

## Beyond Fakers and Fanatics: a Reply to Boudry and Coyne

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I'd like to thank Marteen Boudry and Jerry Coyne for their thought-provoking piece. Though I found much to disagree with, I also found working to the core of our disagreement rewarding. They also prompted me to get clearer about what religious irrationality may be, for which I am grateful.

Now what is our core disagreement?

Several tensions internal to their piece make that question difficult. For example, they call my position—that religious credence and factual belief should be distinguished—“mistaken” and “dangerously so” (16). That suggests my theory has no application. But they also say my notion of religious credence may capture “a certain kind of liberal churchgoer” (3).<sup>1</sup> So they think it might have application after all, even a fairly broad one. Another tension surrounds the word “belief.” They appeal to “the ordinary sense” (1) of “belief” and write emphatic phrases like “*really* believes” and “*genuinely* believes” (phrases I deliberately avoid). Such usage suggests they take unexplained use of “belief” to be clear enough to resolve our dispute. Elsewhere they write: “We do not think that belief is a unitary phenomenon” (2). If “belief” is not unitary, however, it's unclear what its “ordinary sense” is or what “*really* believes” even means. Further, despite claiming “avowals of religious belief cannot simply be taken at face value” (2), they start their argument with survey data, which would only distinguish our views if they were taken at face value.

Despite those tensions, I was still able to distil a profound disagreement between us. It's about the ontology of religious persons. That is what I wish to make clear. To do this, I have to introduce the *faker* and the *fanatic*.

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Daniel Dennett and Linda LaScola (2010) write about atheist clergy: church leaders who no longer “believe” in God *in any sense*, but who pretend God exists in order to maintain financial and social positions in the church. The *faker* is just such a person: fictionally imagining God exists (and other doctrines) to maintain the pretense, but knowing her attitudes are mere imaginings.

Then there are the September 11 terrorists. As Boudry and Coyne point out, they “shaved and doused themselves with flower water right before perpetrating the attacks, in expectation of the dark-eyed virgins in paradise” (6). Boudry and Coyne hold that those terrorists *factually believed* martyrdom in jihad earns one 72

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<sup>1</sup> The application, however, is in fact much broader than liberal churchgoers. See below for explanation of how Boudry and Coyne misread my theory.

virgins.<sup>2</sup> Let's grant Boudry and Coyne this construal, though it's naïve in some respects (see Atran 2010, ch. 20). The *fanatic*, then, resembles this portrait of the September 11 terrorists: the fanatic's religious "beliefs" have all the characteristics of factual beliefs, except vulnerability to evidence; they guide behaviors in all settings and govern inference in the widest possible way.<sup>3</sup>

Now I ask: of all the world's billions of religious people, are there any psychological types besides the faker and the fanatic? (Alternately, should we deny that these categories are exhaustive?)

I say "yes." *Common religious people*—granting this category is hugely diverse in various ways—are neither fakers nor fanatics. So we need conceptual resources to describe the "belief" attitudes of this large class. My paper, "Religious credence is not factual belief," supplies those resources. Religious credence (explained below) is what "belief" refers to when we talk about religious attitudes of common religious people. Uncritical use of the term "belief," as we see in Boudry and Coyne, cannot describe the full range of religious psychologies, for it doesn't distinguish "beliefs" of common religious people from "beliefs" of fanatics.

This set-up, of course, requires that there *are* basic psychological differences in "belief" between common religious people and fanatics.

And this is the core disagreement. Consider this from Boudry's and Coyne's concluding paragraph:

Hard though it may be for the godless to accept, some people really do believe in a 6-day creation or in 72 virgins awaiting them in paradise. It is precisely because such heartfelt beliefs motivate behavior (e.g., suicide bombing) that we cannot bring ourselves to "believe in belief" in the Dennettian sense. Religions are not just harmless tissues of quasi-fictional credences, safely confined within a special compartment of the mind, never to leak into the real world. By and large, they consist of factual claims about the nature of the universe, endorsed and acted upon by millions. (16)

This passage transitions seamlessly from "beliefs" that motivate *suicide bombing* to "beliefs" that are *endorsed and acted upon by millions*. Presumably, this "millions" figure is justified by the survey data they mention earlier. It appears Boudry and Coyne think sincerely affirming a "belief" on a survey reveals the *same* underlying mental state as leads a person to a suicide attack. Elsewhere they write, "What Van Leeuwen calls 'extremism' is at the center, not the fringe" (2). Every devout Muslim, or devout religious person at all, is a fanatic underneath—on this view. They conclude their essay, "We ignore the reality of such convictions at our own peril" (16).

