



## **A Failed Reactivation of Enlightenment Criticism of Religion by Van Leeuwen: Content, Not Cognitive Attitude, Makes the Difference between Factual Beliefs and Religious Credence**

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The subject of this article is a critique of the philosophy of religion presented by Neil Van Leeuwen in his *Religion as Make-Believe: A Theory of Belief, Imagination, and Group Identity*. The article rejects his main title thesis that religion is make-believe. Van Leeuwen assumes that a religious individual has a cognitive attitude for religious content that is different from an attitude for factual beliefs. In this article, Van Leeuwen's concept is rejected. What distinguishes religious beliefs from factual beliefs is the difference in content, not cognitive attitudes.

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Neil Van Leeuwen (2023) offers an interesting naturalistic and reductionist philosophy of religion, moving within the framework of analytic philosophy, philosophy of mind, and the cognitive and evolutionary sciences of religion. He takes the distinction between factual belief and religious credence as the starting point for his theory. According to his “distinct attitudes” thesis, he sees them as two different ways of processing ideas. In turn, his second key thesis, the so-called “imagination thesis,” states that religious credence is different from factual belief in a way analogous to fictional imagining. Also important to Van Leeuwen is the notion of pretense.

According to Van Leeuwen, the religious individual operates two cognitive systems in parallel, which the author calls mind maps. One of these maps deals with spiritual phenomena and events, while the other deals with actual events. Religious people have a distinct cognitive attitude regarding religious credence. One of the features intended to characterize the religious cognitive system is its flexibility and dependence on the individual’s religious will and intention, as opposed to factual beliefs, which can only follow facts. Van Leeuwen gives the example of acquiring and choosing a religious system to fit our needs, which is unlikely to be a feature of factual beliefs that simply follow the evidence.

This dualistic philosophy of Van Leeuwen, according to which factual beliefs follow facts, does not explain the division of people into believers, atheists, and agnostics (as well as others who doubt and are skeptical about the existence of supernatural beings, but do not declare themselves as representatives of either group). According to the logic of Van Leeuwen’s reasoning, atheism is compatible with factual beliefs, because the belief that God does not exist is supposed to correspond to eyewitness facts, and the existence of God in time and space detected perceptually or deductively scientifically is not one of them. But in addition to a large group of atheists, there is an even larger population of people who believe in supernatural beings. This population, according to Van Leeuwen’s philosophy, plays a game with itself, pretending that there is a God, although there is not. According to Van Leeuwen’s explanation, for a variety of reasons, the greater part of humanity chooses to play and continue the religious game even if it becomes familiar with the counter-arguments. This corresponds to his hypothesis of no evidential vulnerability, but it is not applicable to religious content, which can neither be confirmed nor denied. Thus, this evidential vulnerability criterion does not allow analysis of religious beliefs when confronted with factual beliefs.

Instead of the above reasoning presented by Van Leeuwen, it is worth considering the following proposal regarding his concept of following or not following the facts. Both factual beliefs and religious credence follow facts. Neither type of belief, including religious beliefs, is a type of game or make-believe. The difference is that individuals consider different types of facts and derive different consequences from them. We have pointed this out elsewhere (with Hans Van Eyghen) when we analyzed which of the two attitudes toward religiosity and

supernatural beings, belief in them or atheism, can be considered the default. In our opinion, neither of them is the default attitude. This is determined by the cultural context. In religious societies, the default attitude is one of religious faith, while in secular societies atheism is more popular, but this does not necessarily make it the default attitude (Szocik and Van Eyghen 2021). This means that in different societies different contents have the status of facts, as well as different types of beliefs have the status of factual beliefs. It can even be said that in religious communities, religious content also becomes factual in a specific way for religious people, who treat it almost as fact. This means that Van Leeuwen's classification inappropriately distinguishes religious beliefs from factual beliefs with regard to the attribution of different cognitive attitudes to these two types.

