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## Religious Fictionalism and the Ontological Status of God

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RESUMEN

En este artículo argumentaré que la principal diferencia entre el ficcionalismo religioso y otras posiciones ficcionalistas que han sido recientemente formuladas en otros campos de investigación no religiosos es el tipo de relación personal y afectiva que dice sentir la persona religiosa entre él y Dios, el sentimiento de estar en una comunión amorosa y personal con Dios. Argumentaré que una comprensión ficcionalista, realista y no meingoniana de Dios, en la línea que filósofos como Schiffer y Thomasson ya han defendido por motivos no religiosos con respecto a personajes de ficción, parece ser la forma más directa de preservar la posibilidad de que la persona religiosa esté en una relación real con Dios al mismo tiempo que se mantiene una comprensión ficcionalista de la fe religiosa. Por último, argumentaré que concebir a Dios en estos términos artificiales y realistas, a pesar de permitir la posibilidad de que la persona religiosa esté en una relación real con Dios, no preserva una relación personal genuina entre la persona religiosa concreta y Dios.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *personajes de ficción; Dios; comunión amorosa; ficcionalismo religioso.*

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will argue that the main contrast between religious fictionalism and other recently developed fictionalist positions in other non-religious fields of enquiry is the sort of personal and affective relationship said to be felt by the religious person between them and God, the feeling of being in a loving and personal communion with God. I will argue that a realist, non-Meingonian artifactual fictionalist understanding of God, along the lines that philosophers such as Schiffer and Thomasson have already defended on non-religious grounds regarding fictional characters, seems to be the most direct way of preserving the possibility of the religious person standing in an actual relation to God while also maintaining a fictionalist understanding of religious faith. Last, I will argue that conceiving of God in these realist artifactual terms, and despite allowing the possibility of the religious person standing in an actual relation to God, fails to preserve a genuine personal relationship between the concrete religious person and God.

KEYWORDS: *Fictional Characters; God; Loving Communion; Religious Fictionalism.*

## I

Religious belief is commonly considered as a necessary condition for religious faith. This has, at least apparently, been the most widespread position among both philosophers and religious persons not explicitly versed in philosophical reasoning.<sup>1</sup> In contrast with this position, fictionalist conceptions of religious faith conceive of religious faith as engaging in a kind of understanding of the world akin to becoming immersed in a fictional story. Besides, defenders of religious fictionalism deny that religious faith necessarily involves propositional belief and define religious motivation on pragmatic grounds, as the kind of religious understanding of the world they claim the individual can voluntarily become immersed in being the (most) adequate and beneficial way to inspire moral reflection, moving the individual to higher moral action and thus bringing the possibility of enjoying a more worth-living life [see, *e.g.*, Eshleman (2005), Wettstein (1997)].

The relevance of this position is that a fictionalist conception of religious faith renders trivial traditional arguments against adopting a religious stance on the basis of the well-known difficulties of offering an evidential justification for religious *belief*, given that the kind of religious understanding of the world that a fictionalist notion of religious faith involves neither requires nor presupposes accepting the truth of any factual statement regarding the world actually being such and such and not otherwise.

Religious fictionalism not only attempts to preserve a religious way of life (in its practical, ethical sense) but also aims to retain a (non-evidentially grounded but experientially felt) religious understanding of the world. This illustrates one of the main virtues of religious fictionalism over other non-cognitivist and non-doxastic conceptions of religious faith that have been defended in contemporary analytic philosophy, and which are also motivated by the aim of dispensing with the requirement of accepting the truth of any theological or religious statement. Take, for example, R. B. Braithwaite's conception of religious faith [Braithwaite (1955) [1971]], which may be considered as the first serious example of a non-cognitivist understanding of religious faith among contemporary analytic philosophy. According to Braithwaite, religious faith consists solely in an ethical commitment, which neither requires nor implies accepting the truth of any theological or religious statement. Leaving aside the potential virtues of Braithwaite's proposal, the relevant point now raised is that by reducing religious faith to a *mere* ethical issue, his conception

leaves aside the fact that for the common religious person religious faith implies conceiving the world in a different way to the atheist. More recent non-doxastic conceptions such as Louis Pojman's [Pojman (1986)], who defined religious faith as consisting not in believing that God exists but in the hope that He does, face the same difficulty. Our hoping for God's existence, while possibly influencing our moral life and the way we practically relate to the world, does not imply a difference in the way we see and experience it.

