

■ Artigo

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The depth and limits of imaginative immersion in religious cognition

O alcance e os limites da imersão imaginativa na cognição religiosa

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ABSTRACT: Neil Van Leeuwen's Imagination Thesis (IT) proposes that religious assertions usually function not as expressions of factual beliefs about the world but as distinctive acts of imagination. This paper first reconstructs the arguments supporting the IT and then examines its limitations in explaining crucial aspects of religious cognition. Finally, it introduces an alternative model, the Imaginative Support Thesis (IST), which aims to preserve the essential role of imagination while capturing the epistemic complexity of sincere religious assertions. It can be argued that the IST has certain advantages over both the traditional belief-based model and the IT in explaining how religious cognition generally operates.

Keywords: belief, imagination, imaginative immersion, religion, epistemic attitudes.

RESUMO: A recente Tese da Imaginação (TI), de Neil Van Leeuwen, propõe que afirmações religiosas geralmente funcionam não como crenças factuais sobre o mundo, mas como atos distintos de imaginação. Neste artigo, primeiro reconstruímos os argumentos que sustentam a TI e, em seguida, examinamos suas limitações na explicação de aspectos cruciais da cognição religiosa. Por fim, propomos um modelo alternativo, a Tese do Suporte Imaginativo (TSI), que busca preservar o papel essencial da imaginação sem deixar de dar conta da complexidade epistêmica das afirmações religiosas sinceras. Argumenta-se que a TSI apresenta certas vantagens em relação tanto ao modelo tradicional baseado em crença quanto à TI, ao oferecer uma explicação mais nuançada da cognição religiosa.

Palavras-chaves: crença, imaginação, imersão imaginativa, religião, posturas epistêmicas.

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► 1 The imagination thesis

Neil Van Leeuwen has recently advanced a provocative idea he terms the “Imagination Thesis” (2023, p. 15): religious assertions are typically driven by imaginative immersion, not factual belief. This may seem counterintuitive, so some preliminary clarifications are warranted. First, the Imagination Thesis (IT) does not necessarily imply that all religious propositions are fictional. It concerns the cognitive attitude believers typically adopt toward them, not their truth or falsity (see Van Leeuwen, 2014, p. 701). Second, the IT does not deny that some individuals may hold factual religious beliefs. It simply maintains that this is not *typically* the case when religious claims are asserted.¹ Third, one might object that, since people take their religious convictions seriously, grounding them in something “as frivolous [as imagination]” (Van Leeuwen, 2014, p. 713) seems reductive. However, the proponent of the IT could reply that such an objection stems from an impoverished view of what imagination is.

Imagination operates along a spectrum. At one end are ephemeral exercises (“Imagine you have two apples”). Further along lie more immersive experiences (such as reading novels or performing on stage) that can evoke stronger emotions and temporarily shape behavior. At the far end, however, we encounter what might be termed *serious imaginative programs*. Prolonged (and often lifelong) serious engagements with such coherent narrative scripts may, over time, generate “belief-like effects” (Sinhababu, 2016, p. 119). Without producing actual beliefs, such participations may evoke deep emotions, motivate actions, and prompt propositional assertions distinct from simple pretense. Gendler (2003, p. 127) illustrates this with self-help narratives, which, after prolonged immersion, can lead individuals to act *as if* they believe in their future success, even when factual belief is absent (e.g., despite their claims, they may regularly avoid situations that would reveal their lack of progress). Here, we see emotions, degrees of behavioral adaptations, and self-prompting assertions (“I’m doing great”), but arguably not full-fledged belief.

When collectively shared and ritualistically reinforced, such imaginative programs may become socially validated since they generate identity-signaling actions. Their aim is not to “get the world right” but to provide social cohesion and “a sense of belonging” (Ryan, 2024, p. 13). Far from frivolous, these programs could play crucial roles in communal life (like signaling group loyalty and values). Something like this seems to be on Van Leeuwen’s mind when he suggests that religious cognition can generally be explained by a formula of “imagining plus group identity” (2023, p. 16).

This is still far from convincing. To strengthen the case for the IT, we may consider three potential “mismatches” between religious convictions and factual beliefs. First, an etiological mismatch: it can be argued that religious convictions typically emerge not from evidential reasoning, but from repeated imaginative immersion in shared narratives. Second, an evidential mismatch: religious convictions interact with empirical input in ways that differ from factual beliefs, indicating that these attitudes are supported by different cognitive mechanisms. Third, a behavioral mismatch: the behavior inspired by religious convictions often resembles actions driven by deep imaginative engagement, rather than those grounded in factual belief.

¹ This position is less unconventional than it might seem. Scholars have argued that in traditions such as Judaism and Hinduism, religious practice often takes precedence over personal belief, rendering the precise doxastic status of religious convictions a secondary concern (see Boespflug and Jackson, 2024).

► 2 Etiological mismatch

A case can be made that religious convictions differ from factual beliefs in (A) how they are typically acquired and maintained, and (B) in ways they tend to be abandoned.