Boudry and Coyne, furthermore, persistently portray any *non-fanatical* religious attitudes as fakery. Notice their dichotomy: *either* beliefs that motivate suicide bombing *or* "quasi-fictional credences, safely confined." This dichotomy fails

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<sup>2</sup> In my terms, it would be more accurate to use the term "extremist credence" rather than "factual belief," since the terrorists' attitudes were not evidentially vulnerable, whereas factual beliefs are. But nothing turns on this at the moment.

<sup>3</sup> I am using "fanatic" as a term of art here. Many people that we loosely call fanatics won't be fanatics in this special sense, though pretty much anyone who is a fanatic in this special sense will count as fanatics in everyday speech too. Thanks to Helen De Cruz for a comment on this point.

to capture the attitude of religious credence my original paper describes.<sup>4</sup> More fundamentally, it posits mental states for the fanatic and the faker, but no one else. Furthermore, they misread me as saying religious people don't "*genuinely* believe"—as if I were saying religious people were fakers. That reading would only make sense if the only option besides fanaticism were fakery. So to the question of whether there are other religious psychological types, Boudry and Coyne are constrained to answer: "No: whatever variations exist in religious peoples, those two types are exhaustive when it comes to categorizing according to the mental state of belief. One believes or one doesn't. One is a fanatic or a faker."<sup>5</sup>

My psychological ontology posits three basic religious types: [faker, common religious person, fanatic]. Theirs posits two: [faker, fanatic].<sup>6</sup>

This fundamental difference in outlook colors nearly everything Boudry and Coyne write, such that much of the time, they are not speaking to my theory, but past it. Every genuine religious person is a fanatic inside, and extremism is at the center, not the fringe.

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With such a difference in perspective, one might despair of finding resolution. But we can find traction, starting, ironically, with the survey data Boudry and Coyne cite.

There are about 1.6 billion Muslims in the world. As Boudry and Coyne point out, at least half of Muslims surveyed in a range of countries assert the Qur'an should be read literally. For a very rough estimate, let's generalize to half of Muslims worldwide: 800 million. So the survey data indeed reveal that "millions" of Muslims profess a literal reading of the Qur'an. Now suppose (still simplifying) that generally only males are candidate martyrs: 400 million. If even 5% had the psychology Boudry and Coyne think is "at the center, not the fringe," there would be 20 million men who "factually believe" they will receive 72 virgins in paradise upon martyrdom.

If the psychologies of these "millions" are as Boudry and Coyne think, with

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<sup>4</sup> Boudry and Coyne are also mistaken to imply that I think that religious credences are in a "special compartment of the mind." In fact on 708-709 of my paper, I make a point of explaining how my view fits with the received view in cognitive science of religion that religious psychological states arise from general capacities. I am just adding a capacity to the list: the capacity to have secondary cognitive attitudes. Relatedly, contrary to what Boudry and Coyne think, the fact that many ordinary capacities are in play in producing religious psychological states does *not* imply the attitude involved in those states is just like mundane factual belief. Imaginings and hypotheses, too, deploy a variety of mechanisms that are also involved in producing factual beliefs, but that doesn't make them factual beliefs. Likewise for religious credence. I thank Bob McCauley for input on this point.

<sup>5</sup> Boudry and Coyne might wish to escape being committed to this view by appealing to some of the qualifiers they introduce on page 2, e.g., that belief "varies in strength." But first, those qualifiers don't sit well with the way they take extremists (such as jihadists and people who build creationist museums) to be the paradigm of a religious person. And second, those qualifiers, on closer analysis, turn out to be concessions in the direction of a theory that more resembles my own.

<sup>6</sup> This gives Boudry's and Coyne's view more parsimony at the level of kinds of *person*. But at the level of psychological mechanisms, their theory can't be more parsimonious, because my theory is *built up out of components* that everyone (including Boudry and Coyne) has independent reason to posit. For example, since practical setting dependence is a feature of imagining, it doesn't increase our ontology of psychological mechanisms to say credences have it too.

their “beliefs” having the same nature as the “beliefs” of *suicide bombers* (see the long quote above), then we would expect there to be millions of suicide bombers, or at least millions of martyrs or potential martyrs of some sort.

So why aren’t there more suicide bombings?

In any given year, there are just a few hundred. Not “millions.” In 2014, the highest year on record according to the Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism, there were 545 worldwide. Yet Boudry and Coyne treat attitudes of suicide bombers and other extremists as representative of religious people generally. So they are pointing the finger in the wrong direction when they make the charge of cherry-picking data. Why, we should ask them, does only a miniscule percentage of Muslims act on what you say are their factual beliefs? Are those millions of men just unmotivated to receive dark-eyed virgins? It is difficult to see what Boudry and Coyne could sensibly say here, without making concessions in the direction of my view.