Religious fictionalism is often considered as a recent and promising development in philosophy of religion and the truth is that over the last decade it has increasingly attracted an impressive amount of attention in the philosophical literature.<sup>2</sup> The fact that it was not until very recently that religious fictionalism has been seriously and systematically considered in analytic philosophy, together with the fact that the main motivation behind defenders of religious fictionalism is often epistemological (*i.e.*, to retain a religious understanding of the world that grounds religious action while dispensing with the requirement of accepting as being true any theological or religious proposition), has limited the kind of topics addressed when discussing religious fictionalism. My aim here is to enlarge the current philosophical debate on religious fictionalism by addressing the question of the ontological status of God in fictional terms. As far as I know, this is a neglected question in the debate, with defenders of religious fictionalism content to rely on the claim that God is akin to a fictional character, understanding 'fictional character' in rather an intuitive, non-explicit systematically and philosophically formulated way, thus failing to analyze in depth how we should understand the notion of a fictional God or, more importantly, its philosophical implications when defending religious fictionalism as an equally religiously valid alternative to the traditional understanding of religious faith. More concretely, I will argue that the main contrast between religious fictionalism and other recently developed fictionalist positions in other non-religious fields of enquiry is the sort of personal and affective relationship said to be felt by the religious person between them and God, the feeling of being in a personal and loving communion with God. From a theistic point of view, and especially from a Christian perspective, this is an important part of the earthly significance of religious faith (and so, a considerable part of its pragmatic value). A theistic form of religious fictionalism, then, must argue for the plausibility of a notion of God which, despite being understood in fictional terms, in some way allows this feeling of being in a personal and loving communion with God. I will argue that a

realist, non-Meingonian artifactual fictionalist understanding of God, along the lines that philosophers such as Schiffer [see, *e.g.*, Schiffer (1996)] and Thomasson [see, *e.g.*, Thomasson (2003a) and (2003b)] have already defended on non-religious grounds with regard to fictional characters, seems to be the most direct way of preserving the possibility of the religious person standing in an actual relation to God without surrendering the fictionalist distinctive claim that religious faith is just a human product and that the kind of religious understanding of the world that religious faith involves is akin to becoming immersed in an imaginative exercise. Last, I will argue that despite allowing the possibility of the religious person standing in an actual relation to God, this fictionalist understanding of God in realist, artifactual terms fails to preserve a genuine personal relationship between the concrete religious person and God.

## II

In recent years, some philosophers have defended fictionalist positions in other fields of enquiry that are independent from religion. Thus, we can find examples of moral [see, *e.g.*, Kalderon (2005)], mathematical [see, *e.g.*, Balaguer (2009), Leng (2010)], scientific [see, *e.g.*, Frigg and Salis (2020), Toon (2012)], and modal [see, *e.g.*, Kim (2005)] fictionalism. I do not wish to deny that religious fictionalism can somehow benefit from the already existing debate around these often more consolidated fictionalist positions, as is especially the case in philosophy of mathematics and philosophy of science, but I will argue that there is a crucial contrast between religious fictionalism and these other fictionalist positions that prevents the debate over religious fictionalism from being subsumed into them. This crucial difference, as far as I know, has not received sufficient attention, even though taking it into account will help us reach a rather more developed characterization of religious fictionalism.

Among fictionalist positions, the usual one is to consider the object of enquiry (be it numbers, possible worlds, moral properties, scientific theoretical entities, or whatever the case may be) as, so to say, useful fictions. More concretely, fictionalists defend that despite insufficient evidence to affirm the existence of such objects, it is worthy that one acts *as if* they existed (though meanwhile without affirming that they actually exist), given the practical beneficial consequences that may be obtained from this acting *as if* exercise. Thus, for example, defenders of mathematical fictionalism claim that mathematicians should not believe that

numbers actually exist, but that the most adequate stance for them is to work *as if* numbers existed. This practice is justified on pragmatic grounds, because to work as if numbers exist may aid our understanding of the world even if it is the case that in fact there are no numbers, and thus that statements involving numbers fail to provide *an actual description* of how the world operates [see, *e.g.*, Balaguer (1996)].