Van Leeuwen alleges religious credence has little, if any, potential for cognitive governance. As an example, he cites petitionary prayers, in which religious people typically do not ask God to act contrary to the naturalistic order. As the author suggests, petitionary prayers thus have the character of a kind of support or reinforcement of the natural order, but not its disruption. This would suggest that religious beliefs do not have the power to influence factual beliefs, nor do they function in a way that actually opposes factual beliefs. Therefore, they are secondary cognitive attitudes. Factual beliefs remain dominant, as they set the horizon of possible meanings and set the framework for religious beliefs. Van Leeuwen's argument also continues with the observation of the fact that believers, despite petitionary prayers, do not give up in parallel taking actual actions to achieve the desired goal. Van Leeuwen takes this regularity as another example of how believers can perfectly distinguish between the factual order and the religious order and do not mix the two different levels of causality.

Such behavior can happen, and the examples cited repeatedly by Van Leeuwen of sick religious people who not only pray, but also take treatment, seem to confirm this. But religious people often combine and, in a sense, mix the order of religious beliefs with the order of factual beliefs, and the former are not just for self-deception and are not a form of role-playing. A religious person suffering from an illness or asking God for the recovery of a loved one does not treat her religious activities in terms of a game. Depending on the end of the illness, the religious person will treat the course of events either as hearing her requests or as a trial sent by God, the latter in terms of warning or punishment.

Van Leeuwen makes a considerable point that religious beliefs do not govern factual beliefs, but that the latter govern religious beliefs. This is derived from the degree of evidential vulnerability that characterizes only factual beliefs. This is the part of his book where the limitations of the naturalistic perspective he adopts are particularly apparent. Van Leeuwen adopts a very simple, rather naive naturalistic explanatory perspective that interprets religious beliefs in terms of their ability to influence reality. The author looks at religious people by adopting a position that analyzes religion and religiosity through a literal

interpretation of religious content. The examples he provides, especially those related to petitionary prayers, confirm this methodological stance. Van Leeuwen is more reminiscent here of the first attempts at a naturalistic explanation of religion proper to the philosophers of the French Enlightenment. And, as if by surprise, he discovers that religious people generally value or expect more the hope carried by religion than the faithful reflection of reality or the ability to causally alter the course of events through prayers. But this is precisely one of the essential functions of religion and religiosity.

It is worth noting here two phenomena that undermine Van Leeuwen's belief above. First, religious beliefs influence factual beliefs. This applies to the way phenomena are explained and interpreted. This can also be seen in the approach to scientific theories, which are accepted or not depending on religious beliefs. Second, Van Leeuwen's focus on explaining religious beliefs through the prism of their possible relation to real phenomena is weakened by the fact that both some scientists and some philosophers believe in God. These are people who know what the structure of reality is from a scientific, empirical, and rational point of view, and yet they share religious beliefs.

Van Leeuwen, following the tradition of analytic philosophy, formulates a series of classifications and categories, which he then applies to cases of religious belief. It is difficult to determine whether the particular characteristics attributed by the author are indeed the domain of religious beliefs alone. An example of such is the category of voluntariness, which is said to enable such three religious phenomena as creativity, syncretism, and conversion in response to incentives. As an example of how the creativity category functions at the basis of religious beliefs, Van Leeuwen gives the example of the terra cotta warriors of China, built in ancient times on the orders of an emperor. For Van Leeuwen, this is an example of creativity in the sense that it was an unprecedented construction and the Chinese emperor, believing that such warriors could protect him after death from enemy attack, was free to design and implement his idea. This freedom to create a belief, according to Van Leeuwen, is voluntary, unlike the process of creating a factual belief.

In the example given, it is not so much about forming a belief as it is about deriving consequences from the belief held. An emperor who believes in life after death could demand the building of a terra cotta army of warriors, but he could just as well demand something else, or nothing at all. But factual beliefs are no different in this regard either. The belief that climate change is happening leads to different consequences in the actions of different people, or no action at all. Van Leeuwen's examples of the specificity of factual beliefs seem to fit primarily with Aristotelian-style perceptual beliefs, that is, eyewitness perception of an object. In this case, indeed, the statement "John sees a tree" is, in a colloquial, naive, non-philosophical sense, unquestionable, while the statement "John believes he is talking to God" can only be true within the framework of religious credence. But factual beliefs that are more complex, involving social interactions, or sets

of complicated facts whose explanation requires the application of appropriate theories, despite the fact that they belong to the group of factual beliefs and not religious credence, are complicated and interpreted differently by individuals. People also react to them in different ways, and not everyone derives the same practical consequences for action. Factual beliefs equivalent to the terra cotta of warriors and the Chinese emperor may be a given nation's belief in its military might and economic strength. This is a type of factual belief. The consequences of sharing such a belief can vary and also have no precedent. The creativity of the holders of these beliefs is also unlimited.

