

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

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Volume 39 | Issue 4

Article 6

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10-1-2022

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### Recommended Citation

Daly, Chris (2022) "The Continuation of Religion by Other Means?," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 39: Iss. 4, Article 6.

DOI: 10.37977/faithphil.2022.39.4.6

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol39/iss4/6>

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# THE CONTINUATION OF RELIGION BY OTHER MEANS?

Chris Daly

There are several published versions of religious fictionalism. This paper focuses on just one of them: it evaluates Peter Lipton's pioneering account of religious fictionalism. According to Lipton, whereas the sentences of a religious text are to be understood literally, they are not to be believed but to be accepted. To accept a religious text is to believe the moral claims it makes but not its supernatural claims. The purposes of this version of fictionalism are to reconcile religious practice with scientific theory and to access various moral and cultural values. My evaluation will be especially critical of two of Lipton's claims. One is that, for a religious fictionalist, a religious text can be a source of moral guidance. The other is that, again for a religious fictionalist, a religious tradition provides a better understanding of oneself and others, and a better means of community identification, than any secular tradition.

## *1. Introduction: The Conflict between Science and Religion*

Here is the problem, as Lipton sees it. Suppose we believe what science says. What attitude might we then take to what religion says? We might believe some of it, but what about those parts of religion that conflict with what science says? Where conflict is understood in terms of claims having mutually inconsistent contents, our options are constrained. Lipton places two constraints on a resolution: the literal constraint and the selection constraint.<sup>1</sup>

By the literal constraint, not all the religious claims in apparent tension with science can be read non-literally. Attributing a non-literal meaning would dissipate the tension, but it is not available as an across-the-board reading of religious claims. The literal constraint preserves the "plain meaning" of many religious claims, and thereby "the value of that text" and "the religious traditions it supports."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The constraints are drawn from Lipton, "Science and Religion," where he faults various attempted solutions to the above conflict.

<sup>2</sup>Lipton, "Science and Religion," 34.



Some of the writing in the Bible certainly does appear to be metaphorical. . . . But nor is all of the text metaphorical, and in my view not enough of it is to solve the tension problem without extensive semantic violence. . . . Of course we can choose to read any text as a pervasive metaphor, but in the case of the Bible this would be to go against the plain meaning, and in my view it would diminish the value of that text and of the religious traditions that it supports that we should try to find a less disruptive way of resolving the tension.<sup>3</sup>

The selection constraint rules out the option of “pruning” religious texts, divesting them of claims which conflict with science. Such a policy would “leave far too many holes in the religious text” which can “do us the most good.”<sup>4</sup> The content of a religious text is to be preserved.

On [the selection view, i.e., a view such as Plantinga’s], science and religion both deliver factual claims and, taken together, these claims form a multiply inconsistent set. So we should weed out claims, until we have a consistent subset. The claims we remove should be those which we judge to have the weakest warrant, or anyway a weaker warrant than the claims they contradict. In some cases, this means the claim that goes is religious; in other cases it will be scientific: we have to decide on a case-by-case basis. [Footnote removed] This selection view is epistemically responsible, but in my view it would leave far too many holes in the religious text.<sup>5</sup>

With these constraints in place, let’s next consider Lipton’s “immersion solution” to the problem of the tension between science and religion. His solution is designed to solve an acute form of the problem: the problem of how an atheist who is also a scientific realist can retain intellectual integrity as a religious practitioner. In this paper, I concentrate on Lipton’s religious fictionalism for two reasons. First, his views were both pioneering and radical. Second, although various philosophers have offered versions of religious fictionalism,<sup>6</sup> Lipton’s work has not received the attention it deserved following his untimely death in 2007. This paper offers an extended evaluation of Lipton’s attempts to reconcile science with religion whilst preserving what he sees as what is valuable in religion.

