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Religious Fictionalism¹

By Michael Scott and Finlay Malcolm

[forthcoming in *Philosophy Compass*]

Abstract: Religious fictionalism is the theory that it is morally and intellectually legitimate to affirm religious sentences, and to engage in public and private religious practices, without believing the content of religious claims. This article discusses the main features of fictionalism, contrasts hermeneutic and revolutionary kinds of fictionalism, and explores possible historical and recent examples of religious fictionalism. Such examples are found in recent theories of faith, pragmatic approaches to religion, and mystical traditions in religious theology.

1. INTRODUCTION

Religious fictionalism is the theory that it is morally and intellectually legitimate to affirm religious sentences without believing the content of what is said.² Additionally, religious fictionalists propose that it is similarly legitimate to engage in public and private religious practices, such as the observation of religious festivals, going to church, or prayer, without having religious beliefs. In general, fictionalists take the benefits of religious engagement to be available to those who do not believe that the claims of religion are true, or even to those that believe these claims are in error. Beyond these points, however, there are significant theoretical differences in the ways in which religious fictionalism has been developed. In what follows, we will look to explain the theory, consider examples of religious fictionalism, and contrast it with other theories of religious discourse to show how fictionalism is distinctive. We will also find that some theories of religious discourse, even though they are not presented in this guise, plausibly qualify as fictionalist.

2. PRELIMINARY DISTINCTIONS

Fictionalism has been defended for a number of different domains of philosophical interest, including ethics, mathematics, modality and science. A precursor to the lively modern debate about fictionalism is Vaihinger (1924); as we will see, however, there are candidates for religious fictionalism that can be found in much earlier writings.

A widely used distinction across all the domains in which fictionalism is defended is between hermeneutic and revolutionary types of fictionalism. Hermeneutic fictionalists purport to describe current practice: speakers, when they engage in the target discourse, are not committed to the existence of the things that the discourse describes. Hermeneutic fictionalism about God-talk proposes, for instance, that the utterance

- (1) God created the universe

¹ This is an uncorrected pre-print version. When citing please use the final journal version.

² We take a religious sentence to be one that posits or describes a religious property, agent or state of affairs; particular attention is usually given to sentences about God.

may be sincerely affirmed without the speaker believing that God created the universe. Revolutionary fictionalists, in contrast, propose a revision to current practice. The commitments that speakers currently may have to the truth of the claims of the target discourse are misplaced and should be jettisoned. Speakers should, however, continue to engage with the discourse without believing it. To be a revolutionary fictionalist about talk concerning Fs, therefore, is to take the view that sentences about Fs should not be believed (either because we should be agnostic about them or, more boldly, because they are false) and also the view that talk about Fs should not be eliminated. In the case of religion, revolutionary fictionalism occupies a particularly interesting theoretical position: its supporters treat reasons for not believing as insufficient to show that one should not continue to engage in religious discourse and practice.³

If the sentences of the discourse should not be believed what attitude should be taken? A widely proposed answer is *non-doxastic acceptance*. To accept *p* is to go along with *p*, and to take *p* as a premise in one's theoretical and practical reasoning (see Cohen 1992, 4). For instance, according to van Fraassen's constructive empiricism,⁴ when a scientist says

(2) Quarks exist

she should accept rather than believe that quarks exist. Why accept claims that we should not believe? Fictionalists typically point to their pragmatic benefits. For example, accepting that there are theoretical entities such as quarks facilitates useful predictions. Theories may be accepted because they are 'empirically adequate', as van Fraassen argues, without theorists believing that they are true. In general, revolutionary fictionalists need to make a case for the pragmatic advantages of accepting claims that should not be believed. We will turn to the religious corollary of this in Section 3. Hermeneutic fictionalism, in contrast, needs to show that the claims of the disputed discourse are – as a matter of current linguistic practice – accepted rather than believed; their usefulness, therefore, is a separate issue.⁵

Revolutionary fictionalists propose that one may engage in religious discourse without believing that what one says is true, so they need to explain why this is not endorsing outright deceit. Since asserting a sentence appears conventionally to express belief in its truth,⁶ then affirming (1) – speaking as a fictionalist – better not be asserting what it appears to say. Two main solutions have been proposed. One option, influenced by David Lewis' treatment of fiction (1978), is that utterances of the disputed discourse should be understood as containing a silent operator whereby they are true *in the fiction that...* or *according to the theory that...*. For example, on one fictionalist treatment of modality, saying 'possibly *p*' should be interpreted as