(A) Pascal famously advised those struggling with faith not to seek more evidence, but to act as if they already believe: pray, attend services, and eventually belief will follow “naturally” (Pascal, 1999 [1670], p. 156). This seems to be a fairly standard spiritual advice. Consider someone newly received into the Catholic Church who struggles to believe in the real presence. She begins attending Eucharistic adoration, sitting before the consecrated host and contemplating the beauty of the idea that God has chosen to become present in such a fragile form. Over time, her hesitations give way to affective conviction, shaped by repetitive exposure and communal encouragement. But is such conviction best understood as belief?

Factual belief forms differently. Someone believes the Moon landing happened. They encountered evidence, accepted the claim, and retained the belief without daily reinforcement. When challenged, such beliefs are typically revisited through evidential reassessment, not ritualistic immersion (see McCain, 2016, p. 28; Van Leeuwen, 2023, p. 78). Religious convictions, however, often fade without sustained ritual exposure. If one stops praying or attending services, the strength of their conviction tends to erode. This suggests different psychological mechanisms underlying factual beliefs and religious convictions.

One may consider how imaginative immersion often elicits affective responses that linger beyond the initial experience. For instance, after watching a horror film, you might temporarily hesitate to go to your basement alone, even if you don't believe in ghosts. Gendler terms this imaginative “contagion” (2003, p. 125). Since such affective responses are not grounded in belief, they wear off over time. However, when imaginative exposure is repeated regularly in structured ways and socially reinforced, it can generate long-lasting, habitualized affective responses that may even produce a kind of involuntariness that mimics belief. For instance, someone raised in an observant Jewish household may later lose their faith, yet still feel uncomfortable with violating religious taboos (like eating non-kosher food), as a consequence of a lingering affective residue shaped by years of ritual practice.

(B) Moreover, Van Leeuwen (2023, p. 95) observes that people often leave religion for reasons unrelated to truth-tracking. They may feel unwelcome in their congregation, grow disillusioned with religious authorities, or struggle to reconcile their faith with personal allegiances. A practicing Mormon, for instance, might find it difficult to remain in the Church after their daughter marries outside the faith and is consequently barred from temple ceremonies. In such cases, the issue is not that such individuals are disproving their beliefs, but that they can no longer comfortably participate in communal programs.

Some empirical studies (e.g., Van Tongeren, 2024) support this view: commonly cited reasons for leaving religion (like moral injury or value misalignment) are often best understood in non-doxastic terms. While doxastic concerns (such as the problem of evil) do appear, Van Leeuwen suggests these are frequently *post hoc* rationalizations, ways of people “giving themselves permission for what they wanted to do anyway” (2023, p. 96). Someone may have long tolerated the problem of evil, but begins to seriously entertain it once non-doxastic tensions make continued participation emotionally uncomfortable.

This shift resembles “imaginative resistance” (see Gendler 2020), an affective inhibition that arises when we are asked to imaginatively engage with scenarios that violate our social or personal sensibilities. In contrast, we cannot simply abandon beliefs when we are uncomfortable with them. Religious convictions often fade not because new evidence suddenly overturns belief, but because the motivation to sustain immersive participation gradually erodes.

► 3 The evidential mismatch

The IT faces an immediate challenge. As Boudry and Coyne (2016, p. 606) observe, religious believers often appeal to answered prayers or historical data supporting their claims. This suggests a concern for evidence typical of belief. Similarly, Levy notes that religious convictions sometimes show degrees of “evidential vulnerability” (2017, p. 113). For instance, numerous Christians have reinterpreted Genesis mythopoetically since the rise of evolutionary theory. Unlike imagination, religious claims do respond to evidence.

However, the proponent of the IT may argue that this perspective relies on oversimplification. A form of “reality-tracking” (Van Leeuwen, 2014, p. 701) is often crucial to sustaining immersion. When one compares the reality-tracking involved in imaginative immersion with that involved in belief formation, it may become clear that religious cognition resembles the former more closely. This is not to deny that believers care about evidence, but to illustrate how practices like providing evidence or managing counterevidence function differently when shaped by immersive participation, as opposed to belief.

Imaginative immersion primes us to perceive certain features of reality as supporting imaginative engagement. Gendler notes that imaginative immersion can “alter our evidential standards” (2003, p. 126). After reading a ghost story, a sudden creak may intuitively seem supernatural. One may notice something similar in religious engagement. Someone prays for guidance, sees a bumper sticker saying “Trust in God,” and treats it as confirmation. Or a Buddhist devotee may interpret crystalline formations occasionally found in cremation ashes as signs of a monk’s spiritual advancement. A believer may also readily accept miracle reports, suspending ordinary evidential standards. This resembles Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief” (quoted in Paige 2024, p. 29), an immersive mechanism through which one overlooks counter-evidence to preserve engagement.