Religious fictionalists take a similar view when defending their fictionalist notions of religious faith. As I said before, the usual case among defenders of religious fictionalism is to justify the immersion in the kind of fictional religious understanding of the world they claim religious faith consists in as it being (the most) adequate and beneficial means to move the individual to higher moral action. I agree that religion may inspire the individual to higher moral action, and I also agree that the individual does not need to take any religious or theological claim to actually be true to benefit from this inspiring function. However, I think that this morally inspiring function is not the whole story, but that something greatly important is lacking in contemporary fictionalist accounts of religion.

Religion has a peculiarity that distinguishes it from these other fields of enquiry that have also received fictionalist interpretations. Thus, there is an obvious and crucial difference, though unfortunately commonly neglected in contemporary fictionalist formulations of religious faith, between the kind of relationship religious people feel there is between themselves and God, and, say, the kind of relationship that mathematicians feel there is between them and numbers. From a theistic point of view, and especially from a Christian perspective, religious faith properly involves the feeling of religious people being themselves in an affective and personal relationship with God — *i.e.*, the feeling of being in a loving and personal communion with Him.<sup>3</sup> Mathematicians, including robust mathematical realists, do not feel themselves in any kind of affective and personal relationship with numbers — and even less in a personal and loving communion with them. We may concede that numbers, and their (alleged) properties, may arouse emotions like admiration or puzzlement in the mathematician, but this would just be an emotional *reaction* on the part of the subject and not the feeling of being in an affective and personal relationship with numbers. Likewise, the metaphysician's reflections on some given possible world may provoke some emotional reaction in him but, strictly speaking, the metaphysician does not feel to be in any sort of affective and personal communion with any possible world.

As is well known, traditional theism argues this experientially felt affective relationship with God on propositional grounds, as it being the expression of a *genuine* connection with God. However, it is easy to see that the religious significance of this feeling is not (at least not only) propositional, but existential. Leaving aside the possibility of enjoying of God's Salvation, the beneficial outcome provided by religion in this earthly life mainly relies on this feeling of being in a personal and loving communion with God — *i.e.*, the comfort of not feeling alone in the face of the vicissitudes of life, be they its joy or its misfortunes.<sup>4</sup> The challenge for defenders of religious fictionalism is to preserve this feeling of being in an affective relationship with God (and so its existential significance and its pragmatic value) without surrendering their distinctive claim that religious faith is simply a human product and that the kind of (non-evidentially grounded but experientially felt) religious understanding of the world that religious faith involves is akin to becoming immersed in an imaginative exercise.

Supporters of religious fictionalism may respond by claiming that they can simply *pretend* that they stand in such a loving and personal relationship with God. I do not wish to conclusively deny that this pretending is possible or that it may bring some benefits to the fictionalist. However, I think pretending to stand in a genuine personal relationship with God will clearly not bring the fictionalist the sentiment of comfort of being fortified and accompanied by God when facing the vicissitudes of life. This seems to be a conceptual point, applying to any loving and personal relationship. Thus, while I may be capable of pretending that some person loves me, this pretence of mine will not make me feel accompanied by that person — simply because I will be fully aware that it is just a pretence of mine, grounded in a conscious decision of my own which therefore does not relate in any way to the other person.

Moreover, I imagine that defenders of religious fictionalism may be tempted to shy from the challenge by making explicit the fact that their aim is not descriptive but rather prescriptive. That is, they may claim that their aim is not to describe religious faith as it is ordinarily conceived by common religious people, but rather to offer a (more adequate) alternative to it. By taking this route, religious fictionalists may feel free to decide what is to be included and what is not in their own conceptions of religious faith. While I think that this, by itself, would be just an *ad hoc* (and uninteresting) answer, defenders of religious fictionalism may, if they so wish, take this route and formulate their own conceptions of religious faith. However, it would then be hard to see wherein lies the