³ The hermeneutic/revolutionary terminology comes from Burgess (1983). A third arm to the fictionalist taxonomy – 'evaluative fictionalism' – has been recently proposed by Jay (2014, 211-212), in which fictionalist engagement in the domain is seen as a *pro tanto* good, but not sufficient to recommend engagement all things considered. A fourth variety is 'hypothetical fictionalism' proposed by Sauchelli (forthcoming), which is a contextualist account, advising a fictionalist stance towards propositions from a domain only in certain contexts, but not in others.

⁴ Although van Fraassen did not describe this theory as fictionalist it can be seen as a fictionalist account of scientific discourse about theoretical entities. For an overview see Liggins (2012).

⁵ Separate but related: hermeneutic fictionalists need an account of what norms inform the acceptance or rejection of sentences of the discourse if speakers do not believe them and pragmatic considerations may come into play to address this issue.

⁶ See Scott (2016) for discussion and qualifications.

‘according to the theory of possible worlds, p is true in some possible world’.⁷ Similarly, for religious fictionalism, (1) might be interpreted as a *façon de parler* for (something like)

(1*) According to the Christian fiction, God created the world.

Robin LePoidevin is sympathetic to this approach, proposing the following construction: ‘any given theological statement p is true if and only if it is true in the theological fiction that p ’ (2016, 178). However, difficulties with the silent operator theory that have been raised in the literature on ethical fictionalism look similarly challenging for the case of religion (see Joyce 2005). For example, (1) along with

(3) 23% of the universe is made of dark matter.

(4) God created a universe that is made of 23% dark matter.

appears to be a valid argument. However, if (1) and (4) are interpreted in line with the silent operator theory the argument is invalid. Moreover, unless the theological fictions is extended to include claims about dark matter, the interpretation appears to render (4) false. A second option is to say that fictionalists quasi-assert rather than assert the sentences of the discourse: quasi-assertion is a speech act that behaves similarly to assertion but does not commit the speaker to the truth of what is said. One contender for quasi-assertion – we will consider others presently – is *pretend assertion*. So, when the religious fictionalist says that ‘God exists’, she does not express the belief that God exists, because she only pretends to assert that God exists. Peter Lipton (2007) appears more sympathetic to this way of developing religious fictionalism.

Fictionalism is distinct from other ‘anti-realist’ accounts of religious language (for a detailed review of the field see Scott 2013 and 2017). To the extent that religious realists treat religious discourse at face-value, they agree on certain key points with fictionalists. For instance, both reject reductionist approaches that give non-religious (often naturalistic) truth-conditions for religious sentences.⁸ Religious sentences, fictionalists agree, should be treated at face-value as having their apparent subject matter. Fictionalists eschew the reinterpretation or substantial revision to the central claims of the religious tradition at issue.⁹ Similarly, fictionalists reject non-cognitivist theories of religious language that propose that sentences like (1) do not represent a religious subject matter but instead expresses the speaker’s awe, wonder, or perhaps some emotion towards God.¹⁰ Where fictionalist and realist disagree is on the *use* of religious sentences and specifically the attitude that speakers have or should have towards them:

⁷ For more detailed accounts see Rosen (1990) and Divers (1999).

⁸ Take, for example, Spinoza’s claim that ‘By God’s direction I mean the fixed and immutable order of Nature, or chain of natural events’ (2002, 417).

⁹ For this reason proposals by theologians – notably Feuerbach, Strauss and Kafuman (1981) among many others – to eliminate supernatural commitments by reinterpreting the meanings of religious sentences or by revising doctrine should be seen as part of a distinct tradition from religious fictionalism.

¹⁰ Braithwaite (1955) is an interesting case here. His interpretation of many religious utterances such as (1) as ‘declarations of commitments to a way of life’ (1955, 15) appears to be straightforwardly non-cognitivist. However, he also allows for descriptive religious discourse – talk about religious figures, parables, accounts of the creation, etc. – that he says are ‘stories’ that should not be believed but that provide instructive models of good behaviour. His treatment of this latter region of religious discourse looks more in line with fictionalism.

realists take speakers to assert and believe the (indicative) religious sentences that they utter, whereas fictionalists take them to quasi-assert and accept those sentences.