We can go further. The total number of ISIS combatants in the world is estimated at 40,000 (CIA, February 2015). That’s a lot. But the total number of Sunni Muslims, the religious population from which ISIS draws, is 1.2 billion. 40,000 is approximately 0.0033% of Sunnis. ISIS is of course only one of several jihadi organizations. But the percentage of Muslims willing to martyr themselves is tiny on any count—below 1%. Do Boudry and Coyne then say that well over 99% of the Muslim population does not “*really believe*”?

Their dichotomous way of thinking breaks. It either ends up portraying hundreds of millions of devout religious people as closet fanatics, a step away from extreme violence, or it portrays the vast majority of them as fakers, as fake as the atheist clergy of Dennett and LaScola. If the first portrait is correct, why is there not more extreme violence? If the second, how does the massive charade sustain itself?

The notion of religious credence that I develop allows us to avoid the absurd consequences of Boudry’s and Coyne’s dichotomous outlook.<sup>7</sup> Credences govern what people profess when it comes time to profess, but they *often* don’t govern how people in fact think and act. I’d now like briefly to summarize my theory.

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*Religious credence* and *factual belief* are, as I deploy them, attitude concepts. This means in principle that religious credence or factual belief can be held in relation to arbitrary contents. In practice, religious credences *tend* to have supernatural contents, such as *Moses received ten commandments from God*, while factual beliefs *tend* to have more mundane contents, like *there are almonds in my cupboard* or *Fred is married*. The relation between attitude and content is flexible. (Thus, one can have a religious credence about some purported fact or other, and

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<sup>7</sup> I emphasize Boudry’s and Coyne’s dichotomous outlook here. But in fact I think there are two inconsistent outlooks present in their piece. The dichotomous one that I emphasize is far more prominent; it says that religious people factually believe their doctrines—either that, or they don’t “*genuinely believe*” at all, in which case they’re fakers. Though it’s mistaken, this at least is a fairly clear view that stands in stark opposition to my own. The other outlook present in their piece is less noticeable; it says that the many things called “beliefs” are a motley crew and that “beliefs” differ in all sorts of ways. I focus on the former outlook here, because (a) it’s more prominent and (b) it’s not at all clear in what substantive way someone with the latter outlook actually disagrees with me.

this would be a mental state with a different attitude from if one had had a factual belief about that very purported fact; same content, different attitudes. One can indeed have many different attitudes—hypothesis, supposition, religious credence, etc.—to any given “factual claim.” So the fact that a given attitude has a “factual claim” for its content does *not* entail that that attitude is a factual belief. Boudry and Coyne don’t appreciate this point, which causes many of their criticisms to miss the mark.)

There are three steps to establishing my distinction. First, I present an empirically-informed theory of factual belief that *generally* distinguishes it from secondary cognitive attitudes, like fictional imagining, acceptance in a context, or hypothesis. Second, I present evidence from psychology, history, and anthropology that suggests many religious attitudes lack three defining characteristics of factual belief; this makes them secondary cognitive attitudes. Third, I identify important features religious credences have that make them unique.

What are the features of factual belief religious credence lacks?

Take the factual belief *that concrete is hard*. This is what I call *practical setting independent*. It guides your behavior in any setting in which its content is relevant. Even if you are playing make-believe that you’re in a forest, but you’re really in a concrete room, your factual belief that concrete is hard *still* guides your bodily movement to prevent your injuring yourself. The make-believe setting does not deactivate factual beliefs (Harris 2000, Golomb and Kuersten 1996), and factual beliefs, more generally, stay operative in guiding behavior across settings.

Religious credences, however, aren’t like this. Religious attitudes about the afterlife, for example, tend to become inoperative outside religious settings (Harris and Giménez (2005), Astuti and Harris (2008), Legare and Gelman (2008), Watson-Jones *et al.* (manuscript)). This partly explains why there are so few willing martyrs. It also helps explain the observation that religious people facing death are as fearful as atheists or more so (Dawkins 2006: ch. 10; Rey 2007). Their credence in the afterlife is not operative in all settings, and it doesn’t eliminate the factual belief that death is final. Various further examples also support the practical setting dependence of religious credence. Christian ministers often rail against “once-a-week Christians,” people whose actions express devotion on Sunday, but not otherwise. And as Dennett (2006: 227) points out, people who “believe” God is always watching often do things they wouldn’t do in *anyone’s* presence. The view that religious credences are practical setting dependent offers a coherent account of this cluster of phenomena.<sup>8</sup>

Factual beliefs, unlike religious credences, also have *widespread cognitive governance* and *evidential vulnerability*.

