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The Faith Frame: Or, Belief is Easy, Faith is Hard

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This paper argues for thinking about religious commitments as different in kind from everyday ordinary understandings of the world. It argues against the straightforward assertion from the cognitive science of religion that belief in the supernatural is easy. That is, there is a way in which intuitions of invisible presence come very easily to people. Yet to sustain that belief commitment is hard, especially when the invisible other is omnipotent and benevolent. Here I suggest that it makes more sense to understand faith commitments as a kind of frame that coexists with everyday commitments. The approach shares much with Neil van Leeuwen's understanding of religious commitments and factual commitments as being held with different kinds of cognitive attitudes. Here I suggest that people engage the faith frame the way engage play and fiction—except that in the case of faith, the commitment is a serious claim about the world.

Keywords

Faith – belief – religion – anthropology

Belief has always struck me as the wrong question, especially when it is offered as a diagnostic for determining the realness of the gods.

ROBERT ORSI, BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH.

Faith is about seeing the world as it is and experiencing it—to some

extent—as the world as it should be. Faith is about having trust that the world is good, safe and beautiful—a world in which justice is triumphant, enemies are thwarted and you can thrill to the delicate beauty of the day. This is as true—with caveats—for those who worship small, local gods as it is for those whose devotion focuses on Christ, Allah or Ahura Mazda—big gods, as Ara Norenzayan (2013) calls them. The point of pouring a libation to one of the ancient pagan gods is to make your world a better place: to protect the crops, to heal a sick child, to bring wind to your sails so that your fleet can cross the Aegean and bring back a stolen wife. The small gods are also, in many settings, simply feared. The capricious non-Christian spirits in a traditional Melanesian world are mostly imagined as beings to placate. Yet those non-monotheistic beings offer at the least explanation, prediction and control. As Robin Horton (1993: 178) put it, in his account of African traditional religion, “the powers [and] spiritual forces were there first and foremost to be tapped to improve man’s lot in the here and now.” The promise of the big gods of course is that those who follow them will flourish. “Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

The blunt fact that these commitments are held in a world that is often brutal and unfair tells us that faith is hard and requires effort. Belief in a just, fair, good world is not some kind of mistake, not a deluded misconception that observers need to explain, but the fundamental point of the faith commitment. No observer reports that people simply do not notice when the crops rot, the child dies, and the war ends in dust and blood. Faith is about holding certain commitments front and center in one’s understanding of reality even when the empirical facts seem to contradict them. That is why faith takes work and why faith changes the faithful. Yet it can be easy to forget that faith is for the faithful full of complexity and contradiction because our modern social world predisposes us to think in such flat-footed ways about belief.

If a scholar happens not to be religious—and even sometimes if one is—it is easy to take other people’s beliefs in God and the supernatural at face value and to discount the complexity of the commitments—particularly when those commitments are stated with absolute conviction. One can say: these people neither doubt nor question. They praise the Lord at every other sentence, so why would one even wonder about their confidence about the realness of God? “I believe in Christianity,” C.S. Lewis wrote, “as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”

Certainly anthropologists often write as if their subjects never entertain

hesitations about the supernatural, never doubt that the supernatural is straightforwardly real. Anthropologists, generalizing to describe an unfamiliar people to curious readers, write sentences like these:

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1922, 136): the Andaman Islanders “believe that the spirits feed on the flesh of dead men and women.”

Meyer Fortes (1987): “Chiefs for instance are believed sometimes to ‘rise up’ as lions. The belief is consistent with the theory of ancestral presence in animals, trees, and artifacts dedicated to the ancestors.”

E.E. Evans-Pritchard, about the Nuer (1959, 9): “God’s existence is taken for granted by everyone.”

That last sentence ends, as Geertz (1988) remarked that all Evans-Pritchard’s sentences end, with an implicit “of course.” That’s the way it is. God or the gods are real, they are present, and they are powerful.

