The Complex Relationships between Different Beliefs: A Commentary on Van Leeuwen's *Religion as Make-Believe*

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Although Van Leeuwen's *Religion as Make-Believe: A Theory of Belief, Imagination, and Group Identity* contributes to a better understanding of the dynamics of religious beliefs, it raises several questions and invites a deeper discussion in order to better assess the specific features of these beliefs in relation to other belief systems. The limitations observed could help us better understand the complex relationships between different beliefs as they emerge in different social spheres, with their own codes and applications.

Research on beliefs and believing is a thriving field, with many studies published in recent years, spanning several disciplinary areas and providing new insights each year to advance our knowledge of such a fundamental, if somewhat neglected, cognitive feature. Perhaps the focus has been on a general view of the process that allows beliefs to be formed and maintained, rather than on differences between types and subtypes of beliefs, especially religious ones. Indeed, it is quite plausible that recent research on beliefs and believing has tried to avoid a traditional bias and confusion: the one that associates beliefs with a religious or transcendental semantic field, ignoring that there is much more to believing than just the religious type. If we examine Neil Van Leeuwen's *Religion as Make-Believe: A Theory of Belief, Imagination, and Group Identity* (2023), we find rather a broader perspective that recognizes a greater role for beliefs and believing in human knowledge and action, much more than in previous studies in which believing could be considered a second-class cognitive feature compared to true knowledge.

The previous lines only try to provide some context to introduce Van Leeuwen's new work. This is a surprising essay that can be seen from different perspectives: as an attempt to clarify the awkward field of religious beliefs by introducing some necessary distinctions; to advance a thesis more in the field of epistemology in order to highlight some aspects of human knowledge; to go a step further and complement the limited and simplistic views developed by the cognitive science of religion (CSR) in recent years; to offer a much-needed education in belief that will allow us to address many current issues after the proliferation of fake news and the like; to develop a further deconstruction of religion, following a long tradition of trying to reduce and naturalize this embarrassingly unmanageable human feature; and as a challenge, or even a provocation, to theologians and philosophers of religion who have tried for centuries to deal with belief as a central tenet of Christian religion.

Since the commentator is a theologian, the last question may be the most interesting. Nevertheless, a first impression is that for those used to the drama and intensity of Kierkegaard's analysis of faith in *Fear and Trembling*, or for those used to the demanding and tragic experience of faith in Karl Barth's *Römerbrief*, this book might simply seem too silly to take into account, since religious belief is described from the outset in terms of a children's game, a "let's pretend" playing, far removed from the life or death questions that could motivate the classical works cited. Or take as another contrast the works of the greatest contemporary philosophers of religion, who try to show the rationality of the Christian faith, such as Swinburne or Plantinga. Again, Van Leeuwen's argument might seem too disarmingly naive and unworthy to be taken seriously.

Despite these earlier impressions, it would be a great mistake to ignore this book as something too alien to the theological and philosophical tradition and the repeated attempts to come to terms with the experience of faith at the

heart of the Christian message. In any case, it represents a remarkable effort to better explain the dynamics of religious belief and to distinguish it from other forms of belief. Theologians can learn from this interaction, and engaging with this work is a test of theology's capacity to respond to new challenges and to prove that it still has the best story to tell, the best approach to a mysterious and transforming experience, which nevertheless knows many alternative readings and theories, many attempts to naturalize it or to rescue it from religious and transcendental terms.

I have to admit that this is not the first time I have dealt with Van Leeuwen's theories on religious and other beliefs, but the previous attempt was based on a few published articles (Oviedo and Szocik 2020). Now an entire book offers the opportunity to expand and better explain and apply the original theory, and therefore a new engagement is required.

It is important to understand the central messages of the book as a condition for genuine engagement. The main point of the theory developed is that religious beliefs represent a particular cognitive attitude, closer to fictional imagination, that can be distinguished from other beliefs, called "factual beliefs." There are four distinguishing features that help to capture this distinction:

- Factual beliefs are involuntary; you cannot help believing something that can be verified, whereas religious beliefs are voluntary and you can stop believing them at will.
- Religious beliefs are compartmentalized, or only work in some situations and not in others, whereas factual beliefs have a much wider range of applications.
- Factual beliefs require cognitive governance, or help navigate many domains, whereas religious beliefs lack this quality, and are limited to a small domain.
- Factual beliefs are susceptible to contrary evidence, whereas religious beliefs tend to persist in the face of data showing otherwise.