Van Leeuwen here, like many others, operates a simplistic model of the brain-behavior relationship. It is a rather naive version of computationalism. Both factual and religious beliefs can influence, as well as fail to influence, behavioral dependence on a number of factors. Lots of types of factual beliefs related to the state and nation, which are definitely not religious credence, lead to unprecedented consequences regarding the issuance of laws, the making of new laws, the creation of monuments, public holidays, and much more. The abolition of slavery in slaveholding America was an unprecedented event. From the factual belief that there were slaves, people living in slaveholding America derived various consequences. Quite a few of them were certainly of a voluntariness nature. Did they therefore meet the criteria of religious credence?

The lack of a nuanced view of factual beliefs makes the further distinctions and categories introduced by Van Leeuwen flawed in his search for differences between religious credence and factual beliefs. This can also be seen in the case of another category, incentives. According to Van Leeuwen, religious credence is influenced by incentives, while factual beliefs are not. But again, the issue of which factual beliefs we are talking about comes back here. In the case of complex factual beliefs, external factors, including incentives, can lead to their change. In light of new knowledge or new experiences, some factual beliefs are replaced by others. This is also true of simple factual beliefs based on perception, when we interpret what we perceive incorrectly, despite the fact that it is correct from the standpoint of our perception. Science often corrects such perceptions regarding, for example, astronomical phenomena or climate change, when, for example, from the fateful occurrence of snow in winter, some conclude that climate change in the sense described by scientists is not occurring.

Van Leeuwen also devotes much attention to showing the lack of cognitive governance by religious beliefs. Since religious credence is not factual belief, religious components are complementary to instrumental actions that are geared toward achieving a given goal. It is for this reason, Van Leeuwen argues, that a religious individual does not abandon factual actions aimed at achieving a goal despite a parallel stated belief in God and providence.

It is difficult to agree with Van Leeuwen's assertion that neither intuitive nor theological conceptions of God lack cognitive governance. A more nuanced

approach to the issue is required here. It would have to be said that some religious contents do not have cognitive governance, others do sometimes, while still others may always or almost always have it. It depends on the religious individual, the degree of his or her faith. It may also depend on the type of belief and concept. Religious and theological beliefs and conceptions can have cognitive guidance in a very strong way. The sphere of human relations has been and continues to be significantly shaped by religious content. They act here as if they were factual beliefs. The belief that someone is a morally good person because she prays to God becomes a factual belief that is difficult to challenge. Instead, it is a religious credence that says that God chooses those who are morally best, that He sends graces. These religious credences cannot be challenged or modified, and they have cognitive governance. It is difficult here to accept, following Van Leeuwen, that neither intuitive nor theological religious choices have cognitive governance.

The methodological error of Van Leeuwen's philosophy is the assumption that religious beliefs are the domain of only secondary cognitive attitudes. This thesis, accepted at the outset, leads to the erroneous conclusion that religious credence is always the domain of this attitude, on a par with imagination and conjecture. Perhaps this is the biggest metatheoretical error committed by Van Leeuwen. It would be appropriate to correct this error by proposing the following assertion in place of the aforementioned thesis. People, both believers and non-believers, can adopt different cognitive attitudes to different types of beliefs. Religious beliefs may be the subject of a secondary cognitive attitude for some. However, this would be quite curious and rather unusual from the point of view of a religious person who genuinely believes in the object of her religious belief. She cannot "know" about God in the manner characteristic of factual beliefs, because God in religious and theological terminology exists outside of time and space. Therefore, God's existence cannot be proven in the terms of factual beliefs, but neither can his existence be disproven. It is resolvable by way of worldview.