In fact, when anthropologists write this way, they often intend to convey that the people they study are so unquestioning that it would be a mistake even to describe them as “believing.” That was Evans-Pritchard’s point. He wrote that sentence to reject the very possibility that the Nuer would ever say something like, “there is a God.”

That would be for Nuer a pointless remark. God’s existence is taken for granted by everyone. Consequently when we say, as we do, that all Nuer have faith in God, the word ‘faith’ must be understood in the Old Testament sense of ‘trust’ (Nuer *ngath*) and not in the modern sense of ‘belief’ which the concept came to have under Greek and Latin influences. There is in any case, I think, no word in the Nuer language which could stand for ‘I believe.’

EVANS-PRITCHARD 1959: 9

It is a claim echoed by anthropologist after anthropologist. Thus Christina Toren:

We [anthropologists] may characterize as belief what our informants know and, in so doing, misinterpret them. If I am to correctly represent my Fijian informants, for example, I should say that they know that their ancestors inhabit the places that were theirs.

TOREN 2007: 307–8

“Believing in” is a western or Christian thing, these comments imply, a point

about which Talal Asad (1993) has vigorously reminded us.

But it does not make sense to interpret the apparently unquestioning acceptance of gods and the ancestors as a conviction that supernatural beings are always present, available and active. People may talk as if the gods straightforwardly real, but they don't act that way—not in the Bible belt, not in medieval England, not in Fiji and not among the Nuer. People behave as if making the invisible other real enough to impact your life in a positive way takes effort. In medieval England they scourged themselves and fasted and sought to replace their mundane human imagination with words of scripture made vivid. They did so because they believed in God, of course, but they also did so because they felt that they did not believe in God enough. Julian of Norwich actually prayed to die because only then would she come into God's presence in a way that she could truly know him.

In spite of [my] truth faith, I longed to be shown [Christ] in the flesh so that I might have more knowledge of our Lord and Savior's bodily suffering and of our Lady's fellow suffering and that of all her true friends who have believed in her pain then and since.

Her problem was that she did not experience God as present enough, even though in some obvious way, she thought of God was real.

Devoted modern Christians talk constantly about not being faithful enough. They may insist, when you ask them, on any range of identity-defining claims—that climate change is not human-made, or that the earth was created in several days. But they talk about forgetting about God between Sunday services. They apologize for not being able to trust God to solve their problems. When you pay attention, you can see that church services are about reminding people to take God seriously and to behave in ways that will enable God to have an impact on their lives: to pray, to read the Bible, to be Christ-like. And then people say that they go back home and yell at their kids and feel foolish because they have forgotten that they meant to be Christ-like. They report that they run out of time to pray. They confess that they do not behave as if God can help them. They worry that they do not really understand or commit as they should. When you look carefully at a church service, you can see that church is about changing the person in church so that they feel that God is more real, more relevant, and more present for them: so that they believe more than they did when they walked in, and hold on to those belief a little longer after they walk out. It is the clearest message in Christianity: *you may think you believe in God, but really you don't. You don't take God seriously enough. You don't act as if he's there.*

Lord, help my unbelief [Mark 9:24].

This apparent paradox stood out to me when I was doing ethnographic fieldwork with charismatic evangelical Protestants in Chicago and in the San Francisco South Bay (Luhmann 2012). Here were devout believers, most of whom asserted God's reality with firm conviction and many of whom had acted and voted according to those convictions (as they understood them) in ways that had real consequences. Yet as I watched and listened carefully as an ethnographer, it became clear to me that they treated the invisible other at the heart of their faith quite differently than they treated visible everyday objects like tables and chairs. They said that God spoke to them, but they were often skeptical of other people's reports of hearing God's word, particularly when that word had specific outcomes. (As one pastor said in church: 'If you hear God say that you should be calm, take it as God! If God tells you to quit your job and move to Los Angeles, I want you to be praying with me, with your housegroup, and with your prayer circle to discern whether you heard God accurately.') They never asked God to write their term papers or to go shopping for them, even though they said again and again that nothing was impossible with God. They really only asked God to intervene in matters over which they felt they had no control. They said again and again that God's power and love were infinite, but they often felt helpless and unlovable; they often felt that they forgot to pray for help when they should have prayed; and they often struggled with apparently unanswered prayers. When they experienced tragedy, they spoke about God with numbness and despair.