We will look at some reasons in favour of revolutionary fictionalism. We then consider some worked out examples of the theory, before looking at a close relation to revolutionary fictionalism sometimes called ‘conservationism’. We then address several cases of hermeneutic fictionalism.

3. THE UTILITY OF RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

Evidently, one component of the thesis of religious fictionalists (that they share with atheists and agnostics) is that the claims of religious discourse should not be believed. This is, of course, a substantial and contentious issue in its own right but not one that we will pursue in this paper. Let us suppose that there are reasons for either not believing or disbelieving that any of the things posited in religious discourse – God, miracles, angels, grace, spirits, etc. – exist. What is distinctive about religious fictionalism is the contention that considerations about the pragmatic merits of engaging in religion should trump concerns about the truth of religion. Specifically, these considerations are sufficiently compelling that we should prefer the continued engagement with religious discourse rather than its elimination.¹¹

One promising place to start is with the role of religious discourse and practice in supporting ethical standards. Religious texts provide ethical guidance in the form of stories of good practice and of reward and punishment that can help direct one’s thoughts and practical decision making and strengthen one’s resolve against weakness of the will (for a comparable argument about ethical fictionalism, see Joyce 2002). Religious stories, particularly when bound together as incidents in the life of a religious figure, can provide models of good behaviour that are more memorable and engaging to the imagination and stimulating to one’s actions than bare moral principles. As Ronald Hepburn puts it, ‘the Old and New Testaments *as a whole* (and other religious documents) provide a single extended ‘story’ or ‘myth’ or set of symbols, depicting a pattern of life and giving the same sort of aids to keen self-knowledge, and stimulus to moral effort, as the parable proper gives. The moral pattern of life is the fundamental thing: the story its vehicle.’ (1959, 191-92)¹²

J. S. Mill’s *Three Essays on Religion* is also notable here. Although Mill is critical of some supposed positive moral effects of religion, he concedes that the standard of excellence and models for imitation provided by a perfect being and by religious figures, ‘give an increase of force’ and stimulation of ‘aspirations towards goodness’ that go ‘beyond what they can receive from reference to a merely ideal conception.’ (2009, 213) He concludes, ‘the influences of religion on the character which will remain after rational criticism has done its utmost against the evidences of religion, are well worth preserving’ (215). Mill also proposes that religious ideas can have beneficial effects on our imaginations and hopes: ‘the indulgence of hope with regard to the government of the universe and the destiny of man after death, while we recognize as a clear truth that we have no ground for more than a hope, is legitimate and philosophically

¹¹ The revolutionary fictionalist case is usually presented defensively as justification for a current disbeliever or non-believer to remain engaged in religious discourse and practice, rather than showing that current disbelievers or non-believers ought to engage in religion.

¹² Hepburn’s combination of disbelief in central Christian doctrines combined with the case he makes for their practical value makes him a plausible candidate as a religious fictionalist.

defensible.’ (211) For instance, hope for an afterlife can cultivate the improvement of character until the end of one’s life.

Some recent authors defend fictionalist engagement in religion as a guide to moral and practical decision making. Peter Lipton suggests that one ‘immerse’ oneself in the religion by ‘entering the form of religious practice and religious thought...[which involves] participation and a kind of commitment to action’ (2007, 43). Robin LePoidevin proposes that engagement with certain religious practices like worship and prayer may refine our emotional responses to others and attitudes towards ourselves: ‘in so doing we allow ourselves to become emotionally involved, to the extent that a religious service is capable of being an intense experience...What remains, when the game of make-believe is over, is an awareness of our responsibilities for ourselves and others, of the need to pursue spiritual goals, and so on’ (Le Poidevin 1996, 119). Andrew Eshleman claims that ‘inhabiting the time-tested world of religious narrative and imagery is a valuable means of structuring one’s life around a conception of the good and of bringing about a corresponding transformation of one’s character’ (2005, 188).¹³ For religion to effectively guide our moral and practical actions, Eshleman proposes that the fictionalist ‘inhabit’ the religious narrative and worldview. On these accounts, which are to some extent influenced by Kendall Walton’s (1990) writings on the role of immersion and make-believe in fiction, one not only continues to use religious claims in discourse, but fully immerses oneself in religious practice as a means to attain certain benefits, including self-understanding and moral and practical guidance.¹⁴

