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> 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

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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 Rampy 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"?

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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,

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> 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

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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-

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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

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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

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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

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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.

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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

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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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