philosophical or religious interest of their project. Strictly speaking, I have no objection regarding the non-descriptive character of religious fictionalism, since it seems obvious to me that religious fictionalism is far from how religious faith is ordinarily conceived these days by the common religious person, who usually takes it in traditional terms, as making propositional belief a necessary, though not sufficient, requirement for genuine religious faith. However, it should be remembered that religious fictionalism arises, as do other non-doxastic and non-cognitivist conceptions of religious faith, as a response to the (alleged) inadequacy, for purely epistemic, evidential reasons, of the traditional understanding of religious faith to ground a religious way of life — *i.e.*, that no available evidence provides enough justification for forming the belief that God exists (and other religious and theological beliefs akin), and that any non-evidential method for forming such theological and religious beliefs is inadequate for ethical [see, *e.g.*, Clifford (1877) [1879]], conceptual [see, *e.g.*, Williams (1973)], or even theological reasons [see, *e.g.*, Pojman (1986)]. If there is currently not enough justification for such believing, we may be forced to dispense with the requirement of propositional believing. However, if we then dispense of religious faith with its existential and affective dimension, it becomes hard to see why we should continue speaking about religion and not just about some sort of ethical (or even aesthetical) issue. Again, the philosophical and religious relevance of religious fictionalism consists in offering if not a more then at least an equally adequate and properly religious alternative to the traditional understanding of religious faith. It is now obvious that religious fictionalism cannot be taken as an equally adequate alternative to the traditional understanding of religious faith if it fails to retain an important aspect of the affective dimension of religion and its existential significance (and so, a considerable part of its pragmatic value), and even less if it cannot be recognized as properly religious in at least some intuitive but nonetheless meaningful sense of religion. It will be a good thing, then, if religious fictionalism aims to preserve as far as possible the existential significance of religion, and this comprises the feeling of being in an affective and personal relationship with God given the aforementioned sentiment of comfort the feeling of being in such a relationship arises in the individual.

### III

One of the main strengths of the position usually presented by defenders of religious fictionalism is that it succeeds in preserving the af-

fective aspect of religion without thereby committing themselves to accepting that the factual claims made by religion are actually true. More concretely, they claim that a fictionalist understanding of religious faith allows for the possibility that religious stories arouse an emotional reaction in the individuals who become immersed in them, without them having to believe these stories to be true or their characters to actually exist [see, *e.g.*, Le Poidevin 1996, pp. 114–118]. This claim is usually presented by relying on an analogy between religious stories and ordinary, non-religious fictions. If a horror movie can scare us or a drama movie make us cry (and I emphasize that it is the movie itself that arouses an emotional reaction in us, not necessarily the reflection that the things we see happening to the characters in the movie are possible and thus that they may actually happen to us some day), then a (fictional) religious story involving God, Moses, the Virgin Mary, or any other religious character, may likewise scare us or make us cry.

I have nothing to object to here, since it is obvious that a fictional story, be it religious or not, can arouse an emotional reaction in those who become immersed in it. However, this is not the point I raised in the previous section. The challenge is not just to preserve the claim that a religious narrative, even being fictional, may spark an emotional reaction in the individuals who become immersed in it, but rather to preserve the sort of loving and personal relationship that common religious people feel there is between them and God, thereby also preserving the comfort that such a feeling of being accompanied carries with it. The question is not, therefore, whether one can feel worried, scared, intrigued, compassionate, and so on, about a fictional character's fate, but whether one can actually feel oneself as being in a personal and affective relationship with a character one conceives of as fictional. In other words, and this is what the relevance of the question for the ontological status of God relies on, the challenge for religious fictionalists if they want to preserve this feeling of being in a personal relationship with God, which I think they should, is to offer a coherent notion of God which, despite being understood in fictional terms, allows those who become immersed in a fictional religious understanding of the world to conceive themselves as being engaged in this sort of felt relationship of personal and loving communion. Let me emphasize that the challenge is not just to allow the possibility that people may feel themselves personally related to a character who turns out to be fictional. Rather, and since religious fictionalists overtly conceive of God as a purely fictional character, the challenge consists in allowing the possibility that those who are



immersed in a fictional religious understanding of the world conceive themselves as being in a felt loving and genuine personal relationship with a character who is overtly conceived of as fictional.