A deeper enjoyment of certain aesthetic experiences has also been proposed as an advantage of religious fictionalism. Andrea Sauchelli argues that ‘many religious works of art could not be (fully) appreciated if they were not properly understood from within a specific religious perspective’ (forthcoming). Works of art with a religious subject matter are widespread across times and cultures and often represent some of the world’s finest artworks. Sauchelli maintains that taking on a ‘fictionalist stance towards certain aspects of the religious beliefs in question would result in an increased level of understanding of the works in question and thus, probably, a more rewarding artistic and aesthetic experience’. However, some caution is needed here. Revolutionary fictionalism with respect to some given field of discourse is set up against the convention of speakers making assertions and believing what they say. Fictionalists then defend the legitimacy of sustained engagement with the discourse by quasi-asserting without belief. Imaginative indulgence in a distant culture for the purposes of aesthetic appreciation is not, therefore, fictionalism; nor does play acting or participating in a battle re-enactment require one to be a fictionalist, although some of the imaginative processes in these activities may be exploited by the fictionalist to explain her position.

Here are two outstanding issues for revolutionary religious fictionalism. First, can a discourse the claims of which one does not actually believe provide a satisfactory basis for guiding and motivating one’s judgements (and thereby yield the practical benefits that fictionalists claim)? To some extent, the theory of immersion in a fiction is intended to address this concern: one may emotionally engage in a narrative that one does not believe. However, this

¹³ Eshleman’s work has been discussed in more depth in a recent critique from Cordry (2010) and response from Eshleman (2010).

¹⁴ A similar account can be found in the work of Don Cupitt (1980). See Le Poidevin (1996, 112-114) for discussion of Cupitt’s theory.

leaves the problem of cases where the fiction comes into conflict with what one believes. Natalja Deng has argued that if, for example, fictionalists ‘non-doxastically accept that God forbids them to re-marry (p), they’ll take p into serious consideration when deciding whether to re-marry. But...they cannot base their decision on p . Instead they have to base it on their independent moral belief about whether marrying again is permissible’ (2015, 201). It seems that the fictionalist in this case must either break off engagement with the discourse by consulting what they believe, or else risk doing something that they believe to be immoral. One option suggested by Lipton’s treatment of fictionalism, is to avoid this kind of difficulty by restricting engagement with religion to claims that are not flatly inconsistent with one’s beliefs. However, this strategy will only be effective if the fictionalist does not have many independent beliefs about the topics on which religion pronounces; otherwise, the practical implementation of religious fictionalism will be significantly hampered.¹⁵ Deng’s proposal (2015, 202-03) is that we view the sorts of attitudes involved in fictionalism and our engagement with a discourse not in terms of non-doxastic acceptance, by which we use p as a basis for our practical-reasoning, but in terms of pretence and make-believe. She suggests that with make-believe one immerses oneself in a fiction largely for the experiential and psychological benefits enjoyed by doing so, rather than as a basis for decision making. Conflicts between the individual’s ethical views and the claims of the religious discourse will be less problematic on this approach, which appears most in line with the theory proposed by Le Poidevin.¹⁶

A second problem concerns the norms of the discourse that a fictionalist should obey. If the sentences of religious discourse are not considered true then according to what norm are they accepted or rejected by the fictionalist using the discourse? Where this issue is addressed by religious fictionalists the remarks tend to be brief and programmatic, making it difficult to see how this works in practice. This is particularly an issue when experiences or events require the speaker to go ‘off-piste’ and say something that is not a routine or established part of the fictional narrative. If one can, in these cases, pursue pragmatically guided invention then what preserves the integrity of the discourse? Why not, for instance, mix in a bit of Buddhism, or some choice lessons from the writings of Dostoevsky, if these are deemed to have potentially beneficial effects? The appropriate norms for engaging in fictional religious discourse, therefore, is a currently undeveloped area of the theory.