The idea is that factual beliefs play the main cognitive role, helping us to behave rationally by providing the necessary means to navigate a complex and demanding reality, while religious beliefs, or "credences"—as Van Leeuwen prefers to call them—are a secondary cognitive attitude that might supplement some knowledge, but is limited to some less practical areas and therefore of little use when we try to manage our daily business and relationships. The author describes this as a "two-map theory," trying to emphasize the difference with those who claim that we—or most cultures—operate on a single cognitive map. This is the main part of the book. Subsequent chapters attempt to extend this model beyond the so-called WEIRD people, or Westerners, using much data from the cultural anthropological record; and to support it with a semantic

analysis of differences in the use of words like "think" and "believe." The final chapters present interesting applications of the theory. The first is the view of religious belief as a means of enforcing group identity, as possibly its main function, following a tradition that can be traced back to the sociology of Émile Durkheim; and the question of the rationality of religious belief, which the author is convinced can be better addressed within the proposed framework.

Now that the central ideas of the book have been revealed, a critical discernment is required in order to assess its heuristic capabilities. The first thing that can be said is that this is a more sophisticated theory of religious belief than those we are used to from CSR and evolutionist theories of religion. After a long period dominated by these very reductive and frustrating theories, at least for theologians and philosophers of religion, this is a clear advance. Then the main thesis about the cognitive double map and the differences that govern its application are clear and help to understand better how different belief systems work in different environments and circumstances. Van Leeuwen has even designed a language and a semantic game that allow us to proceed with new analytical tools to better describe networks of beliefs.

Having recognized these merits, several questions arise when trying to go deeper into this heuristic or theory and its suitability with regard to real religious and other forms of belief. My critical remarks will be made in a certain order, trying to establish a constructive dialogue with the author, with the aim of improving this theory and making it more appropriate, taking into account several cases that the author has neglected or simply has not been able to cover, since the territory is always larger and more complex than the maps—even considering two of them.

Too Many or Too Few Maps?

A first problem arises with the description of this double cognitive map. In my opinion, there are too few. Real social systems require more maps to circulate, or as the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, an expert in social systems theory, described it: each subsystem has its own communication code and thus observes reality through a different map (Luhmann 1988). A similar point can be derived from other ambitious program at social structuring: the Bruno Latour investigation into "modes of existence." Such program draws a model of different areas in which our experience is configured, and again, following distinct codes depending on where we move: in an economic, a scientific, or a religious mode (Latour 2013). This applies not only to a distinction between religion and all the rest, but also to economics, politics, science, and even more to distinctive languages such as those of emotional or erotic relationships and those that regulate aesthetic communication. To put it bluntly, we use a different cognitive map when we try to negotiate a loan in a bank; when we do neurological research; when we campaign for a social or political cause; when

we try to convince someone of our love for him or her; or when we immerse ourselves in a concert or visit an art exhibition. Obviously, the religious code or map has its own characteristics, semantics, references, distinctions and style. Some have even spoken of a language and a "religious grammar," in the sense of a set of rules that allows communication and exchange between those involved (Oviedo 2015). This grammar is distinct from others, such as those used in ethical judgement—even if it often overlaps with several religions that have evolved towards more ethically concerned expressions.

So the first problem with Van Leeuwen's description is that it is too poor and limited, and that he could extend the idea of cognitive maps beyond the simple distinction between "factual beliefs" and "religious credences." I suppose he might reply that all the other systems are different from the religious one because they could be subsumed within the "factual class." I am not entirely convinced. Take the extreme case of the code of love—in the emotional sense—the game that lovers play, or the seduction process, often goes beyond the factual level, and a person would be a poor lover if he or she confined his or her loving discourse to the mere factual level. I admit that even in this case the distinction can provide some insight and help to distinguish between a set of beliefs that nourish the lovers, such as illusions, expectations, feelings, and others, as opposed to the factual beliefs about the need to take a loan to get a home where they can pursue their love in minimally realistic terms and eventually give birth to a family. Nevertheless, it would be bad if a couple lost their romantic code as a set of beliefs that nourish and support their mutual commitment. Then other codes are involved: the ethical—which demands fidelity and trust, the social—which values the respective families and other social conditions, and very practical ones, especially when they try to raise children.

It is probably not so much a matter of dealing with such different cognitive maps, but of negotiating between them and moving from one map to another. It is clear that you cannot use the scientific map to approach a person you love—indeed, scientists might feel uncomfortable using their own map in this alternative field of love and romance. However, we need to be quite fluent in using these different languages or maps, and to be able to exchange and relate to each of them.