My observations (Luhmann 2012) suggested that it took these devout, committed evangelicals great effort to keep God present and salient in their lives; that their belief in this invisible other was different in some way than their belief in the everyday reality of visible tables and chairs; and that it was particularly hard to sustain a straightforward faith in God's benevolence because the world so often seemed to deny it. These Christians often did sustain their faith—but they worked intensely hard at doing so. They went to church at least once a week. They tried to read their Bibles every day. They thought they should pray at least thirty minutes a day. And they said again and again that unless you did all those things, your faith would wither and die. They never said any of those things about the kitchen table.

This paper sets out to argue that these observations are true of many, many faiths, and that this should lead observers to treat beliefs about invisible others as different in kind from mundane beliefs about the everyday world.

Let me begin with the claim in its most provocative form: that nowhere do

people believe (straightforwardly, easily) in gods and spirits (see also Boyer 2013, 350). When I say this, observers protest. Aparecida Vilaca (2013) once explained that American evangelicals might doubt, but not the Amazonian Wari'. A developmental psychologist commented to me that to his northern Michigan grandmother, God was simply real. And yet: whatever believers may say, they mostly behave as if spirits aren't particularly relevant—and certainly not helpful—unless they go to great effort to get those spirits involved. They may never spontaneously voice doubts. But the very fact that it takes so much work to do rituals which are meant to capture the spirit's attention suggests that spirits aren't assumed to interact in any straightforward way with the humans around them. Pascal Boyer puts it this way:

Observing rituals in the flesh, so to speak, one is bound to derive the ... impression, that beliefs are often an occasional and elusive consequence of ceremonies rather than their foundation. Indeed, if beliefs were as straightforward as Lévi-Strauss (and many others) assume, rituals would be quite strikingly inefficient. As my colleague Denis Vidal once put it, if it takes a whole night of scripted ritualized behavior and 10,000 verses of opaque speech to cure a common cold, then calling all this “efficacite” seems a bit of a stretch.

BOYER 2013, 351

What rituals do is to remind people that their beliefs are plausible. Rituals describe the gods, talk about the narrative in which the God is embedded, get people to sing and pray and dance and enter states in which that which must be represented in their imagination (because the gods, of course, are invisible) can sometimes be experienced in the world.

Initially, spirits may or may not be around. But after the whole night of ritual and the 10,000 verses, to some people at some junctures this conjectural representation becomes more vivid, more accessible, is associated with actual experience, is given some explanatory power—in other words is potentially turned into what we commonly call a belief.

BOYER 2013, 352

People need rituals because people do not in fact treat their religious

beliefs—their conjectures—that God is real the way they treat their beliefs that trees grow upwards and coconuts fall down.

Indeed, people even need to be taught explicitly how to recognize spirits for the simple reason that spirits are invisible. The narrative Vilaca provided to explain that spirits were simply real for the Wari' in fact illustrates the need for this teaching—and that need for teaching indicates that there is something different about this kind of object.

One day in 2003 I asked the jaguar-shaman Orowam, whom I call grandfather, whether I could film a conversation with him about jaguars and their world. He sat on a wooden trunk close to his house and I positioned myself in front of him with my video camera on a tripod next to me. Several people sat around Orowam to hear him speak. After a long silence, Orowam began to look to his left and talk in a low voice, and immediately all of those on that side ran away, especially the children, shooed away by their parents. From the comments I understood that the jaguars were present, arriving from that direction. Not knowing what to do, I remained seated looking towards Orowam, until he turned towards me and began to tell me what the jaguars were saying. They asked him who I was. He replied that I was his granddaughter. Again he looked to his left, listened and turned back to me, saying that they wanted to know what I would give as a present for filming. I answered. Turning to the jaguars, he repeated my response in a loud voice: “a shirt,” she said. Both the dialogues were spoken in the Wari' language. The three of us (or more, since a groups of jaguars was involved) talked like this for about fifteen minutes, after which the jaguars left. The others then drew near again, surrounding Orowam and remarking on what had happened. Nobody, as far as I could tell, doubted the presence of the jaguars.