Widespread cognitive governance means factual beliefs supply the informational background that guides inferences generally, no matter what other

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<sup>8</sup> Boudry and Coyne say my claim that credences are practical setting dependent (and may be turned on by identity challenges) is not falsifiable. But my claim *is* falsifiable: it predicts that if we look persistently, we will find circumstances in which credences don’t guide behavior (especially non-verbal behavior), even though their contents would make them relevant. Persistent failure to find such circumstances would falsify my claim.

attitude is in play. Other attitudes, like fictional imagining, don't have this feature. Imaginings specifically about Sherlock Holmes, for example, don't guide inferences among factual beliefs about who happens to be in London, though factual beliefs about London guide inferences about the imagined Sherlock Holmes. Similar to imaginings, credences about God's *omnipresence*, for example, don't generally guide inferences about how described situations unfold, even for stories including a divine agent (Barrett and Keil 1996). (Boudry's and Coyne's alternate explanation of these data is that people don't understand constituents like "omnipresent." I doubt that, because "omnipresent" simply means present everywhere, which isn't hard to understand<sup>9</sup>. But even if they were right, it would actually help my case. It follows from the way I characterize factual belief (recall it is a term of art) that one cannot factually believe what one doesn't understand (cf. Sperber 1985: 54-55).)

Evidential vulnerability means factual beliefs tend, non-voluntarily, to be extinguished by evidence contrary to them. If you factually believe the water cooler is full but then see it empty, that factual belief is extinguished. Religious credences lack evidential vulnerability; consider young earth creationists. (Boudry and Coyne don't really disagree with this claim, so I won't pursue it further here.)

So religious credence lacks practical setting independence, widespread cognitive governance, and evidential vulnerability; it is not factual belief. But it is unique among secondary cognitive attitudes. Important features, which Boudry and Coyne don't mention, differentiate them starkly. They also, collectively, differentiate common religious people, who have credences, from fakers, who don't.

First, religious credences have *perceived normative orientation*. This means people take credence-expressing actions to be good, right, proper, or virtuous—at least tending that way—and take them to lead away from what's bad or morally dangerous. Religious attitudes on any empirically-informed view should have this feature. So I build it into the definition of religious credence and thereby advance the hypothesis that it will cluster together with the other two I identify.

Second, religious credences are susceptible to *free elaboration*. That means people elaborate on them in ways not licensed by rational inference. Evidence shows people add improvised details to their representations of saints, demons, ancestors, and other supernatural agents. In my view, free elaboration gives people new credences in situations in which old ones might not have given perceived normative orientation.<sup>10</sup>

Third, though credences are often elaborated upon freely, they are also *vulnerable to special authority*. This means they tend to be formed in response to special authorities who, by virtue of anointment or other socially-recognized form of prestige, are accorded the right to dictate credences. This connection between credences and religious authority figures clusters naturally with perceived normative orientation, since such figures, for better or for worse, are looked to for

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<sup>9</sup> See De Cruz and De Smedt (2014: ch. 3) for complications.

<sup>10</sup> Fictional imaginings, of course, also have a form of free elaboration. But the way elaboration in religious credences unfolds is quite different. See section 4.2 of my longer paper.

normative guidance within their communities.<sup>11</sup>

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In sum, religious credences do lack the characteristic properties of factual belief, which makes them in important respects like fictional imaginings. But Boudry and Coyne are wrong to imply that I nearly identify credences with imaginings. They are also wrong to imply that I don't think credences are "serious" or "genuine." Credences have powerful properties that ultimately make them part of a person's identity. Common religious people are not fakers. I hasten to add, however, that people who have religious credences typically don't realize they *are* different from factual beliefs.<sup>12</sup> This shortage of self-knowledge further differentiates common religious people from fakers, who are painfully self-aware. This, then, is the realization about religious irrationality that the present exchange helped clarify for me. Typical religious irrationality doesn't consist in having absurd factual beliefs (though the contents of many credences are absurd), but rather in failing to know that one's own attitudes toward religious doctrines *are* in basic ways more like imaginings than factual beliefs. But perhaps this very self-ignorance is what allows credences, despite being secondary cognitive attitudes, to have the normative properties they have—one mustn't notice that attitudes at the core of one's identity are truly optional. If self-knowledge were achieved, and if people were to realize their credences are not factual beliefs, the spell, to use Dennett's phrase, might be broken.

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<sup>11</sup> People often point out that factual beliefs are formed on testimony from authority too. But *evidential authority* is a very different thing from the *special authority* to which credences are vulnerable. See section 4.3 of my longer paper.

<sup>12</sup> This view is reminiscent of Sperber (1985: 54): "Incidentally, to say that the way a subject is aware of his factual beliefs is different from the way in which he is aware of his representational beliefs, is not to say that the subject is aware *of the difference* between the two kinds of beliefs. In fact, I assume most people are not aware of this difference (or else I would not be at work establishing it)."

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