus Christ is alive” assumes the historical reality of the death—and then denies it. It is an epistemologically complicated commitment, and its complexity is present in the very structure of the sentence. If you told Sam that he had made a mistake, he would probably argue vigorously that you were wrong.

In fact, these two different kinds of belief commitments—one mundane, the other religious—are so distinct that we often use different verbs to identify them: “think” and “believe.” We treat them as making distinct ontological claims. In a series of studies, Van Leeuwen and his colleagues (e.g., Heiphetz, Landers, and Van Leeuwen 2018) have found that people typically default to talking about factual claims with “think” (*Gustav thinks that his final paper is due on June 18*) and talking about religious claims with “believe” (*Lisa believes that burning incense at the temple can keep her family safe. Zane believes that Jesus changed water into wine*). In work that Van Leeuwen and I have done together (still in progress), we have found that people draw these distinctions not just in English and in the United States, but in other cultures and languages as well.

Second, religious beliefs become part of the identity of those who assert them, and humans evaluate challenges to identity-defining beliefs

differently from challenges to mundane beliefs. Mundane beliefs adjust to the empirical details. If I believe that my dog is in the study but I find her in the kitchen, I adjust my beliefs. If I am Jewish and believe that to be a faithful Jew I should keep kosher—a belief that is important, then, to who I am—it will take much more effort for someone else to show me that I am wrong. People evaluate religious beliefs more in accordance with their sense of who they are and how they think the world should be.

In fact, when their beliefs are under stress, people at times even adjust the world to make sense of their religious commitments. Yoram Bilu (2013) has for years been studying the Messianic Lubavitcher Hasids who held that their rabbi Menachem Schneerson was the messiah and would never die. After he did die, many reported seeing and hearing him, just as the disciples saw and heard Jesus. And perhaps also like the disciples, it was only after his death that they began to proselytize in earnest, seeking to persuade others of the truth of a belief that had been so profoundly disconfirmed. The central claim of the classic *When Prophecy Fails* (a study, led by the psychologist Leon Festinger, of a Midwestern doomsday cult) is precisely that people evangelize because they fear that the belief to which they have committed themselves may not be true.

Third, religious beliefs and factual beliefs often play different roles in interpreting the same events. Malinowski (1954) pointed this out years ago. The Trobriand Islanders put amulets on the fields to ward off thieves, and they used magical incantations to protect their wooden canoes on the turbulent seas. But they also kept a sharp lookout for intruders, and they carved carefully, with all the practical knowledge at their command, to build seaworthy vessels that would not sink. They used magic to handle what we would call luck: the unexpected circumstance, the unpredictable event, an overlarge wave. More recently, Cristine Legare and her colleagues (2012) have demonstrated that natural and supernatural explanations are used pervasively across cultures to do different things: one to explain how, the other to explain why. We know from science that tumors arise because cells begin to divide in abnormal ways, but why this tumor, for this person, at this time? That is when people turn to supernatural explanations.

Fourth, supernatural beliefs are not “natural,” as Robert McCauley (2013) puts it. At least, they are not part of the package of being a human

child. Children do not believe the local cultural accounts of magic and spirits more readily than adults. In fact, in some ways children seem to be less committed to and less interested in these ideas than adults. This is what Margaret Mead (1930) saw in New Guinea. When Mead tried to talk to Manus children about magic and spirits, they gave her disinterested stares. It was the adults who spent hours discussing ghosts. Legare and her colleagues (2012) not only documented the coexistence of natural and supernatural explanations in many societies, but set out to understand whether natural explanations replaced supernatural explanations as people aged. They found that the reverse was more often true. It is the young kids who seem skeptical when researchers like Legare ask them about gods and ancestors, and the adults who seem firm and clear. Nor do religious commitments seem like a natural part of growing older, even though people are more likely to become religious as they age. In a secular society, people can grow to adulthood quite comfortably without any religion at all.