## 2. *The Immersion Solution: Exposition*

Lipton’s solution draws on three key elements in Bas van Fraassen’s account of science.<sup>7</sup> Van Fraassen’s account is designed to resolve a different tension. Science makes claims about unobservable entities, but empiricism eschews believing such claims. Van Fraassen’s solution involves three elements: semantic, methodological, and epistemic.

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<sup>3</sup>Lipton, “Science and Religion,” 34.

<sup>4</sup>Lipton, “Science and Religion,” 35 (rejecting the policy found in Plantinga “When Faith and Reason Clash”).

<sup>5</sup>Lipton, “Science and Religion,” 35.

<sup>6</sup>Scott and Malcolm offer a valuable survey of the field (“Religious Fictionalism”).

<sup>7</sup>van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image*, ch. 1.

*Semantic:* scientific theories are to be understood literally and at face value: apparent claims about scientific unobservables are literal claims about scientific unobservables.

*Methodological:* when we use a scientific theory, we are to think and talk in its terms, making full use of its descriptive resources. We “immerse” ourselves in the theory, seeing the world as the theory describes it.

*Epistemic:* empiricists need not believe scientific theories. They need believe only that scientific theories are “empirically adequate”: that those theories describe observable entities correctly. They can be agnostic about what such theories say about unobservable entities.

Van Fraassen calls this discriminating attitude “agnosticism about a theory’s unobservable claims” and he calls belief about its observable claims “acceptance.”<sup>8</sup>

Lipton’s “immersion solution” to the problem of science and religion involves transposing these elements to religion, as follows.

*Semantic:* much, though not all, of the religious text is interpreted literally and at face value: “the Bible means what the Bible says; it is not an entirely metaphorical document.”<sup>9</sup>

*Methodological:* the religious practitioner sees the world in terms of her religion. Moreover, she participates in religious practice, commits to action on its behalf, and identifies and finds solidarity with fellow practitioners.<sup>10</sup>

*Epistemic:* the religious practitioner does not believe supernatural claims but believes some natural and some normative claims made by her religion. These are (mostly) those claims that are independently supported by science and moral reflection.

As Lipton summarizes matters:

We construe our religious text literally, we believe only parts of it but we use all of it and we immerse ourselves in the world it describes. The point of exploring this approach is . . . to consider a way those who find themselves with a commitment both to a religion and to science might have it both ways.<sup>11</sup>

A word or two about the wider literature on religious fictionalism. In terms of the classification of religious anti-realisms offered by Eshleman, Lipton is an advocate of religious instrumentalism.<sup>12</sup> Palmqvist opposes agnostic non-doxasticism to religious fictionalism.<sup>13</sup> But since Lipton takes scientific claims to conflict with various religious claims, and since he believes those scientific claims, he disbelieves those religious claims, i.e., he believes them to be false. So Palmqvist’s agnostic option is not available to

<sup>8</sup>van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image*, 12.

<sup>9</sup>Lipton, “Science and Religion,” 43; Lipton, “Is the Bible a Novel?,” 16–17.

<sup>10</sup>Lipton, “Science and Religion,” 43.

<sup>11</sup>Lipton, “Science and Religion,” 45.

<sup>12</sup>Eshleman, “Can An Atheist Believe in God?,” 188.

<sup>13</sup>Palmqvist, “Forms of Belief-Less Religion.”

Lipton.<sup>14</sup> Proposals similar to Lipton's have been presented by Wettstein, Sauchelli, and Deng.<sup>15</sup> Stump and Quinn offer replies to Wettstein.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. *The Immersion Solution: Evaluation*

We now turn to the evaluation of Lipton's immersion solution.<sup>17</sup> Keeping in mind the parallel between Lipton's solution and van Fraassen's account of science, three questions arise:

- Q1 What is the aim of religious practice?
- Q2 Does religious practice meet that aim?
- Q3 Does anything else meet that aim?

Van Fraassen says that the aim of science is to provide empirically adequate theories. The measure of success in science is then the degree to which scientific theories accurately describe observable entities. What does Lipton take the aim of religion to be? He suggests religion accrues three benefits. One is moral guidance. A second is a better understanding of oneself and of other human beings. A third is communal identification and solidarity. That is his answer to Q1.