Within immersive contexts, participants selectively identify features of reality that reinforce imaginative commitment rather than engage in standard evidential scrutiny. Van Leeuwen calls this “the evidence game” (2017, p. S65). For example, a believer might interpret volcanic rocks on Mt. Sinai as “evidence” of the biblical pillar of fire. But such features function less as isolated evidence than as props that sustain imaginative participation.

Even in pure imaginative immersion, we are often sensitive (to some degree) to counter-evidence. Scenarios that depart too far from reality can disrupt immersion. To use Lewis’s example (1978, p. 42), in “The Adventure of the Speckled Band,” Sherlock Holmes solves a case by concluding that a victim was bitten by a Russell’s viper climbing a bell rope. But in reality, such snakes cannot climb. This implausibility disrupts immersion and invites compensatory explanations (perhaps it was some unknown species, or Holmes was mistaken). Similarly, religious claims that openly contradict well-known facts about the world may provoke discomfort, not because they threaten factual belief, but because they disrupt imaginative engagement (by violating coherence).

To make this more intuitive, consider how religious traditions often include claims that appear testable. These are typically doctrinally peripheral but common across traditions. They provide religious systems with an aura of empirical relevance, suggesting a straightforward description of reality. But these may be better understood as immersion-enhancing mechanisms than direct empirical claims. Their function is not to invite actual testing but to make the religious narrative feel *realistic* enough to sustain serious imaginative engagement. Examples include authoritative claims suggesting that certain prayers prevent seizures in children or that the prophets’ bodies do not decompose. *The Book of Mormon*’s claim that Native Americans descend from Israelites, or early Adventist prophecies about the date of the Second Coming follow the same pattern (see Van Leeuwen, 2023, p. 123).

Such claims are routinely shielded from falsification through “a repertoire” of immunizing strategies (Boudry and Braeckman, 2010, p. 151). When counter-evidence appears (failed healings, contradictory genetic data, missed prophetic dates), these claims are rarely abandoned. Instead, they are preserved through the construction of backup narratives: the prayer failed due to insufficient faith, the prophecy was postponed due to collective sin, Semitic ancestry markers were diluted over time, and prophetic graves remain unexamined due to location uncertainty. These aren’t inferences to the best explanation. They recalibrate the background of a claim just enough to preserve immersion and neutralize imaginative resistance. Their aim is not empirical truth but narrative coherence.

This dynamic is visible in some forms of apologetics. Take a young-Earth creationist. When faced with geological evidence, she may claim the Earth was created with the appearance of age, just as Adam was made as an adult. If fossils raise further problems, she might suggest they were planted by God as a test of faith, etc. These are backup narratives that sustain the plausibility of religious claims and avoid dissonance that would disrupt immersion.

Such backup narratives may resemble “confabulations” (Flores, 2021, p. 6299).² However, the IT does not claim these strategies are irrational (like confabulations often are), precisely because their aim is not to sustain belief but to preserve imaginative immersion. Unlike belief, imaginative engagement allows for a wider array of narrative possibilities. These maneuvers prevent imaginative resistance when religious claims visibly conflict with reality. The apologist constructs explanatory addenda not necessarily to track truth but to preserve coherence.

This also helps explain why religious claims appear to shift in response to scientific or cultural pressures. These shifts are not simple belief revisions based on new evidence. Rather, they are often strategic adaptations aimed at keeping religious narratives imaginatively viable. Just as modern readers may resist imagining Odysseus’ brutal treatment of disobedient slaves as heroic (see Nolan, 2020), contemporary believers may find traditional doctrines emotionally untenable or in conflict with basic convictions about the world and thus experience imaginative resistance.

Such doctrinal shifts are typically rhetorically framed not as breaks with tradition but as recoveries of original meanings. For example, some Christian churches may argue that Leviticus 18:22 refers not to same-sex relationships but to temple prostitution, or that Genesis was always intended as an allegory. Communal imaginative programs operate as evolving imaginative projects, designed not primarily to track truth (like beliefs) but to preserve cultural relevance and immersive coherence for their participants.

► 4 The behavioral mismatch

In his *Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin recounts how George Whitefield’s fire-and-brimstone sermons captivated large crowds in Philadelphia. Despite being chastised by the preacher as “half beasts and half devils” (Franklin, 2005 [1791], p. 168), listeners returned time and again, weeping and trembling with emotion. If they truly believed they were facing eternal damnation, one might expect them to react with panic or desperate actions, similar to how people respond to an imminent disaster. Instead, their behavior seemed strangely cathartic, resembling immersive participation repeatedly sought for its emotional intensity, rather than a reaction to real danger.