Van Leeuwen is right in his very illustrative examples: a religious person will look for good doctors if he has a health problem, and not just pray for healing. A parish priest will have to negotiate a bank loan and contract a construction company on the best terms to carry out maintenance work in his church (I am thinking of a Catholic priest). It would be simply irrational to try to improve the building by asking God for a special intervention. In any case, the priest and his congregation would pray for divine help, which would most likely come through a successful campaign to raise more funds to carry out the work. As

I said, the problem is to relate one map to another, or to combine them in a positive way.

The good news is that most religious people have learnt to combine these different maps, even if in some cases abuse, hypocrisy, and misrepresentation feed suspicions that religious people are less sincere or only formally—not honestly—believe what they say they believe. Nevertheless, most religious believers probably try to combine these different maps in ways that help them navigate their lives and relationships better. We can call this process "cognitive conjunction," or "convergence," or "complementation," but in any case it is important to be aware of how things can get trickier and more complex, and that "religious beliefs" can be confused at some other levels.

Too Irrelevant Beliefs? How Much Cognitive Governance?

After the first question, the second concerns the range of religious beliefs and their applications. Once again, Van Leeuwen's perspective seems too reductive and simplistic, whereas things are much more complex. He probably has in mind forms of religious belief that are less relevant to one's own life and options, and less situations in which such beliefs involve matters of life and death. If we take the extreme expression of martyrdom, for those who risk their lives for holding a religious creed, as has often been the case in the past and still is in many areas with very limited religious freedom, religious beliefs can hardly be described by the four characteristics Van Leeuwen defends. Indeed, when holding a religious belief means putting one's life at risk, it means that one's whole life and behavior is under great stress, and almost everything must be seen in terms of this pressing case.

We can move on to other scenarios in which religious beliefs can again take on a special significance and intensity. Some particular beliefs are able to give meaning to one's life and avoid the emptiness that could encourage fatal choices. I am not sure how the four characteristics or rules insisted on in the book apply in these cases, where once again holding the right beliefs is a matter of life or death, but in a radically different sense from the one described in the previous paragraph: holding these beliefs does not involve the risk of death, but just the opposite: lacking them could mean that a life is not worth living. In this case, cognitive governance is radically extended to encompass a whole life, in the sense of determining the extent to which it is worth living.

Several examples in this reviewed book remind of an anecdote from the essay by Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* (2009, 50): "He [Dennett] also commits the Ditchkins-like blunder of believing that religion is a botched attempt to explain the world, which is like seeing ballet as a botched attempt to run for a bus." Reading through the pages of this highly ironic book, it is easy to concur with its criticism when many crucially threatened developments in human and social life are contrasted with the regenerative air that Christian

faith and theology can provide. Obviously, religious credences are inappropriate for many practical tasks, but by the same token, many factual beliefs are ill-suited and badly equipped to deal with other issues or tasks that require serious commitment, values and strong ethical convictions, especially in critical times. These "credences" sometimes offer the only hope of resisting the most negative trends and of making things better. This is another sense of the "cognitive governance" issue.

On Religious Functions: Many More Than Those Suggested

One impression the reader gets from the pages of this book is that religious belief is somewhat diminished or devalued, being associated with the enforcement of group identity and little else. Not that there is anything wrong with that; it is just too little. Even within current research on religion and its functions, limiting it to the performance of a sense of belonging is frustratingly reductive and ignores many aspects that have been highlighted in recent decades. The functional approach to religion has explored more possibilities and offers a number of interesting insights. This programme has developed in different directions, some building on more abstract functions, others looking at very practical issues to describe more concrete performances. In the first case, the quoted sociologist Niklas Luhmann provides perhaps the most rigorous and demanding analysis of such a function. Religion is based on a communication code that distinguishes between transcendence and immanence, thus helping social systems to reduce their excessive complexity and to cope with unmanageable contingencies. Luhmann (1985) deepened this abstract model to describe the function of religion as an ability to address and neutralize the paradoxes that inevitably arise in self-referential social systems.