Given that, according to religious fictionalism, God is relevantly akin to ordinary, non-religious fictional characters, it seems that our reflections on this question may, at least to some extent, benefit from the ongoing but more established philosophical debate about the ontological status of fictional characters. Let me emphasize why I say the benefit is limited because indirectly this will also serve to point out an important, though commonly neglected, difference between religion, assuming that it is just a human fiction, and ordinary fictions, which again is the already mentioned feeling involved in religion of being in a personal relationship of loving communion with God. In the current philosophical debate about the ontological status of fictional characters, there is, as far as I know (and I would be surprised if there were), no real interest in the question of whether one can feel that there is in an affective, personal, and loving relationship with a fictional character. This is understandable since the question simply lacks of any philosophical interest with regard to ordinary fictions. We would all find it very strange to be told by someone that they feel there is a personal and loving relationship between themselves and some given fictional character. The question may be of psychological interest but would be of no philosophical interest at all. However, the claim that one may feel that there is a personal, loving relationship between him and a fictional character, which sounds very odd if not directly pathological regarding ordinary fictions, is nonetheless one of the key aspects of the existential significance and pragmatic value of religion. In fact, I think that this feeling of being in a loving and personal communion with God is one of the key factors that explains why, even conceding that religious fictionalists may be right in that religion is nothing more than a human product and that the kind of religious understanding of the world that religious faith involves is akin to becoming immersed in an imaginative exercise, all our intuition goes against accepting that adopting a religious stance is *just* like going to the cinema, and that God is a fictional character *just* as, say, *Son Gokū* is. Of course, religious fictionalists may bite the bullet here and insist that they are offering a completely novel understanding of religious faith, but again it would then be extremely hard to take their proposals to be serious and properly religious alternatives to the traditional understanding of religious faith.

Turning to the current philosophical debate over the ontological status of fictional characters, we can make a rough distinction between

realist and non-realist positions by the obvious difference as to whether they conceive of fictional characters as somehow actually existing or whether they overtly claim that fictional characters do not actually exist at all. There are, of course, differences in how these philosophers articulate their individual positions because not all realists claim fictional characters to exist in the same way and nor do all non-realists explain away the non-existence of fictional characters in the same terms. I am not going to critically scrutinize all the positions currently in play in this debate, but I would like to point out that a realist, non-Meinongian artifactual understanding of God along the lines that philosophers such as Schiffer and Thomasson have already defended on non-religious grounds with regards to fictional characters, and thus independently of the cogency of religious fictionalism, seems to be the most direct way of preserving the possibility of the religious person standing in an actual relation to God while also maintaining a fictionalist understanding of religious faith.

Leaving aside the peculiarities of each of their own formulations, the core claim made by defenders of artifactual realism regarding fictional characters is that they conceive of fictional characters as actually existing as abstract cultural artifacts. Fictional characters are abstract in the sense of their being neither spatially nor temporarily located, but as differing from platonic ideas in that they are not eternal and necessary preexistent objects the author(s) comes to know by means of *discovery*. Fictional characters are not discovered but rather *created* by the author(s) of the fiction in which they feature, making their existence contingent in the sense that they depend on the contingent fact of the author(s) having created them. Artifactual realism, then, preserves the claim that fictions and their characters are purely contingent human products, created at some concrete time by some concrete author(s), while also preserving the platonist claim that fictional characters are actually existing abstract objects.

Artifactual realists can readily accommodate the claim that a person may have loving feelings towards some given fictional character. These feelings would simply be the expression of a *genuine* connection with some given fictional object. If defenders of religious fictionalism were to conceive of God in these artifactual terms, then they would not only be able to preserve the experience of having such loving feelings, but they would also be able to claim, along the lines of traditional theism, that these feelings are in fact the expression of a *genuine* connection with God, even though God would obviously not be conceived in the supernatural terms traditional theists do, but just as an abstract fictional object.

Likewise, this understanding of God as an actually existing although created abstract object offers the fictionalist a way of preserving the practice of (private) prayer in a similar way to traditional theism. It is true that religious fictionalism cannot accommodate the practice of petitionary prayer for the obvious reason that a fictional God, even if constructed on the artifactual, realist terms I am referring to here, lacks the properties that are taken to ground the divine capacity to directly intervene in the natural world. However, and in contrast to what is usual among defenders of religious fictionalism, which is to reduce the practice of (private) prayer to a sort of imaginative and morally inspiring exercise [Le Poidevin (2019), pp. 37–40], to conceive of God as an actually existing abstract object will preserve a fictionalist understanding of God while somehow retaining the traditional understanding of prayer as an attempt made by the religious person to reach an *actual* connection with God.