4. CONSERVATIONISM

A related theory to revolutionary fictionalism, which has been defended recently by Jonas Olson (2014, Ch. 9) for ethical discourse, is *conservationism*. The conservationist agrees with the fictionalist that use of the discourse should be preserved even if the claims that the discourse makes are thought to be in error (so conservationism also rejects eliminativism). The two theories diverge on whether one may continue to believe and assert these claims: fictionalists propose that we quasi-assert the claims of the discourse, whereas conservationists propose that we continue to believe and assert them. In *critical contexts* – the philosophy classroom, for instance – one should recognise that the sentences of the discourse are untrue but when one

¹⁵ A related strategy would be to limit the practical effects of the fictionalist engagement to actions that do not conflict with one’s independently held moral beliefs. This is, of course, also restrictive depending on the moral beliefs in question.

¹⁶ See Eshleman (2016, 167-68) for further discussion.

employs the discourse in uncritical contexts one should put aside sceptical concerns and believe. An advantage of this approach over fictionalism, in the case of moral discourse, is that there would be ‘no need for self-surveillance to prevent slips from pretence moral belief and pretence moral assertion into genuine moral belief and genuine moral assertion’ (Olson 2014, 190). Conservationism therefore recommends that one continue to engage with (the untrue claims of) the discourse in question, but dispenses with the complications of theories of pretence, immersion, hidden operators or quasi-assertion. This theory is particularly attractive when faced with certain psychological objections to fictionalism. Suppose that in a critical context (having read J. L. Mackie’s *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, for instance) you might believe that there is no such thing as moral wrongness, but in practical settings you find yourself believing that a certain harmful act or injustice is morally wrong. Conservationism proposes that this double-mindedness is defensible, and that you may assert that the act is wrong; fictionalism recommends that you should not believe the action to be morally wrong, and should only quasi-assert that it is wrong.

Olson identifies a variety of religious conservationism in treatments of *Pascal’s Wager* (1962). The Wager recommends engaging with religion for prudential reasons, i.e. the benefits of an eternal life of happiness, despite lacking sufficient epistemic reasons for religious belief. The purpose of the engagement, for Pascal, is ‘belief in God, not mere pretence belief’ (Olson 2014, 192). However, Pascal seems to envisage that religious belief emerges in those that live a religious life: one starts the endeavour as a sceptic pursuing religious activities for pragmatic reasons but one comes over time to have religious beliefs. If so, then one would not even in a critical context return to the sceptical approach. Conservationism, in contrast, requires a dual approach: scepticism in critical contexts and belief everywhere else. Conservationism remains an interesting and still largely unexplored theoretical option, however, even if Pascal is not an ideal example.

5. FICTIONALISTS IN THE CLOSET

With religious fictionalism clearly in view, we can see that many current and long-standing views about religious language and practice may be interpreted as fictionalist (or closely related thereof) while not explicitly presented as such. A possible early example is *apophaticism*, a position that was prominent from mid-antiquity to the late medieval period, with notable champions including Dionysius, Maimonides and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. A central idea of apophaticism is that we are unable to mentally or linguistically represent God’s nature. As such, what we say in our attempts to describe God’s nature is untrue. However, apophatic authors show no sign of preferring the elimination of religious discourse or withdrawal from religious practice. In part, this seems to be because even though what we say about God is untrue and should not be believed, the activity of attempting to represent God, and the recognition of its failure, may promote a closer relationship with God. The benefits of continued engagement outweigh the drawback that talk of God does not yield truths. For a much more detailed discussion of this, see Scott and Citron (2016). (Note that insofar as this is religious fictionalism it is restricted to our engagement with God-talk).

A recent theory that may be fictionalist is the *non-doxastic theory of faith* (NDF). The central idea of this popular account of faith is that although some cognitive attitude is required