Behavior shaped by imaginative immersion differs from behavior based on factual belief in both the nature of accompanying affective response and in the action-guiding force. This aligns with Walton’s

² An example of confabulation would be when someone denies being seriously ill, despite strong evidence, by pointing to mere possibilities: “The doctors are wrong,” “The CT machine must be malfunctioning in my case,” “I’m losing weight due to stress.” These are *ad hoc* narrative possibilities invoked to preserve a preferred outlook.

well-known argument that the ‘fear’ experienced while watching a horror film is not genuine but a “quasi-fear” (Walton, 1990, p. 196). Unlike real fear, the fear-like emotions that emerge in immersive settings often carry an additional pleasurable quality. People intentionally seek out horror films for entertainment. Or, after reading *Hamlet*, one could say: “It was hauntingly beautiful. Everyone perished in a bloody crescendo.” This is not how one responds to real-life tragedies. Similarly, while watching a horror film can trigger some physiological responses (an increased heart rate or the reflex to close one’s eyes), the overall reaction remains contained. It does not usually result in, e.g., panic-stricken flight from the theater. It can be argued that ordinary religious behavior often exhibits these features of imagination-induced engagement.

Consider a believer who accepts the existence of hell out of loyalty to what she sees as the traditional magisterium. She may even view the doctrine as aesthetically significant, providing a sublime image of God’s righteousness. This echoes Jonathan Edwards’ sermons, in which hell is not only a place of torment but also a cosmic testament to divine sovereignty. Such positive affect toward a horrific claim is rare in response to real-world suffering but common in imaginative contexts. It seems more accurate to say a believer is not cruelly delighting in the eternal torment of billions, but engaging in imaginative immersion, akin to how one might appreciate *The Divine Comedy* or *Paradise Lost*, where hell, though terrifying, evokes large-scale wonder and awe. Her stance appears less like factual belief and more like aesthetically coded, identity-signaling participation.

Additionally, our spontaneous intuitions often override religious assertions in everyday life. Someone may affirm the Quranic claim that unbelief is the gravest sin (98:6), yet respond more favorably to a kind unbeliever than to a criminal who shares their faith. Van Leeuwen similarly notes a mismatch between belief in divine omnipotence and the modest scope of most petitionary prayers, which typically concern outcomes “that might happen anyway” (2023, p. 88), such as a successful job application or medical procedure. Believers rarely pray for outcomes they regard as highly improbable, like conceiving a child in old age, and instead ask for the strength to endure. If divine omnipotence were factually believed, we might expect extravagant petitions to be quite frequent. Yet empirical studies suggest otherwise. Froese and Uecker (2022), for instance, found that most Americans pray for psychological support, while concrete requests, such as direct financial help, are far less common. This suggests that plausible prayers may serve an immersive function. They are more likely to be perceived as answered, reinforcing a sense of divine presence. By contrast, prayers for implausible outcomes risk disappointment and can weaken imaginative engagement.

The frequent mismatch between professed assertions and actual behavior may be cited as evidence that religious convictions often function more like imaginative attitudes than factual beliefs. Dennett (2006, p. 272) argues that if someone truly believed in the omnipresent God who condemns, say, pornography, they wouldn’t engage with it. Van Leeuwen (2023, p. 115) likewise cites data showing little difference in pornography consumption between U.S. regions with high and low religious service attendance, suggesting that many believers are not action-guided by their stated convictions. Interestingly, this critique is echoed within religious circles. Evangelical pastor John Piper contends that habitual engagement with pornography reveals a lack of genuine belief in the Gospel. He notes that if offered a million dollars to abstain, most would. This suggests that the issue is not an uncontrollable compulsion but a lack of proper theological belief (see Piper 2017). Similarly, in *A Call to Anguish*, David Wilkerson challenges Christians’ indifference to the fate of unbelieving loved ones: if they truly believed in damnation, they would be devastated. The point, shared by such diverse authors as Dennett, Piper, Wilkerson, and Van Leeuwen, is that when behavior persistently fails to reflect professed beliefs closely, the authenticity of those beliefs is rightly questioned.

► 5 Reaching the limits of the IT

While the IT may adequately capture certain modes of religious engagement, particularly among so-called cultural believers or traditions rooted more in ritual participation than in doctrinal assent, it struggles to account for some familiar features of religious life.

(i) First, the IT offers a counterintuitive account of religious sincerity. If religious assertions are generally not believed but emerge from imaginative immersion, they are either (a) epistemically insincere or (b) they reflect cognitive confusion.

On option (a), when believers affirm religious propositions, even when they appear sincere, they actually engage in pseudo-epistemic performances. For example, they merely affirm religious claims as acts of group loyalty (“As a Catholic, of course I believe in the real presence”), or assert them as part of appropriate behavior in ritual settings (like reciting Shahada, Shema, or Credo), or they simulate epistemic sincerity for rhetorical purposes (“The Word of God says so”), to shut down debate and legitimize social goals. Option (b) suggests that sincere believers are so deeply immersed in religious narratives that they fail to distinguish between belief and imaginative investment. One would have to say that, for instance, deathbed Buddhist chanters urgently repeating mantras in the hope of rebirth are merely victims of chronic imaginative contagion.