Fifth, scholars have shown that people don't always use rational, instrumental reasoning when they think about religious ideas. This is not to say that they can't reason about religion: the works of Augustine and Aquinas are testament to the human ability to think logically about things divine. But often people do not. The anthropologist Scott Atran and his colleagues (2014) have shown that faith commitments, which they call "sacred values," are often immune to the constant assessment of costs and benefits that govern other dimensions of human lives. Offer a Muslim woman money to take off her veil, and she may insist even more fiercely on its importance. Offer a Christian woman money in exchange for her wedding ring, along with a ring that looks just like her wedding ring but isn't (as Douglas Medin and his colleagues did [1999]), and most likely she will refuse. When people feel themselves to be completely fused with a group defined by its sacred values, they commit acts that most others would not. They become what Atran calls "devoted actors," who are unconditionally committed to their sacred values, and they are willing to die for them.

Beyond these five points, one can say that religious beliefs are always in effect secondary to what we know about the everyday natural world. The everyday world always matters. You must still stop at stoplights, study for exams, and feed the dog. Someone who prayed that their car

would stop without braking would seem mad, not devout. Ditto for a student who prayed to turn in a paper without writing one or a dog-owner who prayed that the dog would get fed without filling up the dinner bowl. There is, indeed, a famous Islamic hadith about this. “Anas ibn Malik reported: A man said, ‘O Messenger of Allah, should I tie my camel and trust in Allah, or should I leave her untied and trust in Allah?’ The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings upon him, said, ‘Tie her and trust in Allah’” (Jami‘ at-Tirmidhi, hadith 2517). Focus on God, the hadith says, but do not forget to tie up your camel. The mundane everyday world is a given. In some sense, it is always prior.

Van Leeuwen (2014: 701) calls this “continual reality tracking.” Children who play at giving their teddy bear a bath may wash Teddy with pretend soap and dry him with a pretend towel. They may give Teddy a playdough cookie for his bedtime snack and mop up the pretend milk from the floor where he spilled it. They will behave as if all these pretend items were real. But if an adult takes a real bite out of that playdough cookie, this startles the child (Golomb and Kuersten 1996). The psychologist Paul Harris (2000) uses this example to point out that make-believe never fully replaces the everyday world. The factual composition of the playdough is not food—and the child knows it. In the same way, praying to solve an everyday problem—the dog is hungry, the paper is due on Monday—never fully replaces the need to act in the everyday world.

Of course, there are counterexamples. Snake-handling sects encourage congregants to hold copperheads and swallow strychnine to demonstrate that, as Mark 16:18 suggests, they can pick up snakes and drink deadly poison without harm (Covington 1995). Christian Science encourages congregants to refuse medical care on the grounds that it should be God alone who heals. In 1997, a cult called Heaven’s Gate persuaded thirty-nine people that if they downed barbiturates and vodka, they would leave behind their bodies to join a spaceship riding behind a comet’s tail. Yet these counterexamples are relatively rare. Most people behave as if there are ordinary expectations about how the world works, and that special expectations associated with spirits become meaningful and relevant only at special times and in special ways (see Taves 2009b).

This is my puzzle: People may talk as if the gods are straightforwardly real, but they don’t act that way—not in the Bible Belt, not in medieval

England, not in Fiji, and not among the Nuer. People behave as if making invisible others real enough to impact one's life in a positive way takes effort, as if one has to learn to think in certain way and—in consequence—to behave as if invisible others are not real in the way that ordinary objects are real. They seem to treat gods and spirits with different ontological attitudes than they do things of the everyday world.

DOUBTING THOMAS—AND TOMÁS, AND THOMASZ, AND TOMASSO

When I argue that people must work hard to keep their gods real, anthropologists often respond, yes, what you say is true for modern Christians in the secular United States, but it is not true of people in traditional societies that have never been secular. “Believing in” is something Christians and Westerners worry about, but not other people. For example, Aparecida Vilaça (2013: 362) once objected that American evangelicals might doubt, but not the Amazonian Wari’: “questions of the kind posed by Luhrmann vis-à-vis her material only make sense within a cultural frame informed by a very specific notion of personhood.” In other words, people only doubt that spirits are real in modern, secular, individualist societies. Yet Vilaça’s own ethnography suggests that in some ways, the Wari’ behave as if the spirits’ existence depends upon the way people treat them—and that spirits are real for humans in a different way than the ordinary objects people can see.

First of all, the Wari’ need to be shown the spirits. The arrival of spirits is theatrical and mimed.