A critical eye can hardly see the relevance of these highly abstract developments to the issue at hand. In fact, in Van Leeuwen's treatment, religious "beliefs" appear as much simpler and can be described in a fanciful, childish way. The point is that such beliefs, nourished by a constant process of religious communication, become part of the fabric of the social system to such an extent that their sharp decline could pose a great danger and threat to the entire system if it lacked such functionality. Luhmann has struggled all his life with this question: to what extent can religion be replaced by functional equivalents capable of providing similar functions and performance, and to what extent have contemporary social systems become so resilient that they can even get rid of religious communication and beliefs? This is an open question, but one that places religious belief on a different level, with social functions that go much further than the simple Durkheimian paradigm of social identity formation. The question suggested by such an analysis is that religious beliefs, and the code that articulates them, take on a different character, or a very different shape, when they are related to these higher functions; or, to use Van

Leeuwen's language, they acquire a different cognitive governance and scope of application.

The other approach to religious functions is more practical and has to do with their therapeutic effects. Van Leeuwen quotes Tanya Luhrmann, but obviously each reader pays attention to different aspects in her engaging and highly informative books. She clearly describes the healing experiences and perceptions of intensely shared and celebrated religious faith. These experiences have been much more studied in recent years in a growing body of scientific literature on religion and health, under the labels of "religious coping," "religion and resilience," "religion and well-being," or "religion and flourishing." Hundreds of new studies are published each year in this area of research, almost all of which show the positive effects of religious beliefs and the practices that support or nourish them on the physical and mental health of those involved (Rosmarin and Koenig 2020). What does all this research add to our understanding of religious "credences"?

Many studies show that only more intense and shared forms of religion achieve these healing properties. Simply believing in God is of little effect unless it is translated into attitudes nourished by celebration, prayer, and other engaging practices. It is very reductive to describe these "belief" in the terms that Van Leeuwen does, without considering how much levels of belief correlate with healing and other positive effects, such as improved quality of life and relationships. We are talking about levels of religious belief, which can range on a spectrum from very weak to very strong; with little or more influence in many life matters; with more or less involvement in other areas of life and business.

Cognitive Salience, Belief Formation, and Social Support

Scanning the list of references at the end of Van Leeuwen's book, the reader may feel frustrated again after noticing the paucity of citations to recent research in the field of belief and process of believing studies. For many years, the research programme Creditions, led by Hans-Ferdinand Angel and Rüdiger Seitz, has been gathering in Graz and has published several books and a large number of research papers, which Van Leeuwen should know, since he has attended some of the recent conferences organized by these experts (Angel et al. 2017). The treatment of beliefs and the process of believing in this case benefits from neurological, cognitive, and epistemological studies and offers a model of how beliefs emerge, become stable, and eventually die, which competes with other similar models now on offer. This model has the ambition to cover all kinds of beliefs, religious and nonreligious, and to provide a guide to dealing with the thorny issue of how beliefs become reliable and can be evaluated.

Another absence concerns the epistemological side, which has been very fruitful in recent years, producing many essays that try to better understand this

process and the extent to which beliefs become a central cognitive feature. A recent example is Matthew Chrisman's (2022) book, *Belief, Agency, and Knowledge.* Several points emerge as relevant to our topic. For example, the extent to which beliefs are voluntary or less so; Chrisman claims that beliefs lack voluntariness but are subject to normative control. They appear more as mental states and less as performances, but perhaps both approaches could be legitimate. However, the main theme of the book is how we can achieve a degree of control to avoid total relativism and the social chaos that would follow. The solution points to communication, mutual testing, and interactions that allow us to test our beliefs, thereby supporting a process of formation or education. This idea obviously also applies to religious "creeds," which, despite becoming sometimes very wild, in the long run stabilize after a dynamism of mutual testing and shared control, which admittedly not always works in a smooth way, but in many other cases manages to drop false beliefs or beliefs that become damaging for the single person and society alike.

Probably that book was published too late and Van Leeuwen did not have the opportunity to read Chrisman and other epistemological analyses of belief. But this approach can help to add some nuance to the simple model Van Leeuwen has proposed. Indeed, this nuance is most lacking throughout the book. To take another example, religious beliefs appear in his model as "resistant to contrary evidence," and this is true for some religious styles—the fanatical ones—but not for many mainstream religious expressions, which are indeed very vulnerable, not only to contrary evidence, but even to the collapse of "plausibility structures," as Peter Berger liked to show half a century ago (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The result is a powerful secularization, as people lose their faith and find it no longer convenient or socially appropriate to hold those beliefs and attend religious services. The idea that Chrisman proposes is that beliefs are strongly socially anchored and therefore depend for their survival on their own social and cultural environment, but at the same time they can be subject to some filtering by social control and testing to avoid their craziest expressions. This is something we can observe in Christian beliefs throughout history and in the main discussions that have contributed to their long-term configuration.