Option (a) is psychologically uncharitable as a general proposal, and option (b) pathologizes sincere religious professions. Under the IT, the majority of sincere believers would either be persistent strategic “fakers” (Boudry and Coyne, 2016, p. 622) or uncomfortably similar to people who mistake daydreams for reality.

(ii) Second, the IT rests on an underargued assumption about what counts as “typical” religious behavior. By framing religious cognition largely as a socially important form of imaginative engagement, the IT risks collapsing the diversity of religious life into a narrow model. Are practices that resist this framing so marginal as to be methodologically negligible? Consider converts whose convictions estrange them from family and peers, Catholics who confess stigmatized sins without psychological or social payoff and often at personal cost, individuals who persist in private prayer for strangers or the dead, or the terminally ill who engage seriously with religious notions of the afterlife. These are not eccentricities but, arguably, widely acknowledged modalities of religious life.

(iii) Third, the IT risks “overapplying” itself by interpreting all religious phenomena as imaginative immersion. This would imply that no one genuinely holds supernatural beliefs. Consider ascetics and martyrs: although their actions suggest deep conviction, the IT could recast them as extreme instances of group loyalty, akin to political martyrdom. Even cult suicides might be viewed not as driven by belief, but by radical social identification or imaginative contagion. Some of the 9/11 hijackers, for instance, reportedly visited strip clubs and drank alcohol shortly before the attacks, despite religious prohibitions. Based on such incidents, one might argue that their motivation stemmed from imaginative investment in an apocalyptic political ideology rather than factual religious belief. However, if even high-cost actions can be explained without appealing to belief, the IT risks rendering any supernatural belief not just rare, but theoretically undetectable. That’s a costly outcome.

(iv) Fourth, the IT relies on overgeneralizations. Van Leeuwen cites, for instance, Sperber’s study of the Dorze, who claim that leopards observe Orthodox fasting rules but still guard their livestock on fasting days, suggesting imaginative engagement rather than factual belief (Van Leeuwen, 2023, p. 200). Other examples include Mormon claims of Israelite ancestry, biblical episodes involving talking animals, young-Earth creationist assertions (all of which are discussed by Van Leeuwen as being religiously upheld despite strong counterevidence), and terminologically opaque Trinitarian doctrines

that many adherents may not fully understand and, therefore, may not really believe (see Van Leeuwen, 2023, pp. 123, 124, 212, 237).

But this conflates distinct domains of religious life. From the fact that a Dorze villager may not believe in fasting leopards (a peripheral religious claim), it hardly follows that they equally disbelieve in, say, divine agency (a core claim). Van Leeuwen moves too quickly from selective fringe cases to sweeping conclusions about religious cognition.

Consider his observation that many believers do not regularly pray for robust miracles. This may suggest that they often imaginatively accept divine omnipotence rather than fully believe it. But even so, it does not follow that they disbelieve in miraculous intervention altogether. In many cases, professions of omnipotence may function less as literal assertions and more as expressive commitments, akin to saying “the best mother in the world.” Such utterances express reverence and loyalty. They are not strictly propositional beliefs, but neither are they mere imaginings. They typically presuppose some core beliefs: one still believes their mother exists and is exceptionally kind. These are still sincere orientations toward reality.

That people often affirm more than they strictly believe does not entail that their attitudes are reducible to social imagination. On the contrary, such expressions may reflect a complex network of beliefs, imagination, and expressive speech. Within ordinary religious engagement, commitments may often range from imaginative social affirmations to deep-seated doxastic convictions.

Consider, for example, folk rituals. In parts of Eastern and Southern Europe, people bring food offerings to graves on commemorative days. Superficially, this may suggest a belief in the dead’s physical agency. Yet these acts are better understood as ritualized expressions of grief, rather than literal assertions about the dead consuming the offerings.³ Van Leeuwen (2014, p. 706) cites similar mourning rituals among the Vezo to argue that they reflect imaginative rather than doxastic commitments. He is right, as far as such rituals go. However, these practices do not even attempt to assert that the dead possess physical faculties. Crucially, it does not follow from the imaginative nature of such acts that participants lack belief in post-mortem survival altogether or that this imaginative quality can be generalized to religious claims more broadly. One can hold sincere beliefs about, for example, post-mortem survival while imaginatively engaging with more peripheral claims of a particular belief system (such as pretending that the dead benefit from food).

Not all religious claims carry the same “assertoric force” (Myers, 2024, p. 12). Unlike peripheral claims (such as fasting leopards), core supernatural convictions (such as the belief in divine agency) are often sincerely held in isolation. These commitments are typically broad enough to evade direct, decisive counterevidence and are often supported by more robust arguments (e.g., teleological reasoning) than narrower miraculous assertions are. They may also involve the sincere rejection of exclusively naturalistic worldviews (e.g., “death is annihilation”). They are not rare nor always bound to specific ritual contexts. One may concede that, in many cases, such attitudes may amount to partial beliefs or degrees of confidence, but they cannot be adequately described merely as social imaginings. One cannot simply infer from the imaginative status of peripheral claims that core religious commitments are likewise reducible to social imagination. Religious cognition may often involve complex epistemic systems in which some core claims are taken literally, some peripheral claims are taken symbolically, and many in between are affirmed in ways that blur the boundary between belief and imagination.