One day in 2003 I asked the jaguar-shaman Orowam, whom I call grandfather, whether I could film a conversation with him about jaguars and their world. He sat on a wooden trunk close to his house and I positioned myself in front of him with my video camera on a tripod next to me. Several people sat around Orowam to hear him speak. After a long silence, Orowam began to look to his left and talk in a low voice, and immediately all of those on that side ran away, especially the children, shooed away by their parents. From the comments, I understood that the jaguars were

present, arriving from that direction. Not knowing what to do, I remained seated looking towards Orowam, until he turned towards me and began to tell me what the jaguars were saying. They asked him who I was. He replied that I was his granddaughter. Again he looked to his left, listened and turned back to me, saying that they wanted to know what I would give as a present for filming. I answered. Turning to the jaguars, he repeated my response in a loud voice: “a shirt,” she said. Both the dialogues were spoken in the Wari’ language. The three of us (or more, since a group of jaguars was involved) talked like this for about fifteen minutes, after which the jaguars left. The others then drew near again, surrounding Orowam and remarking on what had happened. Nobody, as far as I could tell, doubted the presence of the jaguars. (Vilaça 2013: 361)

The Wari’ may not be voicing doubt: but the shaman is certainly going to lengths to demonstrate the invisible spirit’s presence. The shaman points with his eyes, speaks out loud in dialogue, and reports the invisible other’s speech. It is a skilled, practiced performance. The Wari’ need this kind of performance because spirits are not present to the senses in ordinary ways. Spirits are different in kind from ordinary objects, and the behavior of the Wari’ expresses that.

Praying and Preying, Vilaça’s 2016 book, shows that the Wari’ do just as much active keeping-spirits-in-mind work as my evangelicals did for God. In the pre-Christian Wari’ community, there were endless rules about relationships with animals, often presented via myth-like stories. Vilaça writes that people explain, “It was also essential for prey to be roasted and eaten quickly. Immortal, the animals would return to their houses after being eaten completely, and would even ignore the predation, telling their own relatives that the injuries to their body (caused by arrows) had come from getting scratched in the forest” (2016: 198–99). Doing these things of course is an act of pointing to the presence of spirits—look, I am roasting the meat quickly, because that is what the spirits want. The difference is that for US Christians, the drawing of attention happens through church, housegroups, Bible reading, and prayer. Among the Wari’, it happens through shamans, who admonish children not to play in the river (because the river might house the spirits of dead Wari’), insist on specific behaviors at meals (like eating quickly), explain

illness as spirit-related, and so forth. Vilaça writes, “In the diverse curing sessions that I saw during my initial field research, the shamans, usually working in pairs, would make long moralizing discourses to all those present, saying that people could not eat such and such an animal” (2016: 199). When Wari’ no longer keep the food taboos, they say, the animal spirits disappear. Vilaça quotes a Wari’ man: “The animals’ doubles [their supernatural spirits] have vanished. . . . We are completely white” (2016: 243). In short, the Wari’ talk as if spirits only become relevant, and may even only become real, when humans call them properly and treat them appropriately.

Even among the Wari’, then, there is a sense that someone needs to be in the right frame of mind to enable the spirits to be present. The Wari’ talk as if they need to pay attention and to behave as if the spirits are real in order to make them present in their lives. If people don’t do that, the spirits disappear.

In fact people often behave as if gods and spirits are real only under certain conditions. That is what the anthropologist Rita Astuti saw when she went to do her fieldwork among the Vezo, a small Malagasy fishing community at the edge of the sea. The Vezo told her that after death, people become ancestors and communicate through dreams: “In dreams, the dead can be seen with their original body form, they can talk and be heard, they can move and be seen, they can touch and be felt” (Astuti 2007: 231). And yet the Vezo also clearly thought that the dead just die. Carrying a corpse, the Vezo laughed at Astuti when she wondered whether the dead woman would be warmer by the fire. Dressing the dead woman, someone remarked that she wouldn’t need a bra because although her breasts were large, she “would have no chance to swing them around” where she was going (2007: 234). Everything survived, it seemed, but nothing did.