VILACA 2013, 361.

This scene does not represent straightforward acceptance of the spirit's presence. It demonstrates the great care and skill that enters into the demonstration of the invisible spirit's presence. A special man, in whom the community has invested many resources and which the community identifies as an expert, is the one who sees, and he then acts out in public the spirit's interaction. The shaman points with his eyes, speaks out loud in dialogue and reports the invisible other's speech. It is a skilled, practiced performance. The Wari' need this kind of performance because spirits are not

present to the senses in ordinary ways. Spirits are different in kind from ordinary objects, and the behavior of the Wari' expresses that.

These days a broad group of anthropologists and psychologists argue that even committed believers treat invisible others—spirits—as less real and less reliable than things of the mundane everyday world. The philosopher Neil Van Leeuwen (2014) summarizes this work by arguing that religious beliefs and mundane beliefs are held with different “cognitive attitudes.” That is, people evaluate these beliefs with different evidence, commit to them for different reasons, and draw different kinds of inferences from them. To be clear: there are no doubt many kinds of belief commitments held with many different kinds of cognitive attitudes: beliefs about fiction vs beliefs about facts, beliefs about doing vs beliefs about knowing, beliefs about matters that define one’s identity vs beliefs about the mundane world. But the case that cognitive attitudes towards beliefs in spirits are different in kind from cognitive attitudes towards beliefs about the mundane world has proved controversial (Boudry and Coyne 2016). My reading suggests five major arguments for the defense.

First, people use language differently when they talk about spirits, and in a way that suggests that they think about the realness of spirits and mundane objects differently. You do not say, “I believe that my dog is alive.” The fact is so obvious that it is not worth stating. You simply talk in ways that presume the dog’s aliveness. You say that she’s adorable, or hungry, or in need of a walk. Van Leeuwen contrasts these two beliefs:

“Jennifer believes that Margaret Thatcher is alive.”
 “Sam believes that Jesus Christ is alive.”

The first is a mundane assertion. If Jennifer held her belief about Margaret Thatcher after Thatcher died in April 2013, she’d just be wrong and it likely would not take much effort to get her to admit it. Sam, however, asserts his belief in the sharp awareness that there was a man called Jesus who died and was buried some two thousand years ago. His statement “Jesus Christ is alive” assumes the historical reality of the death—and then denies it. It is an epistemologically complicated commitment, and its complicatedness is present in the very structure of the sentence. If you told Sam that he had made a factual mistake, he would probably argue vigorously that you were wrong.

Second, religious beliefs become part of the identity of those who assert them, and humans evaluate challenges to identity-defining beliefs differently from challenges to mundane beliefs. Mundane beliefs adjust to the empirical

details. If I believe that my dog is in the study but I find her in the kitchen, I adjust my beliefs. We evaluate religious beliefs more with our sense of destiny, power and the way the world should be. Many years ago I spent some time with some of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's followers who were with him at the end of his time in his overbuilt Oregon compound. They were committed to the view that Bhagwan was a good man, despite the rumors that his right hand person had tried to poison another follower, and despite the abrupt shift in their spiritual practice from sexy dancing meditation to long days of manual labor. Not until the FBI helicopter landed in the compound, they said, did they come to the conclusion that he had behaved criminally—and then they fled. Being a Rajneeshi had been who they were, and they had not wanted the inconvenient facts to get in the way.