In the next three sections, §§4–6, I will query whether religion provides the first two benefits. In §7 I will argue that no religion uniquely provides communal identification and solidarity and that various non-religious practices equally provide them. §8 summarizes my evaluation of Lipton's fictionalism.

### 4. *Is Religion Morally Adequate?*

Given that a religious text makes moral and, more generally, normative claims, presumably we would want it to make only true normative claims. To adapt van Fraassen's terminology, one would want a religion that is morally adequate. By this I mean that a religion is morally adequate if and only if it makes all the moral obligations that we have independently of the religion and it does not impose any further obligations that conflict with any of those moral obligations. (This allows that a religion may impose normative requirements of its own, e.g., to follow certain rituals or practices provided that they do not conflict with morality). Again, if a religious text provides information about the nature of oneself and fellow human beings, presumably we would want it to make only those psychological, biological, and anthropological claims that are true. One would want a religion that is anthropically adequate.

<sup>14</sup>Palmqvist, "Forms of Belief-Less Religion," 52.

<sup>15</sup>Wettstein, "Awe and the Religious Life," especially §VIII; Sauchelli, "The Will to Make-Believe," 630–633; Deng, "Religion for Naturalists and the Meaning of Belief," §III.

<sup>16</sup>Stump, "Awe and Atheism"; Quinn, "Religious Awe, Aesthetic Awe."

<sup>17</sup>Deng, "Religion for Naturalists," 206–207, offers a useful but brief assessment of his solution.

A point of detail: I have simply followed Lipton in framing matters in terms of normative claims being believed or as being true or false. Such an approach might seem to assume that expressivism about normativity is false. Lipton does not broach the issues of cognitivism and expressivism about normativity, but I am inclined to think that, even given expressivism, the larger issues that follow are substantially the same. First, expressivists still want some way of evaluating normative sentences, namely, which ones to endorse, which ones to disavow. The larger issues are then engaged. Why should we endorse a given normative sentence simply given the fact that a certain religion endorses it? Second, that aside (and following Horwich),<sup>18</sup> I think that expressivism is best understood as the thesis that normative sentences express desires, and not as the less plausible thesis that normative sentences are not truth-apt or are not objects of belief. So understood, expressivists can take talk of morally adequate belief systems at face value. Lastly, even if both the preceding points are incorrect, the position that Lipton takes, the conjunction of moral cognitivism with religious fictionalism, is of considerable philosophical interest in its own right.

Extant religious texts are not morally adequate, as Lipton acknowledges. Nor are they anthropologically adequate. The texts of Judaism and Christianity contain offensive or false claims about, for instance, the status of women and the morality of homosexuality, as well as false information about the biological origins of human life, at least if that information is construed literally. Far from being piecemeal evidence, this information is repeated and emphasized throughout those texts, and, as Lipton would agree, the morality in question is reprehensible and the biology deeply erroneous. That provides our answer to Q2. But now what? What should we do with religion given that it fails to meet two of its aims? This is the topic raised by Q3.

The known fact that a system is less than perfectly adequate raises the question: which cases does it provide reliable information about and which not? The ensuing dilemma is that either there is independent evidence in support of what the system claims in a given case, whereby the system is redundant, or there is no independent evidence, whereby there is no reason to accept what the system claims. Pursuing the parallel with science and what it does when it fails to meet its aims, there seem to be three options. The first is to modify the religion so that it ceases to make what have been identified as false claims. In short, we bowdlerize religious text. But this falls foul of the selection constraint: that amending the text by eliminating error would “leave far too many holes in the religious text.”<sup>19</sup> Now, if improving the religious text is not an option, there is still the option of changing our minds. This is the second option. Having identified an erroneous claim in the text, we can

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<sup>18</sup>Horwich, “The Essence of Expressivism.”