So what in fact *did* they believe? Astuti worked with Paul Harris to develop two death stories. In one, people were told that Rumpy was a hardworking man who’d fallen ill with a fever and had been taken to the hospital; there, although the doctor gave him four injections, he died three days later of malaria. In the other, a man called Rapeto, with many children and grandchildren, died at home among them, and after his death they dreamed about him and built him an ancestral tomb. After hearing one of the two stories, subjects were asked what “still worked”?

They were asked about bodily functions (does his heart still beat? do his eyes work?) and mental ones (does he miss his children? does he know his wife's name?). Regardless of which story they heard, people said that most functions no longer worked, but that more of the mental ones did than the bodily ones. They also said that significantly more functions worked for Rapeto than for Rampy. That is, when people were reminded of their religious ideas, the dead man seemed less like a corpse and more like an ancestor. Astuti and Harris concluded that

Vezo do not believe in the existence and power of the ancestors in the abstract, but they believe in them when their attention is on tombs that have to be built, on dreams that have to be interpreted, and on illnesses that have to be explained and resolved. In other contexts, death is represented as a total annihilation, and in these contexts it would be misleading to insist that Vezo believe in the existence of ancestral spirits. (2008: 734)

It is a striking claim: in ordinary contexts, reminded of ordinary events, the Vezo do not think and act as if they believe in spirits.

Indeed, the head of Astuti's adoptive family addressed the dead during a major ritual and ended his delivery with a joke: "It's over, and there is *not* going to be a reply!" (Astuti 2007: 241). People laughed, Astuti said, because as the ritual draws to a close, they "shift out of the frame of mind that has sustained the one-way conversation with the dead and they come to recognize the slight absurdity of what they are doing" (2007: 241). This is not a perspective in which religious commitment is a thing in the world, like a sofa in the living room, and either you have it or you don't. From this perspective, faith is an act of paying attention, and it is hard to sustain because in many ways faith flouts facts. *It's over, and there is not going to be a reply.*

In a later essay, Pascal Boyer makes the point in his characteristically clear way: "The world over, people do not (easily) believe in gods and spirits."

Observing rituals in the flesh, so to speak, one is bound to derive the . . . impression, that beliefs are often an occasional and elusive consequence of ceremonies rather than their foundation. Indeed, if beliefs were as straightforward as Lévi-Strauss (and many others) assume, rituals would be quite strikingly inefficient. As my colleague Denis Vidal once put it,

if it takes a whole night of scripted ritualized behavior and 10,000 verses of opaque speech to cure a common cold, then calling all this “efficacité” seems a bit of a stretch. (2013: 350–51)

What rituals do is to remind people that gods and spirits matter. Rituals describe the gods, talk about the narrative in which the gods are embedded, get people to sing and pray and dance and enter states in which that which must be represented in their imagination (because the gods, of course, are invisible) can sometimes be experienced in the world.

Initially, spirits may or may not be around. But after the whole night of ritual and the 10,000 verses, to some people at some junctures this conjectural representation becomes more vivid, more accessible, is associated with actual experience, is given some explanatory power—in other words is potentially turned into what we commonly call a belief. (2013: 351–52)

People need rituals because people do not in fact treat their religious beliefs—their conjectures, Boyer calls them—that a helpful god is real the same way they treat their beliefs that trees grow upward and coconuts fall down. They need to be reminded that spirits are present, and they need to act in order to get them to respond. This is particularly true for helpful gods and spirits. The idea that there is an invisible other who takes an active, loving interest in your life is in many ways preposterous and takes effort to maintain, even in a community that has never been secular. It takes intention and attention. It requires a frame of mind in which one remembers and anticipates as if gods and spirits matter.

KINDS OF REALNESS

To be clear, it does seem likely that people in different cultures think about realness in different sorts of ways. The anthropologist Jonathan Mair opens an essay with a wry observation that public debates about religion often seem to consist of people shouting at each other without any sense of what the other party is saying. The New Atheists (Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and so forth) insist that what Christians say and do should be taken as evidence of what they

think—and that what they think is simply wrong-headed. The Christians writing back against them (he mentions Karen Armstrong and Mark Vernon) retort that Christianity is not about propositions at all, but rather about truths that are more transcendent, symbolic, and nonliteral. “The result,” Mair comments, “is a loud conversation at cross purposes” (2013: 449). That’s because, he argues, they think about realness differently. The two sides don’t hear each other properly because they live in different “cultures of belief.”