Third, religious beliefs and factual beliefs often play different roles in interpreting the same events. Malinowski (1925) pointed this out years ago. The Trobriand islanders put amulets on the fields to ward off thieves and they used magical incantations to protect their wooden canoes on the turbulent seas. But they also kept a sharp lookout for intruders and they carved carefully, with all the practical knowledge at their command, to build seaworthy vessels that would not sink. They used magic to handle what we would call luck: the unexpected circumstance, the unpredictable event, an overlarge wave. More recently, Cristine Legare and her colleagues (2012, 779) have demonstrated that natural and supernatural explanations are used pervasively across cultures, one to explain how, the other to explain why. We know that tumors arise because cells begin to divide in inappropriate, unbridled ways: but why this tumor, for this person, at this time? Legare (et al 2012) not only documented the co-existence of natural and supernatural explanations in many societies, but she set out to understand whether natural explanations replaced supernatural explanations as people aged. She found that the reverse was more often true. It is the young kids who seem skeptical when researchers like Legare ask them about gods and ancestors, and the adults who seem firm and clear. This is what Margaret Mead (1930) saw in New Guinea. When Mead tried to talk to Manus children about magic and spirits, they gave her disinterested stares. It was the adults who spent hours discussing ghosts. It seems that supernatural ideas do things for adults they do not yet do for children. It also suggests that these ideas about the supernatural take effort to acquire.

Fourth, scholars have shown that people don't always use rational, instrumental reasoning when they reason with religious ideas. This is not to say that they can't reason rationally about religion: the works of Augustine and Aquinas are testament to the human ability to think logically about

things divine. But often, people do not. The anthropologist Scott Atran and his colleagues (2014) have shown that faith commitments, which they call “sacred values,” are often immune to the cost-benefit trade offs that govern other dimensions of human lives. A cartoon can be as big an affront to the faithful as an airstrike. Offer a Muslim woman money to take off her veil, and she may insist even more fiercely on the importance of her headscarf. When people feel themselves to be completely fused with a group defined by its sacred value, they commit acts that most others would not. They become what Atran calls “devoted actors” who are unconditionally committed to their sacred value, and they are willing to die for it.

Fifth and finally, scholars have shown that people behave as if religious beliefs depend more on context than beliefs about the everyday natural world. The natural, material, everyday world always matters. You must stop at stoplights, study for exams, feed the dog. Someone who prayed that their car would stop without braking would seem mad, not devout. Ditto for a student who prayed to pass an exam without studying or a dog-owner who prayed that the dog would get fed without filling up the dinner bowl. The mundane everyday world is in some sense always prior.

Van Leeuwen calls this “continual reality tracking.” Children who play at giving teddy a bath may wash teddy with pretend soap and dry teddy with a pretend towel. They may give teddy a playdough cookie for his bedtime snack, and mop up the pretend milk from the floor where teddy spilled it. They will behave as if all these pretend items are real. But if an adult take a real bite out of that playdough cookie, this startles the child (Golomb and Kuersten 1996). The psychologist Paul Harris (2000) argues that make belief is always temporary. The factual composition of the playdough is not—and the child knows it. And so the factual governs the non-factual, even when people tell you that it is the non-factual which really counts.

Of course there are counter-examples. Snake handling sects encourage congregants to pick up poisonous snakes, and those snakes bite and kill people with alarming frequency (Covington 1995). Christian Science encourages congregants to refuse medical care on the grounds that it should be God alone who heals. A cult called Heaven’s Gate persuaded 39 people that if they took barbituates and vodka, they would join a spaceship riding in behind a comet’s tail. Yet these counter examples are relatively rare. Most people behave as if there ordinary expectations about how the world works, and special expectations associated with spirits that become salient at special times and in special ways (Taves 2009).