Not all religious content has always the same cognitive governance, which does not distinguish it from factual beliefs in terms of cognitive governance. Van Leeuwen lacks a nuanced approach to both religious credences and factual beliefs. Complex factual beliefs can have the potential for cognitive governance very differently. We can assume that the degree of cognitive governance is generally greater for factual beliefs than for religious credence. But also add that it is not so much—at least not always—due to the nature of the type of beliefs in question, but also due to the context and the person. Feminist epistemology categories such as "standpoint" and "situated knowledge" aptly express this complexity. If there are situations in which religious beliefs have cognitive guidance and factual beliefs do not, what does this say about the interpretation proposed by Van Leeuwen? It says as much that the potential of both types of beliefs is determined to an important extent by the context, environment, and specifics of the individual. This shows that cognitive attitude is secondary

to belief type, rather than the other way around, as Van Leeuwen believes that cognitive attitude determines how a belief type is treated.

The inadequacy of the unnuanced approach that characterizes Van Leeuwen's philosophy is also evident in his analyses of the category of evidential vulnerability, which is supposed to characterize factual beliefs and of which religious credence is supposed to be devoid. Several types of factual beliefs should be distinguished here. In the case of those based on perception from a distance, the rejection of false beliefs can indeed occur immediately, at the moment of evidence. But for many other types of factual beliefs, which involve complex facts and phenomena and go beyond the realm of sensory perception, resistance to experience occurs just as often as in the case of religious credence. The phenomenon of fake news and post-truth is precisely an example of how evidence-resistant false factual beliefs can be. Despite the almost unanimous position of scientists on the existence of climate change and the effectiveness of vaccines, as well as the rather intense presence of knowledge of this in popular culture, many people believe false factual beliefs on these topics. This means, therefore, that Van Leeuwen's thesis that the feature of evidential vulnerability means the automatic elimination of a belief in the light of evidence is not formulated precisely enough, for such a definition is not met by many factual beliefs.

With Van Leeuwen's reductionist philosophy of religion outlined in this way, which denies the truthful epistemic value of religious beliefs, the next part of his discussion appears as a natural conclusion. Namely, Van Leeuwen here refers to practical functions other than cognitive functions that are played by religious components. This is an unoriginal concept, echoing the beliefs of many scholars of religion, in recent years disseminated by, among others, Ara Norenzayan (2013) in his book *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict*. It is a theory that recognizes that the main, and perhaps only important, function played by religious components is that of providing and marking group identities. Similar views are voiced by Jay Feerman (2009, 2016), who denies religious components a truth function in the epistemic sense, while he sees the role they play as that of in-group markers.

The two chapters of Van Leeuwen's book that follow the epistemological part, namely Chapter 6 under the title "Identity and Groupish Belief" and Chapter 7 entitled "Sacred Values" give the impression of being the weakest substantive parts of the book. They are rather loosely connected to the previous chapters on the epistemic status of religious beliefs. In these chapters, Van Leeuwen presents himself as a proponent of a trend that treats religious content in a non-epistemic way, while attributing to it a symbolic, organizational function that shapes intergroup dynamics.

It is difficult to agree with Van Leeuwen's two-map theory, and the distinct attitudes and imagination theses that underpin it. While factual and religious beliefs differ in content, they do not always differ in cognitive attitudes in the

fundamental way that Van Leeuwen's theory assumes. Often, a religious person who believes in religious content does not treat it as a game or as imagination in the same way that he or she mouths fantasy content. Religious content is just as real to the believer as the content of factual beliefs. If this is the case, the only element that differentiates the two types of beliefs is their content, not the attitude of the individual—this one, after all, is the same in both cases. The differences concern the characteristics of an entity that exists outside of time and space and that is not accessible to perceptual cognition. It seems, therefore, that Van Leeuwen's most serious methodological error is to treat the act of religious belief as a type of imagining with the nature of pretension and play. The act of religious belief differs from the mental processes accompanying factual beliefs in that it is activated with respect to those contents whose existence is not taken for granted and derived from perception, as in the case of factual beliefs based on sensory perception. Consequently, it is a mistake to reduce the functions of religious components exclusively to social functions, concerning the guarantee of group identity or providing a foundation for sacred values. These functions undoubtedly exist and are provided by religious components. However, they are not the essence of the existence of religious components, which, as Van Leeuwen suggests, are the only elements that are preserved as a result of his demystification of the alleged epistemic emptiness of religious beliefs. We can assume, following Van Leeuwen, that people have secondary cognitive attitudes, but religious credence is not a secondary cognitive attitude on par with suppositions and imaginings.