Another virtue in conceiving of God as an actually existing fictional object is that it may preserve the claim that God is not just a fictional character from which the individual person may freely decide to take inspiration, but that God is in fact the (humanly originated but nonetheless independent) basis of morality and of the way the religious person relates to the world. This, let's call it grounding function, is usually considered by common religious people to be one of the core aspects of their religious faith. Of course, a fictionally humanly created God, even if actually existing as an abstract object, cannot by itself *justify* either any moral principle or the way the subject relates to the world. However, this fictional God may nonetheless ground the *independent* conceptual framework within which the religious person conducts his practical life and his theoretical approaches to comprehending the world in which he lives. An analogy may be clarifying here. In Western democracies, constitutions are products of the ethical and political convictions of the citizens who create them. However, once created, they also ground and determine, and not merely inspire, most of the ethical values by which they and the next generations of citizens conduct their own individual practical life. Constitutions require their acceptance by the citizens and are, of course, open to correction and amendment because, strictly speaking, constitutions are not by themselves a *justification* for the ethical framework and the kind of understanding of the world they posit. Nonetheless, once the individual citizen has accepted them, constitutions may then become the *independent* basis for the kind of understanding of the world according to which the concrete citizen conducts his own life.

If the fictionalist is to conceive of God in these artifactual terms, the question arises as to whether the people who say they have a common faith (say, for example, the Christians) are actually relating to the *same* God or whether each religious person has their own, *unique* God. The answer to this question depends on whether each religious person individually *creates* their own God on their own grounds, from their intimate reflections, or whether each religious person externally *discovers* the God already created by some other(s), say for example the God created by the author(s) of the Biblical Scriptures. The creative route seems to emphasize the intimate, more subjective dimension of religion, while the discovery route seems more akin to traditional theism and its claim that there is a unique God and it perhaps fits better with the way religious people tend to embrace their religious faiths. There is also the possibility that each religious person intimately creates their own God by drawing inspiration from external sources. None of these answers seem to be problematic for religious fictionalism since they are all consistent with the claim that religion is just a human fiction.

Conceiving of God in the aforementioned fictionalist realist artifactual terms, then, seems to allow the fictionalist to claim that the concrete person stands in an actual relation to God. However, even assuming artifactual realism, the claim that one may be in an affective and personal relationship with God faces an obvious difficulty, which is that if God is an abstract object, neither spatially nor temporarily located, then God does not seem to have the properties that are taken to ground this kind of personal and affective relationship, since these properties are concrete, and thus spatially and temporarily located. Defenders of artifactual theory have attempted to solve this difficulty regarding ordinary, non-religious fictional characters, one example being van Inwagen's distinction between "having a property" and "holding a property" [van Inwagen (1983), pp. 74–76; van Inwagen (2003), pp. 145–146]. Conceding that some of these solutions do actually succeed, then the religious fictionalist will be able to claim that the loving feeling towards God experienced by the concrete religious person is not just a purely subjective emotional reaction on their part but that it is grounded in them being in an actual relation to God.

However, we must remember that the challenge for the religious fictionalist is not just to preserve the loving feeling the concrete person has towards God, but to preserve in a relevant way the sort of personal and affective relationship said to be felt by the religious person between them and God, the feeling of being in a loving and personal communion with God. Even conceding that an artifactual, fictional God may some-

how have those properties that will ground the loving feelings of the concrete religious person towards God, this would be just halfway to claiming the possibility of the concrete religious person being in an actual loving and personal communion with God. In order to claim that there may be a genuine personal relationship between the concrete religious person and God, not only is it needed that God may be the cause of the loving feelings of the concrete person, but it must also be allowed that God may play an active role in that personal and sentimental relationship, just as the concrete person does. Now, the problem is that a fictional God, conceived in the artifactual lines outlined, simply does not seem to be the right kind of entity to be able to engage in a personal relationship. An artifact is a humanly created abstract object, and abstract objects are not persons, lacking as they do of any intentionality on their own, and so they are incapable of loving. This means that an artifactual God *cannot be* an active part of any personal relationship with a concrete person, and so, after all, there is no possibility of there being a personal communion between the concrete religious person and such a fictional God.<sup>5</sup> Thus, even conceding that an artifactual fictionalist understanding of God may allow the concrete person to stand in an actual relation to God, this kind of relation will not be, properly speaking, a genuine (*i.e.*, mutual) loving and personal relationship. Conceiving God in the aforementioned realist artifactual terms seems to be a coherent position for the religious fictionalist, and in fact it appears to have some merits in its own right, but it also seems clear that the, so to speak, monadic relation with God that results from such conception fails to preserve the existential significance of the sort of personal and affective relationship said to be felt by the common religious person between them and God — which relies on its providing the concrete religious person with the comfort of being fortified and accompanied when facing the vicissitudes of life, be they its joy or its misfortunes.