In his thoughtful essay *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?* the classicist Paul Veyne remarks that in classical antiquity belief-like assertions were social assertions that interlocutors did not take to refer to the everyday world in the same way that later Europeans would assume that they did. “The Greeks believe and do not believe their myths. They believe in them, but they use them and cease believing at the point where their interest in believing ends” (1988: 84). All humans, he writes, hold contradictory commitments. These different commitments are managed with what he calls different “truth programs”: different sets of ideas, practices, and interests that belong together in some social world and are held with a particular attitude. “A Greek put the gods ‘in heaven,’ but he would have been astounded to see them in the sky. He would have been no less astounded if someone, using time in its literal sense, told him that Hephaestus had just remarried or that Athena had aged a great deal lately” (1988: 18).

I take Philippe Descola’s ([2005] 2013) project to be an effort to give more comparative depth and specificity to these observations. He takes as his central pivot the way social worlds distinguish between what is of the human and what is not: culture and nature, which to Descola is the great divide. His point is that the line must be drawn by all people—but that they draw it in different ways. It was the Enlightenment that made nature nonagentic, objective, and thus free of human intention, and changed forever the ontological commitments of the West. Animist worlds imagined human-like intentions throughout the world, so that all objects had agency and were different merely in their appearances. A totemic world understood shared human-like agency only in humans and a limited number of nonhuman animals and objects with which these humans identified. And other worlds made complex mappings by analogy, all different from each other. When the naturalism of the post-

Enlightenment world in effect strips mind from nature, he argues, humans then feel the right to pillage the world around them. These are cultural differences in what is real, in what way, and for whom.

There are, in short, varied ways that people judge the relationship between things of the everyday world and what the faith frame treats as real, even if spirits and everyday things are always differently real. It seems likely that Western culture invites people to make a realness judgment categorically: real or not real. That is Descola's point. The naturalness of the post-Enlightenment world creates a material world that is real and is fundamentally different from the stuff of the mind. Ultimately, G. E. R. Lloyd (2018) remarks, this is our legacy from the Greeks. Other cultures may be more likely to invite people to make that judgment on a continuum: more or less real. And so Western cultures likely worry about realness in a different way than many other peoples. The evidence still suggests that invisible beings are understood as differently real from everyday objects everywhere. It is just that gods and spirits are likely differently real from everyday objects in different places in different ways.

AND THEN THE DEVIL

It also seems likely that it is more difficult to sustain faith in a loving god than in a demonic spirit. That may seem counterintuitive. Belief in a loving god should comfort, while a demon scarcely can. And yet fear may be harder to discount than love, and the love of a god may seem frankly implausible.

In many modern evangelical churches, sin and judgment have almost vanished. These churches usually present themselves as reaching out to the unchurched, and they offer to potential converts a god who never judges, never punishes, and always loves. "From love, with love, and for love" was the way the evangelical prayer group I joined described the way we should experience our relationship with God. So, too, the book that has sold more hardback copies in the United States than any other single text aside from the Bible, *The Purpose Driven Life*: "Because God is love, the most important lesson he wants you to learn on earth is how to love" (Warren 2002: 123). Many people find it hard to take that kind

of joyful promise seriously. Warren's book is sold as a workbook, with lessons and practices at the end of every chapter. He assumes that most Christians give lip service to these concepts but find them difficult to believe for themselves.

Meanwhile, the fear of dangerous invisible others is difficult to suppress. As Boyer points out in *Religion Explained*, humans are sharply aware of danger. He argues that what Barrett (2004) later called a hyperactive-agency-detector (the striking human tendency to see agents everywhere) evolved out of the need to avoid predators. Something goes wrong—a crash, a rustle in the bushes, a dark and lonely road—and humans look for an agent that could harm them.