There are good reasons to question the validity of the paradigm proposed by Van Leeuwen, according to which religious beliefs form a separate class of beliefs. As Lluís Oviedo and I have pointed out elsewhere, religious beliefs can significantly influence practical actions (Oviedo and Szocik 2020). This occurs when religious beliefs determine the moral system adopted, and its consistent application in daily life influences the decisions made. This can also occur outside the context of religious places and events, making this type of religious belief settings independent, on par with factual beliefs.

Religious beliefs are the domain of such functions as a sense of meaning and significance. As we have pointed out, the categorization used by Van Leeuwen, dividing beliefs into factual and religious beliefs, does not quite work for religious credence analysis. Therefore, other categorizations, such as the division into "existential" and "immediate" beliefs, seem to more optimally account for the complexity, nuance, as well as functionality and contextuality of different types of beliefs (Oviedo and Szocik 2020). We have already pointed out in this article that Van Leeuwen's categorization is flawed for one fundamental reason. Namely, religious people do not treat religious beliefs in the manner presented by Van Leeuwen, that is, as an alternative or equivalent to factual beliefs. This fact is misinterpreted by Van Leeuwen as suggesting that a person holding religious beliefs is in some sense confabulating and self-deceiving, participating in a fictitious game. This is a misunderstanding of the



role played by religious beliefs. They are recognized by religious people as true, even on a par with factual beliefs, however they do not play the role fulfilled by factual beliefs, which in turn is often the role of providing orientation in space, growing out of perception. Even then, we noted that the epistemic function of religious beliefs is founded on their truthfulness in its own way.

Van Leeuwen does not seem to have correctly guessed the specifics of religious beliefs. Religious beliefs as faith-based religious beliefs, which are the domain of credence, are not based on evidence and facts from the very beginning. Therefore, they are the domain of faith. They may refer to certain facts, be based on intellectual reflection, and be subject at least to some degree to the rules of logic. Such examples are not lacking in the history of religious thought, and the scholasticism headed by St. Thomas Aquinas and Anselm of Aosta is an excellent example of this school of thought. In other words, a religious person does not assume that religious beliefs will explain the world in a manner analogous to factual beliefs. Nor does she expect to obtain scientific-type confirmation for her religious beliefs.

In conclusion, the philosophy of religion proposed by Van Leeuwen may be attractive to this group of thinkers and researchers who sympathize with the Enlightenment mindset, which we could call debunking arguments (but not evolutionary debunking arguments). Van Leeuwen adopted a way of categorizing beliefs based on supposedly different cognitive attitudes that are activated depending on the type of belief. This is a rather surprising approach, which makes the truthfulness and usefulness of beliefs dependent on cognitive attitudes rather than their content. This article presents a different position, which refers to the content difference, rather than cognitive attitudes, as relevant. The content of beliefs is what makes the different types of beliefs treated differently, as literal, symbolic, or imaginary. It is also worth emphasizing that Van Leeuwen's main thesis that a religious individual activates a secondary cognitive attitude toward religious beliefs is incorrect. Religious individuals do not treat their beliefs in terms of games and illusions. The Enlightenment-type arguments cited by Van Leeuwen stating that a religious person breaks the rules despite believing in an all-seeing and all-knowing God do not support his thesis of religiosity as a game and make-believe. What is relevant here is the content of beliefs. Because supernatural beings have the status of entities that exist outside of time and space, they are not detected and recorded through the senses. Nor are they confirmed scientifically. However, this does not mean that a religious person treats his beliefs as fictitious. This faulty starting assumption is the source of many misunderstandings and misinterpretations that must inevitably arise as a result of the assumptions made. Even if one could point to examples of religious people who confirm Van Leeuwen's theory, there are even more counterexamples that take exception to it. Also, there are many factual beliefs that are not automatically accepted. These situations show that the proposed categorization of beliefs based on cognitive attitude is flawed.

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