<sup>19</sup>Lipton, “Science and Religion,” 35.

cease believing that bit of the text (supposing that we believed it beforehand). We preserve the text, but change our credences with respect to it. Indeed, this is Lipton's approach to his own religion. Since he does not believe all of the moral claims the Torah makes, the course of future inquiry might lead him to reject other moral claims that it makes. On the face of it, this seems a promising option. But it raises the question of the basis of the selection constraint. If it is permissible to update one's beliefs about the text and thereby improve them, why is it impermissible to amend the text and thereby improve it? (Historically, no major religious text was written all at once. The Bible, for instance, consists of many books written across many decades. If, in the past, practitioners worked with religious texts that were less extensive than their current forms are, why shouldn't future practitioners?) Contrariwise, if amending the text generates too many holes, as Lipton says it would, why wouldn't deleting beliefs generate too much of a doxastic loss? The rationale for the selection constraint becomes obscure.

There is a third option about what to do when a religion fails to meet its aims. Sometimes, when faced with persistent and deep-seated observational failure, science invents new theories. The third option is then to invent new religions that are more morally or anthropically adequate than the ones currently available. Unlike scientific theories, religious texts are not constrained or selected based on such theoretical virtues as simplicity, elegance, and unity. So it is open to us to devise new religions opportunistically and with the benefit of hindsight, building into them the correct moral and empirical claims that their predecessors omitted. There is historical precedent for this procedure. Comte's Religion of Humanity was devised with an eye to include (what he called) the "feminine virtues" of sympathy and sentiment that, in Comte's opinion, previous religions neglected. This third option overlaps with the first. One way to come up with a new text is to produce a highly excised version of an old one. So, if this third option is viable, it is difficult to see why the first is not.

Eshelman comments that, "In the course of their long evolution, existing religious traditions have developed a richness of insight, expression, and means of character transformation that one could not hope to reproduce should one seek to 'wipe the slate clean and start afresh.'"<sup>20</sup> But there is no call for requiring that when a religion is founded, it needs to be introduced *in toto*. And since insight is the product of experiment and investigation rather than the sheer longevity of a practice, a religion founded after the scientific revolution could incorporate a wealth and quality of information unavailable to venerable religions. In any case, a new religion can incorporate elements of older ones, much as early Christianity incorporated some pagan myths.

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<sup>20</sup>Eshelman, "Can An Atheist Believe in God?," 191.

### 5. *The Role of Independent Justification*

According to Lipton, the parts of religious tradition and text that the practitioner is entitled to believe are “for the most part” those that are independently justified. The hedging is included because, independently of outside sources, the text has “epistemic weight in certain areas, for example where it enjoins certain forms of ritual behaviour and where it in effect characterises certain group values.”<sup>21</sup> In all other cases, the epistemic support is drawn from outside the religion and from what we have discovered for ourselves. Here is how Lipton puts it:

So I favour a more flexible rule about what parts of the text to believe. We should accept those parts that we find on reflection to be valuable for us. In the case of ethical content we should not believe something just because the Torah says so, but because it passes the muster of our powers of critical reflection, however circumscribed those powers may be.<sup>22</sup>

Let’s consider two kinds of case in turn: the “bare” case where a text tells us what to believe or do, and then the “richer” case where, not only does a text tell us what to believe or do, but there is independent reason to respond in that way.

First, then, the bare fact that a certain text or practice enjoins  $\emptyset$  (some act type or some value) does not seem to provide any degree of justification for thinking that  $\emptyset$  should be enjoined. Without antecedent positive information about the provenance of a text or practice—information about its epistemic standing—there is no justification for thinking that we should do whatever the text happens to enjoin. (Compare such injunctions as “don’t walk on cracks between pavements” or “slander should be avenged by duels.”) And this point has especial force where the text is enjoining values or moral principles; matters of consequence raise the stakes. It might be thought that if there is independent support for what a text says, there is then some degree of justification for other things that it enjoins. That is, some degree of justification is transferred to other things that the text enjoins. But this is questionable because it is overly permissive. By the foregoing reasoning, if  $e$  is evidence for  $p$ ,  $e$  is evidence for  $p \ \& \ q$ , for any arbitrary  $q$ , and hence evidence for  $q$ . Any evidence would thereby be evidence for any proposition. Scientific theories make true observable predictions that would not otherwise occur to us. The novelty of those predictions provides strong support for the theories when the predictions are subsequently confirmed. Do religions make anthropic claims that we would otherwise not make but which have subsequently turned out to be true? This is doubtful. It is hard to think of anthropic predictions that any religion has made that would not otherwise have been made and that have subsequently turned out to be true.