³ This aligns with Wittgenstein’s view of certain types of ritual behavior: “Kissing the picture of a loved one. This is not based on a belief that it will have a definite effect on the object that the picture represents. Instead, it aims at providing some form of satisfaction. [...] [W]e act in this way and then feel satisfied” (2020, p. 36).

► 6 Reality-oriented imaginings

Under the IT, what usually passes for religious belief is more accurately understood as “imagining plus group identity” (see Van Leeuwen, 2023, p. 16). Believers imaginatively engage with sacred narratives, while social commitments keep the engagement serious. The IT model is based on two psychological mechanisms: (i) *imaginative immersion* and (ii) *social commitments*.

However, as we’ve seen, the IT encounters numerous problems. One may consider, e.g., periods of doubt that believers often experience. This experience is widespread in serious religious engagement and is sometimes regarded as an “intrinsic element of faith” (Tillich 1958, p. 23). Sincere doubt poses a problem for both belief-based and imagination-based models of religious cognition. Van Leeuwen (2023, p. 173) is right to note that one cannot comfortably say they believe that p while having doubts that p . However, doubt cuts both ways: it is equally odd to say that one doubts p when p is merely imagined. This brings us to a third psychological variable neglected by the IT:

(iii) *Epistemic openness* is the cognitive stance of seriously considering a claim, even if it is not fully believed (as it allows for significant uncertainty). It goes beyond mere imagination since the agent regards the claim as truth-apt. The imagination characteristic of make-believe typically lacks this openness. (When we imagine Santa Claus, we do not seriously entertain the possibility that such an entity exists somewhere in Lapland.) When linked to high-stakes implications, epistemic openness becomes strongly action-guiding (even when it does not amount to belief).

There are many cases where epistemic openness guides imagination. Unlike the “offline” imagination of make-believe, which is disconnected from truth concerns, reality-oriented imagination is significantly “online” (Myers, 2024, p. 22). It operates with a “mind-to-world direction of fit” (Howard-Snyder, 2019, p. 122). The imagined content is taken seriously as something that could correspond to the actual world, even if one remains uncertain.

Let’s call these *Reality-Oriented Imaginings* (ROI). They often seem to combine features of belief (reality orientation, affective seriousness, and action-guiding commitment) with features of imagination (suspension of disbelief and narrative immersion). This isn’t a rare phenomenon. We encounter it regularly outside religious contexts.

Consider an artist who continues her work despite obscurity. She does not believe in future recognition of her work, like one believes the next Olympics will be held in Los Angeles. Yet she is not merely engaging in make-believe. She draws on narratives of neglected artists (Kafka, Melville, Van Gogh), imagining herself on a similar trajectory. Though she cannot prove her work’s future (or posthumous) recognition, she treats it as a serious possibility worth acting upon. Her perseverance reflects epistemic openness toward a valuable but uncertain prospect, sustained through imaginative engagement. She wrestles with doubt, downplays discouragement, and persists. This stance is often admired as meaningful rather than foolish.⁴ Religious engagement differs in one crucial respect. It is typically oriented toward possibilities that resist strict falsification or confirmation (e.g., “We will reunite in the afterlife”). ROIs enable strong commitment without full belief. In the case of the afterlife, the payoff is significant, so it makes sense to act upon it without strict belief.

What happens when a sincere believer affirms, for example, that Christ rose from the dead? Such affirmations rarely function as straightforward historical claims (like “Napoleon died on St. Helena”),

⁴ A compelling example of ROI is discussed by Jackson (2021, p. 4). Consider a parent of a missing child who, over time, may no longer believe the child is alive, yet remains deeply committed to that possibility. This stance is not irrational: the stakes are high and the potential payoff profound. The parent suspends disbelief, downplays ambiguous evidence, and draws on survival narratives to sustain a reality-oriented commitment. It’s not belief, but it goes well beyond make-believe.

nor are they reducible to participation in social rituals. Rather, they generally reflect a reality-oriented seriousness, a lived openness to the possibility that something extraordinary occurred after Christ's death. In many religious contexts, imagination is guided by genuine epistemic openness: a strong sense that divine agency may exist, that death may not be the end, or that rare supernatural interventions might occur. Prayers often operate with real, though uncertain, expectations (falling short of strong empirical belief, yet more serious than fantasy).

Religious assertions are often neither strict factual beliefs nor imaginative pretenses. Of course, in reality, believers may often speak with more certainty than they actually possess ("I no longer believe, I know"), but such declarations usually serve a devotional purpose. Like a parent of a missing child saying, "I know she's alive," the claim expresses a sincere orientation toward an important possibility. These are not straightforwardly insincere. They are overstatements that articulate a genuine existential and emotional commitment to a reality that remains possible (and desirable), even if uncertain.