In a conference in Finland in 2016, I heard a panel in which four papers explored spirits in different villages. Jon Mitchell described a Neolithic temple on Malta that had recently become a site for Marian pilgrimage, and Helen Cornish described the visitors to a museum of witchcraft who wanted to feel the uncanny. In both cases, they found people who wanted to feel spirits yet often did not. Two more papers described spirits that no one—including the locals—wanted to believe might be there and yet none of them, including the anthropologists, could entirely discount. Alex Aisher spoke about work with an animist people in northern India, and Callum Pierce described work in a predominantly Tibetan Buddhist village. Both related, with poignant anxiety, just how hard it was to ignore the local mutterings about malignant spirits, even when the locals refused to say that the spirits were real. A capricious spirit who wreaks havoc with one's crops or boats feels more plausible than one who promises a perfect harvest. A judgmental god who punishes might seem more realistic—more in accord with the world as it is—than a god who promises eternal joy. Fear of the unknown and dangerous can be difficult to disavow.

I propose that there is a *continuum of plausibility* for invisible spirits. At one end, there are spiritual worlds dominated by nonomniscient, capricious spirits whom humans fear. At the other end, there are spiritual worlds dominated by loving, monotheistic gods who promise a justice sometimes at odds with the earthly experience of the faithful. They are the “big gods” Ara Norenzayan (2013) describes: omniscient, omnipotent, and just. As one moves along the continuum from the capricious spirits toward the big gods, belief in the invisible others requires more

effort to sustain. That may in fact be the reason the big gods have the social effects that Norenzayan describes. These big gods arguably demand more overt signals of commitment that do many smaller gods—everyone has to go to church, fast on certain days, make specific pilgrimages. He argues that as societies adopt omniscient gods, people trust members of the group more readily—and that trust enables the growth of larger social worlds. That creates more overt testimony and, perhaps, more overt signals of trustworthiness. Someone who asserts a belief in Jesus also, in doing so, asserts a belief that wrongdoing will be known and punished.

Not all faiths are represented on this continuum, nor does the continuum presuppose a common way of thinking. Every faith has its own conception of the good life and a distinctive moral end toward which it aims. For each faith, that moral end is framed against a supernatural world of more or less active spiritual beings that are managed in various ways. Thai Buddhists, for example, reject the idea of an overarching god who sees all things, and yet they live in a world teeming with ghosts. They reach for the good life by representing human experience as a life of suffering. Yet across these faiths runs a common thread: that which we fear is more believable than that for which we yearn. The god who will curse you if you do not propitiate him is more difficult to ignore than the god who promises a golden world without end.

THE FAITH FRAME

These observations suggest that those who are religious behave as if they have a faith frame as well as an ordinary set of expectations about an everyday world: a mode of thinking in which gods and spirits really matter, and a mode of thinking about the ordinary world of rocks and dogs and what to buy at the store. I use the word “faith” here, because belief is a promiscuous word. “Belief” refers to any kind of claim, intuitive or deliberative, that there might be an invisible spirit. By “faith” I mean a sustained, intentional, deliberative commitment to the idea that there are invisible beings who are involved in human lives in helpful ways. To operate in the real, everyday world while maintaining the idea that there is an invisible other who takes an active, loving interest in your

life, people of faith adopt a mode of thinking and interpreting, a set of expectations and memories, in which gods and spirits matter.

In this way of thinking and interpreting, people hold gods and spirits in their awareness as if those gods and spirits are present and engaged. When they do that, all kind of memories, understandings, expectations, and hopes become salient. They think about what those gods and spirits might want, how they might please those gods and spirits, where those beings might be and what they might be thinking, and so forth. And of course, thinking this way even when feeding the dog, driving to the market, or shrugging on a coat is a goal in many sacred books. In Islam one should be *taqwa*, conscious and cognizant of God, or *muraqabah*, aware that Allah is watching. The Hebrew Bible instructs people to set their mind and seek the Lord (1 Chronicles 22:19); the New Testament, to rejoice always and to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:16). Perform every action, says the Bhagavad Gita (2:48), with your heart set on the Supreme Lord. It is a point out of Mary Douglas ([1966] 2002): faith is a shift in attention that reframes.