One may wonder whether to conceive of religious faith in interactive terms together with an artifactual understanding of God may help the religious fictionalist to preserve the aforementioned personal relationship between God and the concrete religious person. A classic example of interactive fictions are the so-called choose-your-own-adventure books, where the reader is able to choose how the fictional character(s) should behave among the different options given (*e.g.*, go to such-and-such a page if you decide the fictional character should do X or go to another referenced page if you decide otherwise). A more visual example of interactive fictions are videogames. When gaming, the player has control

over the movements of the character starring in the game (*e.g.*, on pressing button A the character jumps, on pressing button B the character ducks, and so on). Now the question is whether a fictional religious understanding of the world may be conceived of along such lines, thereby leaving space for (a fictional) God to be an active participant in a genuine, personal relationship with the concrete religious person. The analogy may be constructed along the following lines: just as the character in an interactive fiction behaves according to my acting (*e.g.*, when pressing button A the videogame character jumps), a fictional God may also behave according to my acting (*e.g.*, when I love Him, He loves me back).

This understanding of religious faith as an interactive fiction is interesting but it does not help to preserve a genuine personal relationship with God inasmuch as it does not show that a fictional character may have an intentionality on their own, distinct from that of the concrete person who is immersed in that fiction. The fact that in interactive fictions the character(s) behaves according to the participant(s)'s inputs neither implies nor requires that the fictional character(s)'s behavior is an *intentional response* to the participant(s)'s inputs. Despite the participant(s)'s choices determining his own immersion in the story, the content of an interactive fiction is already fixed beforehand, though in a way that allows multiple realizations — *e.g.*, in choose-your-own-adventure books, all multiple paths and their outcomes are already defined by the author of the book, and all the possible movements of a videogame character are already fixed by the programming language in use. The active role of the participant(s) in interactive fictions simply consists in the participant(s) *choosing* among different options already defined by the author(s) of such fictions. The participant(s)'s inputs, then, do not create a new fictional story but are merely the choosing of a fiction among a set of already given fictions. From an artifactual understanding, this may result in multiple, different and equally existing fictional stories and their corresponding fictional characters — *i.e.*, one different story, and therefore one different fictional character, for each decision the participant makes. In any event, the important point now is that the active role of the participant(s) in interactive fictions does not depend on the fictional character(s) intentionally responding to their inputs — and so does not justify the claim that a fictional character may have their own intentionality, and so their being capable of engaging in genuine personal and affective relationships.

A final comment is needed. In this paper I have not attempted to conclusively argue that a fictionalist understanding of religious faith cannot somehow preserve the sort of personal and affective relationship said to

be felt by the religious person between them and God. After all, I have just explored one way for preserving such feeling of being in a personal and loving relationship with God — though I must also confess that this is the only way of conceiving of God I can think of that allows the possibility of the concrete religious person standing in an actual relation to God without surrendering the fictionalist distinctive claim that the object of religious faith is just a human product. This does not preclude, however, the possibility of there being other coherent fictionalist conceptions of God, different from the one I have outlined in this paper, which allow in some relevant way the aforementioned feeling of being in a personal and loving communion with God. As I said before, my ultimate aim in this paper is not to conclusively argue against the adequacy of a fictionalist understanding of religious faith, but rather to expand the current philosophical debate on religious fictionalism by emphasizing one important aspect of religion, though one that is commonly neglected among defenders of religious fictionalism, which, at least from a theistic perspective, should be preserved if religious fictionalism is to be considered as an equally plausible and properly religious alternative to the traditional understanding of religious faith. However, having said this, I would also like to add that I strongly suspect that religious fictionalists will be unable to preserve such an important aspect of religion unless they surrender, or at least qualify, their claim that God is simply akin to any other fictional character. If religious fictionalists are to maintain their claim that God is relevantly akin to ordinary, non-religious fictional characters, then any fictionalist understanding of God that conceives Him as being the right sort of entity capable of engaging in a personal and loving relationship with a concrete person, would also conceive ordinary, non-religious fictional characters as being capable of engaging in such personal relationships. Admittedly, this would be at best a highly exotic metaphysical view, and one that goes against all our intuitions: comic readers may perhaps develop loving feelings towards the fictional character *Spiderman*, but it just does not seem right to claim that a fictional character such as *Spiderman*, even if he somehow actually exists, loves comic readers.