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<sup>21</sup>Lipton, “Science and Religion,” 44.

<sup>22</sup>Lipton, “Science and Religion,” 9.



Let's turn to those claims in religious texts that are backed up by independent, external evidence. This case suggests that precisely because the evidence for those claims is independent of the religious text, the text is redundant. Why bother with it if you can instead consult a source that has underived epistemic authority?

Consider the device of reflective equilibrium.<sup>23</sup> Could we adapt that device to help us understand the issue here better? The idea would be that religious texts and moral practice are in a process of reciprocal illumination whereby bits of the texts are discarded or reinterpreted, and similarly for moral practice. There is then a process of mutual adjustment between reinterpretation and belief revision and it would be a mistake to look for independent justification for either of what the religious text prescribes or what our moral practice is.

This approach has two serious shortcomings. First, there are no grounds to alter our moral practice in the light of what is found in a text unless there is antecedent reason to believe the principles avowed by the text. It would help if we had reason to think that the principles had been formulated to codify (as opposed to reform radically) our considered moral judgments but there is no reason to think this. Furthermore, *ex hypothesi*, Lipton cannot claim that divine guidance led to those principles being included in the text. Both their provenance and epistemic status remain elusive. Consequently, we have no reason to follow any normative principle just because it is found in a religious text. Second, the model of reflective equilibrium allows that, in some cases at least, candidate moral principles are abandoned because of our particular moral judgments. Principles that women should always be subservient to men, that apostates should be executed, or that slavery is morally acceptable are abandoned. So, as Lipton himself concedes, not all the moral principles found in the religious text should be retained. Given their moral unacceptability, Lipton recommends that the religious practitioner should cease believing those parts of the text that license those principles. The replacement moral principles, the ones the practitioner should believe, are not ones found in the text. But this is just the start of the process of secularisation: the process of finding a basis for morality whose justification (as opposed to whose historical origin) is independent of any religious text or authority. So, again, the question arises: why bother with a religious text if we rely on moral principles that have justification independently of what the text says?

### 6. Lipton's Likely Replies

It is possible to discern two lines of reply in Lipton to this query. One is that immersion in a text involves a commitment to its use: "in accepting a religious text we not only believe parts of it; we also commit ourselves to using the text as a tool for thought, as a way of thinking about our

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<sup>23</sup>Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 20.

world."<sup>24</sup> The other line of thought concerns the heuristic role that religious texts can have, especially in facilitating our moral development:

"For those inside the tradition, the Bible is good to grapple with, and not just in the parts of it that are antecedently believed. . . . In my view one sometimes has to struggle with one's religious text, not just in order to understand it but in order to come to terms with its moral content. In some cases we may find this content morally unacceptable."<sup>25</sup>

The first claim, that immersion and commitment are intertwined, can be granted, but the claim only leads to a rephrasing of the challenge. Granted that immersion in a religion involves commitment to that religion, why immerse in the religion in the first place? Where the claims of the religion can be independently supported, those claims can be formulated and defended on secular grounds. "What does mummery add?" an unsympathetic critic might ask.

My challenge to Lipton here invites a rejoinder that might be drawn from Braithwaite (whose work Lipton acknowledges).<sup>26</sup> The rejoinder is that, even for a religious fictionalist, religion can evoke emotional responses that enhance our moral sensibilities. I think, however, that the challenge recurs. Since many fictions evoke various and powerful emotional responses, such as *To Kill A Mockingbird*, 1984, and *The Color Purple*, why immerse in a religion? Why invest it in rather than in any of these other forms of fiction? The latter may be as inspirational, troubling, or surprising as any religious text. A reading group, a form of activity I discuss later in this paper, may both be a source of moral instruction and of the emotions that motivate us in following through on our moral principles.