This, as I have been arguing, can be hard. People can function quite effectively in the world without thinking about gods and spirits, and often they do—even when they are ostensibly religious. It can take effort to wrench their attention toward gods and spirits and away from the demands of making breakfast for the kids and clearing the kitchen sink. In an all-night drumming ceremony, or in a church or temple, it can be easier to turn one's mind to gods and spirits. And once people do pay attention, of course, those gods and spirits can seem *more* real than the messy sink. But rituals do not last forever, and people often talk and act as if they need to cultivate the right way of paying attention to their gods and spirits—because otherwise it can feel as if gods and spirits are not real at all. The everyday expectations are always relevant—the messy sink is there, demanding action—but the faith frame is not always relevant.

The challenge, then, for those who want to be faithful is to think with the faith frame as much as they can, despite how easy it can be to get distracted or discouraged, despite the competition from and contradictions of the everyday. The best comparison for this task is play: an as-if frame in which someone acts according to the expectations of the play frame, while still remaining aware of the realities of the everyday world.

A SERIOUS PLAY

To choose to think with the faith frame is a decision to enter into another mode of thinking about reality that calls on the resources of the imagination to reorganize what is fundamentally real and that exists in tension with the ordinary expectations of everyday reality. This involves a shift in perspective similar to the shift in and out of imaginative play—except that the play claims are also serious claims about the world.

I am not the first to note this relationship between faith and play: many anthropological observers (among them Peter Stromberg, Don Handelman, Jean Briggs, Michael Puett, and indeed my own early work) have seen that the sacred has a play-like quality. The point about play is that it is distinct from nonplay: a “free activity,” as the historian Johan Huizinga defined it in *Homo Ludens*, “standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious,’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly” ([1938] 1971: 13). When dogs play, they crouch to signal the play and then bare their teeth ferociously—but they do not bite. When children play, they too often signal the play—“Let’s play!”—and they can then become pirates on the high seas on the living room couch. The anthropologist Gregory Bateson ([1972] 2000) talked about this as a layering of interpretive frames. There is a “play-frame” and a “reality frame,” and when we play, we act within the play frame. We bathe the teddy bear in invisible water, and we dry him off with a towel of air, and we are not confused when our hands do not get wet.

Faith is like that in many ways. It is, as Adam Seligman and his colleagues (2008) say about ritual, an as-if, subjunctive mode, superimposed upon the indicative everyday thereness of the messy sink. When people act within a faith frame, they engage an ontological attitude in which they act as if something were true—that there is an invisible person who loves them or judges them or is willing to protect them—and they seek to take it seriously despite their knowledge that this as-if sits uneasily with the world they see and know. They set out to be the people they would be if they truly took seriously the lessons of the Bible or the Qu’ran or the promises of ancestors. And yet they also live within the reality frame of the world as it is. They must pick up the dry-cleaning, organize lunch money, and, in the case of Astuti’s Vezo, recognize that the

dead are dead and, in the ordinary course of things, there will not be a reply. People of faith live, in effect, on two levels, just as the child washing the teddy bear lives on two levels, attending to two different ways of making sense of the world. They behave (as Van Leeuwen puts it) as if they map the world in two different ways. It is hard because there are a lot of ordinary things to take care of that draw attention away from the faith frame; it is hard because it is difficult to be that person who is always compassionate and responsible. It is not easy to remember that you are protected by a mighty god when you are driving home for dinner and there is an accident on the bridge *again*.

And so the purpose of this book is to explain how this play-like stance, this as-if commitment, this faith frame comes to feel like it is not play but real. Belief in a just, fair, and good world is not some kind of mistake, not a deluded misconception that observers need to explain, but the fundamental point of the faith commitment: belief *despite*. Faith is about being able to keep gods and spirits somehow vital even when the crops rot, the child dies, and the war ends in dust and blood. Faith is about holding certain commitments front and center in one's understanding of reality even when the empirical facts seem to contradict them or just demand attention in different ways. Faith is about having trust that the world is good, safe, and beautiful—a world in which justice is triumphant, enemies are thwarted, and you can thrill at the delicate beauty of the day. It is about seeing the world as it is and experiencing it—to some extent—as it should be. To do that, people need to superimpose their faith frame upon an everyday frame. They can do that more effectively when gods and spirits feel real to them. We now turn to the specific ways that people learn to pay attention so that they kindle that sense of realness, so that the play-like faith frame comes to seem more like the everyday and gods and spirits feel alive.

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