#### IV

I have argued that the main contrast between religious fictionalism and other recently developed fictionalist positions in other non-religious fields of enquiry is the sort of personal and affective relationship said to be felt between them and God, the feeling of being in a personal and

loving communion with God. I have argued that a theistic form of religious fictionalism must defend the plausibility of a notion of God which, despite being understood in fictional terms, allows in some relevant way the feeling of being in a loving and personal communion with God. I have argued that a realist, non-Meingonian artifactual fictionalist understanding of God, along the lines that philosophers such as Schiffer and Thomasson have already defended on non-religious grounds regarding fictional characters, seems to be the most direct way for preserving the possibility of the religious person standing in an actual relation to God without surrendering the fictionalist distinctive claim that religious faith is just a human product and that the kind of religious understanding of the world that religious faith involves is akin to becoming immersed in an imaginative exercise. Last, I have argued that, despite allowing the possibility of the religious person standing in an actual relation to God, a fictionalist understanding of God in realist, artifactual terms fails to preserve a genuine personal relationship between the concrete religious person and God. Ultimately, my aim in this paper was to extend the current philosophical debate on religious fictionalism by emphasizing one important aspect of religion, though one that is commonly neglected among defenders of religious fictionalism, which, at least from a theistic perspective, should be preserved if religious fictionalism is to be considered as an equally plausible and properly religious alternative to the traditional understanding of religious faith.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Note, however, that not all Christian philosophers agree that religious belief is a necessary condition for religious faith — see, e.g., Alston’s account of religious faith in terms of “acceptance” [Alston (1996)] and, more recently, Howard-Snyder’s understanding of religious faith in terms of “belieflless assuming”



[Howard-Snyder (2016)]. Nor all Christian philosophers reduce religious motivation to evidential terms — *e.g.*, according to Plantinga and defenders of the so-called reformed epistemology, religious faith involves propositional belief even when it is not derived from evidence.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent and accessible overview of the philosophical debate over religious fictionalism, see Le Poidevin (2019); see also Scott and Malcolm (2018). However, it is interesting to note that religious fictionalism is not, strictly speaking, a completely new philosophical position, with some authors having convincingly argued that it has been a position either fully endorsed or at least considered in a relevant philosophical way by classical thinkers such as Kant [Jay (2014)], Feuerbach [Verhayden (1993)], and Unamuno [Oya (2020)], although perhaps not articulated under the kind of analytic and more systematic jargon we are nowadays used to.

<sup>3</sup> There may be Christian people who believe that God exists without believing that this sort of loving and personal relationship with God exists (*e.g.*, those who conceive of God as Him being *just* an impersonal first cause or as Him being *just* the final judge). This may be a coherent theological position, but I sincerely find it very hard to reconcile with the central Christian claim about the atonement of Jesus Christ. Biblical Scriptures are clear on this point — see, *e.g.*, “This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” [1 John 4: 9–10]; “But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” [Romans 5: 8]. But even from a purely philosophical, non-scriptural perspective, I personally think that the most straightforward implication of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is that there is such a loving and personal relationship with God.

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that the religious person cannot find other beneficial outcomes of their faith which, arguably, may be independent of there being such a loving and personal relationship with God (*e.g.*, the tranquility that the religious person may find in realizing that the world is not a chaotic disorder but rather has an ultimate, rational design; or the comfort the religious person may find in believing that all actions will be justly judged in the end).

<sup>5</sup> I emphasize that the problem is conceptual, not just epistemological. This contrasts with the kind of difficulties that the traditional theist faces when claiming that there is a genuine, personal and loving relationship between the concrete religious person and God. Since, according to traditional theism, God is conceived as a supernatural Being who actually exists but is neither spatially nor temporarily located, or at least not located in the same way as a concrete object like an individual concrete religious person is, the traditional theist faces the challenge of explaining *how* such a personal relationship occurs. Nonetheless, given that according to traditional theism God is conceived as a Personal Being, under this conception God is then at least the right sort of entity to engage in

personal relationships even if there is no clear explanation as to how He personally relates to the concrete person.

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