The second part of the rejoinder can also be granted: religious texts can be useful resources to test and refine our moral sensibilities against. If you were in Solomon's situation, which of the two women would you give the baby to? Three critical points should be noted.

First, one need not be "inside the tradition" for a religious text to provide the role of a resource. We can employ a religious text for this heuristic purpose without immersing ourselves in it. As the case of Solomon illustrates, we can isolate a moral dilemma or a judgment or an action and, what is more, we can debate the morality of the issue shorn of religious trappings. I take it that Lipton sets a good deal of store by the practice of immersion, to the practice of working within a specific religious tradition. It is something he repeatedly emphasizes, and he even calls his theory "the immersion solution." But I wonder why he set such store by immersion since what is of value here, using religion as a resource, apparently does not require being immersed in the religion. Lipton faces a dilemma.

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<sup>24</sup>Lipton, "Science and Religion," 45. See also Eshelman, "Can An Atheist Believe in God?," 192–93.

<sup>25</sup>Lipton, "Science and Religion," 45.

<sup>26</sup>Braithwaite, "An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief."

In evaluating the reasons the Torah gives for passing certain moral judgments, either those reasons essentially involve supernatural claims or they do not. If the former, the reasons given are, by Lipton's lights, ones that he does not believe and so the inferential route to the Torah's moral judgments is blocked. The religion provides no more than source material—examples of moral issues and of what a particular text has to say about them—and the religion provides no reasons for reaching any particular moral judgment. On the other hand, suppose that the reasons given by the Torah concern only natural claims. In that case any religious dressings those claims might have been given (in the form of descriptions of, say, what is predestined or holy) are dispensable.

Second, there is an important disanalogy between van Fraassen's anti-realism about science and Lipton's immersion solution. As we have seen, van Fraassen takes the observable/unobservable distinction to have considerable epistemic significance. It corresponds to the distinction between what we might believe and what we only accept. But it does not, in van Fraassen's view, correspond to the observable/theoretical distinction. He acknowledges that "all of our language is thoroughly theory-infected," with the consequence that all of our observational statements are imbued with theoretical terms.<sup>27</sup> The key point for our purposes is that a statement's featuring theoretical terms does not exclude its being an observational statement. So, we can be immersed in a scientific theory, describe the world in the theory's terms, and still use at least some of those terms to describe what we observe and hence what we believe. Now, consider Lipton's immersion solution. According to his solution, the distinction between what we might accept and what we might believe corresponds to the distinction between religious statements and non-religious statements. Religious statements are those that use terminology drawn from a religious practice ("grace," "maya," "God," "karma"); non-religious statements are those that do not use this terminology. (This is not to suggest that there is a sharp distinction between religious and non-religious statements, since there is not a sharp distinction between religious and other practices.) Statements about morality or one's psychology or one's community are non-religious provided they meet this condition and that is why, on Lipton's solution, such statements are ones that we might believe. But when one is immersed in a given religion and one describes and evaluates the world in the terms supplied by the religion, none of the descriptions so furnished will occur in statements that the practitioner believes. So, whereas immersion in a scientific theory enables one to believe some of the descriptions that theory provides, by contrast, on Lipton's account, immersion in a religion permits one only to accept the descriptions the religion provides. This reinforces the first point. Following an argument will generate belief in its conclusion only

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<sup>27</sup>van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image*, 14.

if you believe each of its premises (assuming the argument has no redundant premises). But then, on Lipton's account, immersion in a religion does not provide arguments that, if followed, generate belief in moral, psychological or anthropological conclusions. For immersion in a religion yields acceptance, not belief. Following an argument will generate belief in its conclusion only if none of its premises are religious statements, statements that are not apt for belief.