That is what the anthropologist Rita Astuti saw when she went to do her fieldwork among the Vezo, a small Malagasy fishing community at the edge

of the sea. The Vezo told her that after death, people become ancestors and communicate through dreams. “They can be seen with their original body form, they can talk and be heard, they can move and be seen, they can touch and be felt” (Astuti 2007, 331). And yet the dead also really die. Carrying a corpse, the Vezo laughed at Astuti when she wondered whether the dead woman would be warmer by the fire. Dressing the dead woman, someone remarked that she wouldn’t need a bra because although her breasts were large, she “could have no chance to swing them around” where she was going (Astuti 2007, 234). Everything survived, it seemed, but nothing did.

So what in fact *did* they believe? Astuti worked with Harris to develop two stories. In one, people were told that Rampy was a hardworking man who’d fallen ill with a fever and had been taken to the hospital; there, although the doctor gave him four injections, he died three days later of malaria. In the other, a man called Rapeto, with many children and grandchildren, died at home among those children and grandchildren, and after his death they dreamt about him and built him an ancestral tomb. After hearing the story, subjects were asked what “still worked”? They were asked about bodily functions (does his heart still beat? do his eyes work?) and mental ones (does he miss his children? does he know his wife’s name?) Regardless of which story they heard, people said that most functions no longer worked, but that more mental than bodily functions did so. They also said that significantly more functions worked for Rapeto than for Rampy. When people are reminded of their religious ideas, the dead man seemed less like a corpse, and more like an ancestor. Astuti and Harris concluded that:

Vezos do not believe in the existence and power of the ancestors in the abstract, but they believe in them when their attention is on tombs that have to be built, on dreams that have to be interpreted, and on illnesses that have to be explained and resolved. In other contexts, death is represented as total annihilation, and in these contexts it would be misleading to insist that Vezo believe in the existence of ancestral spirits.

ASTUTI AND HARRIS 2008, 734

When the head of Astuti’s adoptive family addressed the dead during a major ritual, he ended his delivery with a joke: “It’s over, and there is not going to be a reply!” (Astuti 2007: 241). People laughed, she said, because as the ritual draws to a close they “shift out of the frame of mind that had sustained the one way conversation with the dead, and they came to recognize the sheer

absurdity of what they are doing” (Astuti 2007: 241). This is not a perspective in which belief is a thing in the world, like a sofa in the living room, and either you have it or you don’t. From this perspective, belief is a way of paying attention, and it is hard to sustain because in many ways belief flouts facts in the face. *It’s over and there is not going to be a reply.*

These observations suggest that humans behave as if they have a faith frame and an everyday frame, a way of thinking when they reason about the supernatural, and a way of thinking when they reason about the ordinary world of rocks and dogs and kitchen tables. The observations suggest that the everyday frame is always relevant, but the faith frame is not always relevant. Even when someone is religious, even when they express no doubt that god is real, they use their faith frame and their everyday frame to make sense of different events and to motivate different actions, and it requires effort to identify spirit and to sustain the frame, the more so when the everyday world seems to contradict it.

These reflections might seem to fly in the face of one of the great achievements of the cognitive science of religion, which has been to demonstrate that in some fundamental way, belief in the supernatural is easy for humans. Pascal Boyer, Stewart Guthrie, Justin Barrett and others have argued that humans readily generate intuitions about supernatural agency—about gods who can read one’s mind, about an external moral force, about invisible agents. These scholars have shown that we humans see agents everywhere—at least when we think quickly, intuitively and automatically. We see faces in the clouds and eyes on cars (Guthrie 1995). When two geometric shapes move sequentially around a computer screen, we ascribe intentions to them (Heider and Simmel 1994). When you walk into a dark and unfamiliar house alone, it is all too easy to generate intuitive beliefs about hidden agents and even invisible ones. We know that, because we mostly all become afraid. Boyer (2002) and his colleagues argue that the ease with which we produce such intuitions make the apparently irrational idea of an invisible agent seem plausible. Justin Barrett (2004, 13) remarks that when a “reflective; belief—a belief which is deliberately learned and held, like a theological understanding of God—is supported by these quick, automatic intuitions, “the reflective beliefs just seem more reasonable.”