for propositional faith, this attitude need not be doxastic.¹⁷ Rather, it is sufficient for faith that one accept, assume, suppose, hope or acquiesce to claims from the religious domain. Some theories of non-doxastic faith go further. In his initial formulation of propositional faith, J. L. Schellenberg argued that ‘faith [that *p*] is positively *incompatible* with belief [that *p*]’ (2005, 132). If this is correct then any proposition one has faith toward, when expressed in discourse, will not be believed. For instance, if I have faith that God is merciful, when I say ‘God is merciful’, I do not express belief in this proposition. Since this account was initially published, however, Schellenberg appears to have weakened his stance.¹⁸ He now maintains that NDF is ‘a way of having such faith’ (2013, 262). However, many supporters of NDF take the expression of faith without belief to be widespread. William Alston, for one, admits that he is ‘inclined to think that a sizable proportion of contemporary, sincere, devout Christians are accepters rather than believers’ (2007, 136). Now, to the extent that religious discourse trades in the communication of faithful attitudes, it follows from NDF, since many (if not all) of the faithful do not believe the religious propositions they affirm, that the most charitable interpretation of religious discourse is that it does not conventionally express the beliefs of speakers.¹⁹ When speakers express their faith they are, in effect, quasi-asserting religious sentences. This appears to lend support to a (hermeneutic) variety of religious fictionalism.²⁰

The claim that NDF is a kind of fictionalism has been used as an argument against the theory itself. Malcolm and Scott (forthcoming) use it, along with a variety of objections to NDF, to defend the position that belief is a necessary condition for propositional faith. One possible way to distinguish fictionalism from the faith as described by the supporter of NDF is in terms of the importance placed on *truth* (Malcolm, forthcoming). For the fictionalist, the truth of the claims of the discourse do not alter whether she should engage in it. In contrast, some authors defending NDF have claimed that ‘[w]e do not attribute faith to a person unless the truth or falsity of the proposition involved makes a difference to that person’ (Buchak 2012, 226). So, the two positions are distinct since the truth-value of the proposition(s) in question do not matter to the fictionalist, but they do matter to the person with faith. Although this response seems plausible, some examples suggest that the response is not so straightforward since there appear to be cases of faith without regard for the truth. For instance, when a person believes God exists and this person genuinely loves God but is suffering from a period of depression or akrasia, this person might, temporarily, not care whether God exists. Nevertheless, in virtue of her belief in and love for God it appears that this person should still be attributed with faith. More needs to be said concerning the role of truth in distinguishing NDF from fictionalism. Without a clear

¹⁷ NDF is endorsed by many philosophers, including Alston (1996), Audi (2011), Bishop (2007), Buchak (2012), Howard-Snyder (2013a; 2016), Kvanvig (2013), McKaughan (2013), Schellenberg (2005), and (sometimes) Swinburne (2005). Given that this list is not even exhaustive, NDF may be the most popular theory of faith in the current literature.

¹⁸ He did so following objections made by Howard-Snyder (2013b).

¹⁹ It is possible that NDF is true and that affirming one’s religious faith does conventionally express belief in what one says but this would have the upshot that the communication of faith is (often) insincere: one would be linguistically expressing commitment to belief in a proposition that one need only accept.

²⁰ An important feature of NDF is that faith is incompatible with disbelief, and if this condition is defensible, then a person who has non-doxastic faith can only meet the definition of *agnostic* fictionalism.

and defensible distinction between the two positions, NDF may still be taken to qualify as fictionalist.

Another theory which has components of hermeneutic religious fictionalism is John Hick's pluralistic theory (1989). According to Hick, the world religions are largely in error with the claims they make about the supernatural, and yet Hick does not deny that there is some kind of supernatural realm. He typically refers to this as 'the Real', but advocates engaging with the Real through established religions that have proven themselves to be efficacious, and hence are genuinely directed towards this transcendental Real. To count as efficacious for Hick, a religious tradition must successfully lead to the 'transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness' (36). One can achieve this transformation by simply engaging with the genuine religious tradition as one engages with it traditionally, accepting and using religious discourse in such contexts as prayer and worship.²¹

6. MORE ON HERMENEUTIC RELIGIOUS FICTIONALISM

Unlike the change of attitude recommended by revolutionary fictionalism, hermeneutic fictionalism purports to describe current linguistic practice. On the face of it, hermeneutic fictionalism in religion looks more of a reach than it does for some other fields of discourse. For example, it seems that mathematics or ethical discourses are often engaged in (except when in philosophy seminars) without the speakers giving any consideration to the nature or existence of ethical properties or mathematical objects. So when a speaker says