Lastly, there remains a puzzle about what additional attitudes Lipton takes to the religious normative claims that he rejects. In the case of van Fraassen's constructive empiricism, a scientific theory that makes a false observable claim is either abandoned or modified. Yet Lipton seems reluctant to do either of these things in the case of a religious text:

We sometimes have to struggle with the text, not just to understand it but to come to terms with its moral content. In some cases we may find this content morally unacceptable. . . . but here too I would continue to preserve the constructive attitude of immersion in the text. But the difficult material is there to be struggled with, not to be bowdlerised or ignored.<sup>28</sup>

To bowdlerise the text would be to revise it. To believe the text would be to believe its false normative claims. To abandon the text would be to abandon the religious tradition. Lipton rules out each of these options. He persists in struggling. But what is there to struggle over? It isn't a struggle about understanding the text: finding the content of the text morally objectionable requires understanding it in the first place. Nor is the struggle about whether to reject its sentences as Lipton has already resolved to reject them. It is then unclear what the struggle is about. And, if Lipton seeks to take some attitude to those sentences in addition to rejecting them, he does not say what it might be. It cannot be belief because to believe what a text says involves believing its normative claims, yet here Lipton is rejecting those claims (i.e., disbelieving them). The framework Lipton adopts from van Fraassen does not illuminate what this attitude could be, assuming there could even be such an attitude.

In fairness to Lipton, there is a parallel challenge to van Fraassen: what attitude does the constructive empiricist take to a scientific theory that is known to be empirically inadequate but instrumentally useful, at least in many contexts? Not belief, because the theory is known to be false. Not acceptance, because the theory is known to be empirically inadequate. There is a lacuna in the provision of available attitudes. What seems to be wanted is an attitude of "loose acceptance" that a constructive empiricist takes to a theory *T* just in case she believes some of *T*'s observable claims but is either agnostic or disbelieves *T*'s other claims, whether observable or unobservable.

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<sup>28</sup>Lipton, "Is the Bible a Novel?," 9.

### 7. Social Identification, Solidarity, and Pluralism

I have made two critical points against Lipton's likely replies. The third point is broader: it addresses both the normative issues that Lipton raises and the social solidarity that Lipton claims that religion engenders.

The point is that, if we wish to broaden our moral sympathies, we can employ texts from many different religions to this end (as Deng observes),<sup>29</sup> but also from secular literature. Reading a text as part of a seminar or book circle would help gain moral inspiration.<sup>30</sup> Now, Lipton thinks that religion can provide more than even an intensive reading group can. Religion can provide "extraordinary support for communal identification and moral reflection."<sup>31</sup> This broaches the third benefit that Lipton attributes to religious practice. But the invocation of this benefit takes us away from the issue of epistemic justification that has been occupying us up until this point. By the same token, this third benefit is independent of the other two benefits. There are activities that facilitate community identification and fellow feeling, such as Veterans Day, national days of independence, and the Glastonbury festival (the largest greenfield music and performing arts festival in the world) that lack a pedagogic dimension. Furthermore, in adducing this third benefit, Lipton understates matters. If the practitioner need not believe any religious doctrines, it is open for her to be a member of more than one religion, indeed of many religions, and to reap the benefits of participating in all of their rituals and practices. Some religious texts may require practitioners to follow *only* that religion. But we have seen that, on Lipton's account, practitioners may evaluate and reject norms prescribed by their religion. The benefits that participation in several religions may bring might outweigh following a certain religion's norm proscribing such a practice. The parallel with van Fraassen's account of science only encourages this recommendation of religious eclecticism, since one and the same scientist will be immersed in the very different worlds presented by theories from different branches of science.