And yet it is also true that humans have other intuitions that flatly contradict these ideas about invisible agents watching us and having power over our lives. After toddlerhood, humans also expect that persons are visible, that minds are private and that love is dependent upon right behavior. They distinguish between real and pretend. If they hear a crash in the next room, they may have the intuition that there’s an agent present: but

if they check and can't see anyone, the competing intuition that it was just the wind against the window will likely feel more powerful. In many cases, these ordinary inferences or intuitions about visible persons and invisible non-persons (like the wind) directly undercuts the intuitions which seem to support ideas about invisible agents. There is a kind of obduracy about the world of the visible which means that when inferences about invisible others is not supported by experience, the commitment to the invisible can fade away. Ghost stories are simply less frightening in the daylight.

This is why the work of faith is important, and it is why the faith commitment is not like mundane beliefs about an ordinary factual world. The intuitions Boyer, Barrett and others describe are often based on fear. Something goes wrong—a crash, a rustle in the bushes, a dark and lonely road—and a human seeks for an agent that could hard them. By contrast, faith is the sustained, intentional commitment to the deliberative belief that an invisible other is real—and often, that the being is important, good, and helpful. Faith requires effort to sustain precisely because everyday intuitions do not always support the idea that an invisible other will grant a petition, punish the wicked and reward the just. Of course all faiths have accounts of why a mighty god might not answer a prayer. We call this theodicy. But I have never met a Christian who has not been disappointed—at some point—by God's apparent absence, and who has not spoken of the need to affirm God's goodness in the face of that disappointment. I have never encountered a Christian who has not wondered at some point whether the promise of joy they hear from the altar is really intended for them.

Because of this, faith requires constant attention—praying, sacred text reading, ritual abasement, care of the shrine—to override these disappointments and the ordinary, everyday intuitions that persons are not invisible, minds cannot be read, and love is always limited. What I saw among evangelical Christians was an explicit, determined insistence that faith required practice—a honed attention to the presence of God. But they are not unique. Evans-Pritchard on the Nuer, Victor Turner on the Ndembu, Reichel Dolmatoff on Amazonian shamans—they all describe teaching involved in recognizing spirits, and the elaborate rituals, community gathering and even hallucinogens required to make them present. The classic monotheistic faiths build fantastically expensive buildings, support a staff of experts at enormous community expense, and surround the faithful with music and art to fill their senses. We need to take seriously something that people often say, which is that without the rituals, the prayers, the expert priest or shaman, the spirits might not show up, and people might not believe that they are real.

It seems likely that it is more difficult to sustain faith in a purely loving god than in a demonic spirit. That may seem counterintuitive. Belief in a loving god should comfort, while the demon scarcely can. And yet fear may be harder to discount than love, and the love of a god may seem frankly implausible. In many modern evangelical churches, sin and judgment have almost vanished. The church imagines reaching out to the unchurched, and offers to potential converts a god who never judges, never punishes and always loves. “From love, with love and for love” was the way the prayer group I joined described the way we should experience our relationship with God. So too the book that has sold more hardback copies than any other single text than the Bible: *The Purpose Driven Life*. “Because God is love, the most important lesson he wants you to learn on earth is how to love” (Warren 2002, 123). Who can take that kind of joyful promise seriously?

The fear of dangerous invisible others is difficult to suppress. In a conference in Finland in 2016, I heard a panel in which four papers explored spirits in different villages. One spoke of a Neolithic temple that had recently become a site for Marian pilgrimage, where people came there hoping to see the Virgin among the remnants of the distant past. Another described the visitors to a museum of witchcraft who wanted to feel the uncanny because the goosebumps gave them confidence that magic was real. Those were papers on what people wanted, and their hopes were not always fulfilled. Not so the next two, which described spirits that no one—including the locals—wanted to believe might be there and which none of them could entirely discount. One spoke about work with an animist people in northern India, and another about work in a predominantly Tibetan Buddhist village. Both described just how hard it was to ignore the local mutterings about malignant spirits, even when the locals refused to say that the spirits were real. Fear of the unknown and dangerous can be difficult to disavow.