This approach suggests that religious traditions can be better understood as layered systems that invite varying degrees of epistemic openness and imaginative involvement, rather than as uniform structures of make-believe. At the center are core metaphysical claims (e.g., "God exists," "Death is not the end"), which tend to elicit higher epistemic openness and relatively low imaginative dependence. These convictions often feel intuitive and may be sustained through independent reasoning, rather than vivid imaginative immersion. They are less reliant on ritual or imagery and do not easily fade when the imagination is disengaged, much like basic metaphysical stances. Surrounding these are doctrinally specific claims (virgin birth, reincarnation), which may draw moderate epistemic openness and stronger imaginative involvement. At the periphery lie symbolic claims ("The inhabitants of Jannah are 30 meters tall"), where imaginative engagement is high, but isolated epistemic openness may be minimal. Peripheral claims often require ritual, story, or symbolic context to remain psychologically salient. Remove the imaginative scaffolding, and they tend to dissolve or become intellectually remote.

This layering offers a more nuanced picture: while not universal, it may describe how many believers relate differently to different claims within a religious system. Unlike the IT, which treats all such assertions as performative imagination, this alternative model allows for variation, showing how epistemic seriousness and imaginative investment can diverge across a tradition.⁵

When the IT theorist argues that Mormons do not really believe Native Americans descend from Israelites but imagine it socially, he assumes this generalized imaginative attitude applies across the system of religious claims. However, the same believer may imaginatively entertain this genealogical narrative while remaining much more epistemically open toward the existence of God or an afterlife. Such core attitudes might even approach (partial) belief in many more cases than the IT allows.

Even the peripheral claims, generally speaking, are not simply entertained under make-belief pretense. Imagine a devout Evangelical being asked, "Do you really believe Noah's Ark held pairs of all animals?" She might affirm the claim, but with hesitation. Her affirmation isn't the expression of a factual belief: she knows the story sounds implausible. But it's also not mere social pretense, as the IT would suggest. What's often happening with such assertions is more complex.

The believer views her religious tradition as a reliable hermeneutical framework through which interpretive trust, imaginative immersion, existential meaning, social commitments, and epistemic openness are organized. Within that system, core convictions such as "God exists," "Miracles are genuinely possible," and "Scripture is divinely inspired" are frequently embraced with a significant degree of epistemic openness, which may even approach belief. The Ark story exists within the same

⁵ This reasoning is somewhat analogous to Baumard and Boyer's account (2013, p. 295) of religious belief. They argue that explicit religious doctrines often emerge as *post hoc* rationalizations of common cognitive intuitions (such as agent detection, or the intuitive plausibility of gods and spirits).

layered, coherent structure. It inherits what we might refer to as *transferred sincerity*. In other words, such claims are affirmed and treated seriously because they belong to a trusted network grounded in deeper epistemic commitments. The Ark story is a peripheral narrative development of claims one earnestly considers and entertains as real.

For many believers, rejecting peripheral claims as mere social fiction creates a cognitive unease that goes beyond group loyalty or social reasons in general. It provokes deeper doubts: “If I call this fiction, what does that say about my trust in God’s power or the Bible’s authority?” There is also an epistemic hesitation (not just social pressure) that keeps a believer from easily discarding such claims as pure imaginings (even when belief and strong epistemic openness are absent). As a result, the believer engages with the story in a hybrid mode: not as a literal fact, nor as detached make-believe, but as a serious imaginative possibility: “If a powerful divine agency was involved, maybe this could have happened.” The believer might not believe *p*, but she also hesitates to say, “I don’t believe *p*.” The claim *p* (e.g., “Noah’s Ark held all animals”) is “belief-adjacent” (Goodman, 2023, p. 2): not endorsed as an isolated claim, but not easily dismissed.⁶ It exists within a system whose foundational claims (about God, miracles, and the possibility of revelation) are taken with real epistemic seriousness. The Ark story inherits its weight from that structure. What often motivates assertions of *p* is not isolated conviction that *p*, but allegiance to a broader framework in which divine intervention remains a serious possibility.

Sincere affirmations often exceed literal belief when anchored in deeper epistemic commitments. For affective and existential reasons, we may hesitate to deny claims we do not strictly believe (“Jonah survived in the whale for three days”), because doing so can feel like a betrayal of core convictions to which we are genuinely committed (“The Bible is not fiction,” “God is powerful,” etc.). Such affirmations occupy a hybrid space: not strictly factual, yet not fictional either. They are serious imaginative acts, entangled with the epistemic and affective traditional structures that sustain them and from which they cannot be cleanly separated.

► 7 Conclusion: the Imaginative Support Thesis (IST)

What Malcolm and Scott call the “orthodox account” of religious faith (2016, pp. 257–258) typically assumes that religious assertions express beliefs. But such a view fails to account for the crucial role of imaginative immersion in sustaining these assertions. By contrast, the IT interprets religious discourse primarily as a kind of collective make-believe: (IT): I & SAC.

