You are leafing through the pages of a scientific journal of high reputation. You come across an article by an author whom you know as a good, meticulous, and reliable natural scientist. The sentence that catches your eye is this:

"The carotenoids are isoprenoid polienes".

You do not understand the sentence. You do, however, have good circumstantial reasons to believe that it is an indicative sentence expressing a true proposition (for short: that it is a true sentence). Your situation therefore is this: you can say that you believe that the sentence "carotenoids are isoprenoid polienes" is true. At the same time, you cannot be said to believe that carotenoids are isoprenoid polienes, because you have no idea what this is all about.

This situation seems paradoxical. You believe of a given sentence that it is true, because you have good external reasons to believe that it is true, but you do not believe (nor do you disbelieve, for that matter) its content – because its content is incomprehensible to you.

One way out of this problem is to distinguish between two propositional attitudes that are involved here. One is the familiar attitude of believing the proposition expressed by a sentence (in this case, believing that carotenoids are isoprenoid polienes). The other is the propositional attitude of holding a sentence true (in this case, holding "carotenoids are isoprenoid polienes" true). And the point of the distinction is this: when one believes that $p$, it analytically follows (modulus the sentence/proposition distinction) that one holds ‘$p$’ true. The converse, however, does not hold: a person may hold something true without believing it, e.g., when one does not understand it.

There is nothing absurd about holding a sentence true without believing the proposition it expresses. Indeed we want to do more than merely point to this possibility. We want to claim that this possibility


captures important phenomena. For example, the attitude towards holy scriptures, we suggest, is frequently that of holding them true. It is not unusual for people not to understand the text, or to understand it only partially or dimly. In this sense they cannot be said to believe it. At the same time they may well believe that it is true. What we have here are cases of division of epistemic labor, as it were. Part of your reason for believing that a certain given sentence, which to you is inscrutable, is true, is your belief that there are people whom you trust – scientists or priests, as the case may be – who do understand the sentence and who believe its content.

Let us explore the attitude towards sacred texts somewhat further. There is actually more than one attitude involved. That of the fundamentalist is simple. Fundamentalists believe that each and every sentence in, say, the Old and the New Testaments, is literally true. For them there is one literal – or, at any rate, straightforward – interpretation, under which each sentence is rendered meaningful and true.

Diehard fundamentalists, even if they exist, are not, by and large, typical believers. A typical believer’s attitude towards sacred texts is more complex. It seems to be a mixture of straightforward belief in some of the sentences and of holding others true. More precisely, where there is no straightforward reading of a sentence in the sacred text which will enable the believer to believe it, he or she will typically hold the sentence true in the sense that they will believe that there exists an intended interpretation under which the sentence is true. (Call them phonetic believers,\(^2\) as distinct from fanatic believers.) The interpretation, moreover, will have to be such that it will render the sentence true in a non-embarrassing way. This means, minimally, that the interpreted sentence will not overtly contradict other sentences of the same sacred text. It may also mean that the interpretation should not be too far-fetched, that it should still be closer to the literal than to the altogether allegorical interpretation.\(^3\)

There are, however, other believers, perhaps less typical, for whom the latter restriction does not apply. They will hold many sacred sentences true in the sense that they believe that there exists some interpretation under which these sentences can be seen in the best light, as revealing deep and precious truths. In order to achieve this, the interpretation may, or perhaps ought to, deviate drastically from the literal in the direction of the allegorical or even the mystical.