(5) There are two prime numbers between 3 and 9

the hermeneutic fictionalist's contention that she is not thereby committed to what the utterance entails – i.e. the existence of two abstract objects – has some purchase. Notably, if we imagine that it was discovered that there are no abstract objects, it seems that this would have no impact on mathematical discourse: we would unhesitantly continue to use sentences that, on face value, appear to describe or posit such objects.²² In contrast, reasons for not believing in the existence of God – the problem of evil, for instance – seem to be reasons for changing one's religious attitudes or ceasing engagement with religious discourse at all. If hermeneutic fictionalism were true for religion, speakers would not start from a position of believing the claims of the discourse, so no change of attitude should be required. Notwithstanding the heavier lift required to defend hermeneutic varieties of religious fictionalism, we have seen that NDF is a candidate supporter of this theory. Here are two others.²³

Georges Rey defends *meta-atheism* according to which practitioners of religion are self-deceived about what they say (2006, 337). For anyone with a basic scientific education, Rey contends, it is obvious that religious claims are false. Rey does not propose, however, that

²¹ In an alternative response to religious diversity, Victoria Harrison (2010) has considered the prospects of fictionalism for reorienting the theoretical approach of philosophy of religion as a discipline.

²² For more on this see discussion of the oracle argument: Burgess and Rosen (1997), Yablo (2000).

²³ There are other possibilities. Wittgenstein sometimes looks askance at the apparently extravagant supernatural commitments of some religious thinking: 'For a blunder, that's too big' (1966, 62). One way of interpreting this (though certainly not the only one) is that religious utterances are – if taken as literal assertion – mistakes, but that speakers are not using religious sentences assertorically to express beliefs in their contents. This would be a kind of hermeneutic fictionalism. See also Howard Wettstein (2012, Ch. 13) who defends an account of religious engagement without metaphysical commitments.

educated speakers are thereby insincere when they affirm religious claims because they may think of themselves as believing what they are saying (2006, 338). Instead, speakers are in a state of self-deception. Whilst on a critical level they should recognise that the religious claims they utter are false, they have various reasons to put aside these considerations when using religious discourse. We have already encountered some of these reasons in the foregoing, such as having a sense of purpose or moral grounding, but other motivations might include showing loyalty to family and other social groups, personal ties and identifications with religious institutions, resistance to changing one's public stance, the wish for one's life to be part of a larger project. Now, Rey's position is, to say the least, contentious (see Scott 2013 for a detailed critique); however, if self-deception is a state of mind that falls short of belief, we can understand meta-atheism as a kind of hermeneutic religious fictionalism. In uttering religious sentences speakers engage in quasi-assertion whereby they accept what is said without genuinely believing it to be true.

Some theories that take the utterances of religious discourse to be metaphorical may also fall under the umbrella of hermeneutic fictionalism.²⁴ We typically do not believe the face-value content of the metaphorical utterance. For instance, we do not take someone saying

(6) God is my rock.

to believe that God is a rock. According to one way of understanding metaphorical utterances, what is said by the utterance is not believed by the speaker but used to suggest or imply some secondary proposition. However, if the metaphor theory of religious discourse is correct, then this secondary proposition – if it is religious – will also be a metaphor (and similarly for a tertiary proposition implied by the secondary one, and so on). This account yields a variety of hermeneutic fictionalism because religious discourse would not involve speakers believing any religious propositions.

7. CONCLUSION

Religious fictionalism has received support in recent years, and has seen a number of interesting developments that have taken the field further. The ethical benefits, transformative effects and imaginative enjoyment that comes from engaging with religion have all been used to support participation in religious practice without belief. Moreover, both recent and historical theories in religion appear interpretable according to fictionalist criteria. However, there are many options available to take the field further. Several proposals have been made for different varieties of fictionalism and related views like conservatism, whose benefits are yet to be evaluated in any kind of depth. There are outstanding objections to fictionalism that remain unresolved. Moreover, there is still much scope for developing on religious fictionalism from cognate areas such as ethics, and for viewing the various theories developed within theology and the philosophy of religion from a fictionalist perspective.

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²⁴ See Kenny (2005), McFague (1983), Soskice (1985); for critical voices see Alston (1989, Ch. 1 and 2) and Swinburne (1991, Ch. 3; 1993, Ch. 4 and 5). For a review of metaphor theories see Scott (2013 and 2017).

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