I propose that there is a continuum of believability for invisible spirits: at one end, spiritual worlds dominated by non-omniscient, capricious spirits whom humans fear, and at the other end, spiritual worlds dominated by near-unconditionally loving monotheistic gods who promise a glorious life on earth quite at odds with the earthly experience of the faithful. As one along the continuum, belief in the invisible gods requires more effort to sustain. Not all faiths are represented on this continuum, nor does the continuum presuppose a common understanding. Every faith has its own conception of the good life and a distinctive moral end towards which it aims. For each faith, that moral end is framed against a supernatural world of more or less active spiritual beings which are managed in various ways. Thai Buddhists reject the idea of an overarching god who sees all things, and yet

they live in a world teeming with ghosts. They reach for the good life by representing human experience as a life of suffering. Yet across these faiths runs a common thread. That which we fear is more believable than that for which we yearn. The god who will curse you if you do not propitiate him is likely more difficult to ignore than the god who promises a golden world without end.

Is there evidence for such a claim? There is common sense. A capricious spirit who wreaks havoc with one's crops or boats must seem more plausible than one who promises a perfect harvest. A judgmental god who punishes must seem more realistic—more in accord with the world as it is—than a god who promises eternal joy. There is also the observation that people respond more to what Ara Norenzayan (2013) calls the sticks of hell rather than the carrots of heaven. At least, people are better behaved when they take their god to be more mean. And the intuitions that Boyer and Barrett describe arise from moments of danger—the fear of a predator—rather than from moments of peace and ease.

By “faith frame” I mean the set of memories, expectations, and representations which are evoked when someone calls God or the supernatural to mind, and thinks and acts on the basis of those memories, expectations and representations. The faith frame creates a different epistemological stance than the factual frame of the everyday, ordinary world. Its objects are not quite as real as tables and chairs, but they are also felt to be more real, more morally important, more central to self and purpose. The faith frame catches up the way the faithful want to be and the world as they think it could and should be. To choose to think with the faith frame is a decision to enter into another way of thinking about reality which—like fiction—calls on the resources of the imagination to re-organize what is fundamentally real and what lives in tension with the ordinary factual frames of everyday reality. And so the shift from thinking like a bus driver (“I know I turn left up here”) to thinking like a Muslim who happens to be driving a bus (“A good Muslim would stop here longer than the company might like in order to allow this elderly woman to catch the bus”) is similar to the shift in and out of imaginative play—except that the play claims are also serious claims about the world.

The point about play is that it is distinct from non-play: a “free activity,” as the historian Johannes Huizinga defined it in *Homo Ludens*, “standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life in being ‘not serious’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly.” When dogs play, they sometimes signal to each other with a distinctive play-crouch, and they infer from the crouch that their snarling intensity is not to be taken as aggression. The

anthropologist Gregory Bateson talked about this as a layering of epistemological frames. There is a “play-frame” and a “reality frame,” and when we play, we act within the play frame. We bathe the teddy bear in invisible water and we dry him off with a towel of air, and we are not confused when our hands do not get wet.

Faith is like that in many ways. A person who prays enters into an epistemological frame—a faith frame—in which she acts as if something were true: that there is an invisible person who loves her or judges her or is willing to protect her on terms, and she seeks to take it seriously despite her knowledge that this as-if sits uneasily with the world she sees and knows. She sets out to be the person she would be if she truly took seriously the lessons of the Bible or the Koran or the promises of ancestors. People of faith want to live as if the faith frame is really true, and it is hard, because faith is always under assault by the small (and large) unfairnesses and brutalities of life. It is hard because it is difficult to be that person who is always compassionate and responsible, and it hard to remember that you are protected by a mighty god when you are driving home and there is an accident on the bridge *again* and you will be late at dinner. It takes work.

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