Let “I” be imaginative immersion and “SAC” social/affective commitments (identity, community, belonging). According to the IT, religious assertions are serious imaginative acts with social or emotional utility. They are not truth-oriented. However, this is too reductive. It underplays the epistemic seriousness that sincere believers often assign to their religious claims. Many do not merely “make-believe” that, e.g., God exists and interacts with the world. They entertain these propositions as live epistemic possibilities, sometimes with significant degrees of commitment.

A more flexible account may be proposed. Let’s call it the *Imaginative Support Thesis* (IST). Social imagination is not the sole driver of religious cognition, but often supports reality-oriented core commitments: (IST): I & E & SAC.

⁶ Paul Veyne has noted a similar phenomenon. In discussing extravagant hagiographical miracles (talking animals, severed heads that continue preaching), Veyne writes that medieval Christians both believed and did not believe such tales (see, 1988, p. 17-18). They recognized their implausibility, yet did not consider them fiction. These stories bordered on claims with high epistemic openness, such as the general plausibility of divine intervention, and were taken seriously by association.

Here, E refers to epistemic openness: a graded measure of how seriously a religious proposition is entertained as possibly true. For instance, an E of 0 treats the claim as fiction. An E approaching 1 represents strong doxastic commitment, even belief. Unlike the IT, the IST allows for internal variability: the same religious person may exhibit high E toward core theological claims (e.g., “God exists,” “Some miraculous events have happened”) while maintaining low E toward isolated peripheral claims (e.g., talking donkey in Numbers 22). The model reflects the stratified structure of religious cognition. Not all claims are treated equally.

The interplay between these three variables enables us to explain a wide range of religious behaviors without marginalizing them. What doxastic and imaginative models of faith often describe are not typical cases of religious assertion, but rather the opposing ends of a spectrum. At one end, we find situations that Van Leeuwen emphasizes as representative of religious belief. These primarily involve cases of so-called *cultural believers*. Such individuals celebrate major religious holidays, maintain identity-marking practices (e.g., abstaining from certain meats), yet exhibit weak epistemic openness ($E < 0.5$) toward core supernatural claims. Their religious actions do not stem from truth orientation but from social signaling. In these cases, we typically observe low overall E and high SAC. These individuals are not rare. However, it is misleading to treat them as paradigmatic representatives of religious faith.

Moving along the spectrum, we encounter individuals with medium to low E (e.g., 0.4-0.6) towards central religious propositions. Such individuals may be uncertain regarding specific claims, but their imaginative engagement can still motivate low-cost actions. This is similar to superstitious behavior: one may not be convinced that prayer works, but might still pray before a medical procedure, *just in case*. These behaviors are not based on belief, but they also cannot be explained solely in terms of social imagination. There is some (arguably weak) openness to real outcomes.

The IST can also account for conversion trajectories without reducing such cases to imaginative immersion. A person may begin with low to moderate E toward a central claim (“Christ rose from the dead”), but through exposure to apologetics and personal experiences, their epistemic openness increases. Here, imagination supports growing epistemic commitment. This doesn’t mean that one starts to treat all religious propositions with the same degree of E. Rather, they usually prioritize core claims. Doubt may persist, but their assertions are not sustained by sheer imaginative repetition. Such individuals are best described as *sincere believers*.

Van Leeuwen appears to conflate sincere believers with religious fanatics and therefore treats them as a marginal phenomenon. His reasoning seems to go as follows: if someone claims that Jonah could survive in the belly of a whale for three days, they are either speaking under pretense or are irrational. Since many Evangelicals who profess biblical literalism function rationally in daily life, they do not really believe such claims. Instead, they participate in imaginative social practices. Only a fringe group of irrational fanatics truly believes such claims (see Van Leeuwen 2023, p. 199).

The problem with this approach is that religious fanaticism is not best understood as an anomalous case of factual belief. Fanatical behavior typically involves high “I” and high “SAC,” but (contra Van Leeuwen) unstable “E.” Such individuals usually treat all religious claims (core and peripheral alike) with equal seriousness. Lacking robust belief or high epistemic openness, they resort to imaginative overdrive to suppress doubt, which often results in a rigid, fundamentalist behavior. In these cases, *fanaticism* is usually not grounded in belief but in a willing imaginative contagion. Doubt is not acknowledged or resolved through reasoned reflection but is silenced through forceful, repeated immersion.

The point is that the IST can account for nearly all forms of religious behavior through the graded interaction of imagination (I), epistemic openness (E), and social/affective commitment (SAC). It avoids the pitfalls of both the orthodox model (which overstates belief) and the IT (which overstates social

imagination). Unlike the IT, the IST captures how doubt and sincere devotion can coexist and explains why certain religious claims have more action-guiding force than others. It preserves the seriousness of religious assertions without reducing them to either irrational beliefs or social make-believe.

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The datasets related to this article will be available upon request to the author.

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