This parallel also helps address Robin le Poidevin's charge against an eclectic approach to religious practices. He writes that, "it is hard to see that this [approach] involves anything other than a very provisional, and perhaps also very superficial, commitment to the religious life."<sup>32</sup> Le Poidevin has in mind someone who accepts a series of religious practices in sequence rather than, as I am considering, all at once. Even so understood, his charge is overstated. "Provisional" just means *not permanent* and that simply restates the proposal in question. As to being "very superficial," someone might profitably immerse themselves in a succession of religious practices much as someone might work through a sequence of cultural interests over a lifetime, absorbed by and enjoying each one for as

<sup>29</sup>Deng, "Religion for Naturalists," 212.

<sup>30</sup>As noted in another context by Eshleman, "Can An Atheist Believe in God?," 90.

<sup>31</sup>Lipton, "Science and Religion," 46.

<sup>32</sup>Le Poidevin, "Playing the God Game," 184.

long as it is found rewarding. Again, a person's career can be variegated without being superficial: Churchill was variously a soldier, journalist, historian, and politician, throwing himself into each role that came his way. There was nothing superficial about his life.

It has been suggested that a "serious challenge" to the kind of religious fictionalism that Lipton advocates is the fact that the frequent imagining and entertaining of a religious practice as true "may in the end cause us to believe certain (implausible) religious claims."<sup>33</sup> The use of "may," though, indicates hedging and a challenge needs to be taken seriously only if it has strong supporting evidence. It seems unlikely that an actor who plays the murderer in *The Mousetrap* night after night thereby faces a serious challenge of being enticed into a life of violent crime. In any case, one countermeasure for the religious fictionalist would be to immerse oneself in a variety of religious practices at any stage in one's life. Any inclination to believe the claims that are part of those practices would be decreased by the glaring conflicts between many of the claims of different religions. Another countermeasure, if one were needed, would be periodically to re-read the likes of Hume or Mackie to "break the spell."<sup>34</sup>

Finally, to return to Lipton, it should come as no surprise that religious practice can offer much more to people's individual and collective flourishing than any reading group can. But that frames the contrast in an impoverished manner. Suppose the contrast is with a reading group that is part of a thriving community with a shared history and beneficial traditions of its own. The personal and social benefits that Lipton identifies are not the sole preserve of religious practice. And I find no argument in Lipton's work for his claim that "the immersion solution can provide a great deal, more than even the most enthusiastic book group."<sup>35</sup> And it's hard to see how there could be a general argument that the benefits of religion would outstrip those of non-religious sources, however diverse and venerable. Which means are chosen to provide these benefits is then a matter of taste and convenience.

### 8. Conclusion

Lipton's religious fictionalism presents religious practice as having two benefits: moral guidance and cultural value. This paper's assessment is that the first alleged benefit is lacking. The challenge facing Lipton's religious fictionalist about the connection between religion and morality is as follows. Either religion is a source of justified moral beliefs or it is a store of examples and opinions which need not be justified. The first option is ruled out because Lipton has not shown that religion provides justified moral beliefs. The second option does not mark out religion from other

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<sup>33</sup>Sauchelli, "The Will to Make-Believe," 633.

<sup>34</sup>Sauchelli, "The Will to Make-Believe," 633, concedes this last point.

<sup>35</sup>Lipton, "Is the Bible a Novel?," 9.

fictions. Non-religious fictions provide a trove of examples and case studies for refining our moral sensibilities. They are also replete with their authors' own moral opinions, which we can variously reflect on and respond to. And though they are valuable, none of these works of fiction are themselves sources of moral guidance: we need independent moral guidance to tell us which of their moral precepts to accept and which to reject.

This paper grants that, under Lipton's fictionalist construal, religion has cultural benefits and can provide social solidarity and emotional solace to in-groups. But there is no case in thinking that such benefits are the preserve of any one religion nor of religions in general. So far as Lipton's religious fictionalism goes, one can derive these same benefits by practicing several religions or none. On such issues, it is a matter of each to their own.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>I am grateful to Fraser MacBride and an anonymous referee for this journal for extremely helpful comments. I discussed Peter's views with him in the summer of 2007, only months before his untimely death. This paper is intended as a friendly challenge to a deeply missed philosopher.



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