How Much Rationality?

A final point of revision in Van Leeuwen's theory concerns the rationality of religious beliefs. In perhaps the best chapter of the book, the author offers a convincing typology of three major classes, each with three subtypes, to classify the different strategies and solutions to this question: how religious people, who are usually rational, hold beliefs that are quite far from this standard. Van Leeuwen again offers his theory of two maps to explain this strange and apparently contradictory attitude. In fact, the studies of Cristine Legare, which

he cites, empirically confirm the coexistence of two maps in many religious minds (Legare and Visala 2011; Legare et al. 2012).

However, Van Leeuwen dismisses as less convincing the third "solution" in the first class of his typology: the one that tries to show the rationality of religious belief. He even cites Anselm and Plantinga arguments (Van Leeuwen 2023, 206) to justify many Christian beliefs, but the reason for his own disbelief is that other more exotic and stranger beliefs in other religious horizons would remain unexplained. This is a difficult line of argument to follow. It would be much easier to recognize that there are sets of religious beliefs that can be explained in rational terms, as a long tradition in the philosophy of religion shows, and other "credences" that depart from this pattern and so can be described in purely mythological terms, as superstition, or in other cases as mysteries beyond rational access. In this sense, it would be much better to distinguish between religious beliefs that can be given a good deal of rational explanation; and other beliefs that are very difficult to explain in these terms, or where some rationality in holding them can only be shown indirectly. For example, if believing that Christ has risen helps one to cope better with a serious illness; or provides hope and support for difficult ethical choices, then in a pragmatic sense we might recognize a degree of rationality in it.

In this case, as in others, things appear less in black and white than in shades of grey, or in a gradation of more or less rationality in the beliefs we hold and profess. In any case, the combination of rational knowledge, mystery, and some grey areas in our perception of reality is something common not only in the religious realm, but also in science and other social areas where we do not manage to achieve a complete and satisfying rationalization and need to adopt many beliefs and intuitions that go beyond any standard of rationality, but that give meaning to our lives and relationships.

Concluding Remarks

The study of beliefs and the believing process still faces a number of challenges and unresolved issues that are becoming more prominent in the current cultural panorama. For example, the ease with which beliefs are manipulated by increasingly powerful means in social networks and intelligent systems. The issue of the involuntariness of beliefs raised by Van Leeuwen and Chrisman becomes less convincing when confronted with many cases in which beliefs are easily induced and nourished by forms of propaganda and deliberately deceptive communication. Perhaps the subjects of such messages cannot help but believe them, but the question remains as to their reach, consistency and, more seriously, the possibility of preventing and correcting them.

A second issue relates to the journal in which this book symposium appears, which is dedicated to the dialogue between science and religion. Van Leeuwen's theory contributes to a better understanding of these relations by proposing a

dual map model. Extending this model, as suggested in my first comment, we can easily imagine this exercise in terms of connecting the map of scientific knowledge and beliefs with the map of religious or transcendental ones. The big issue is to recognize that these maps can interact and be connected, helping to build a more complete and integrated knowledge of a very complex and integrated reality. In this context, it is better to avoid describing other cognitive maps as "secondary" or "imaginative," as this approach smacks of a derogatory instance towards the other. It is important to avoid the reductive dreams of those who seek a single and overarching map—a "grand theory"—that could explain and make sense of everything in our world, in our lives. These reductive dreams rather become a form of impoverishment and risk becoming exclusivist and incapable of pluralism and respect for the other, as they try to exercise forms of cognitive domination.

Lastly, it is rather unfortunate that Van Leeuwen ignored our critical points and analyses in the article we published some years ago (Oviedo and Szocik 2020), which tried to address some relevant points in his important theory of religious beliefs. Following Chrisman's suggestion, since a theory is always a belief—at least in the radical Popperian sense that it can hardly be fully and unreservedly verified—such theoretical beliefs would gain more credibility if they were able to answer critical points and engage with alternative views. Van Leeuwen's proposal about religious beliefs is another belief, and certainly not a factual one; indeed, it lies in a field between purely factual beliefs (like believing that I can find a can of beer in the fridge) and believing that my life is meaningful because I can explain what is more relevant and justify my actions. My expectation is that this belief can grow, mature, and become more plausible as it makes room for critical voices and suggestions.

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