In the Iowa Supreme Court

No. 25–1608

Submitted September 15, 2026—Filed October 23, 2026

Andrew Perry,

Appellant,

vs.

Dordt University,

Appellee.

Appeal from the Iowa District Court for Sioux County, Robert D. Tiefenthaler, judge.

A former nursing student appeals the dismissal of his religious-discrimination claim against his former university. **District court judgment affirmed.**

May, J., delivered the opinion of the court, in which all justices joined.

Alan R. Ostergren (argued) of Alan R. Ostergren, PC, Des Moines, for appellant.

Nicholas B. McGrath (argued) and Christopher E. Hoyme of Jackson Lewis P.C., Omaha, NE, for appellee.

May, Justice.

In November 2021, an undergraduate nursing student claimed that his religious beliefs would be violated if he were required to take the COVID-19 vaccine before going into clinical rotations. Because of these beliefs, the student claimed, his university should grant him a religious exemption from the vaccine. The university denied the request. The student then brought this religious-discrimination suit against the university under the Iowa Civil Rights Act (ICRA). Following a bench trial, the district court dismissed the suit, primarily because the student did not have a sincerely held religious objection to the vaccine. The student now appeals.

We see no grounds for reversal. The student could not prevail under the ICRA without proving a prima facie case of religious discrimination. To prove a prima facie case, the student was required to prove that he had a *sincerely held* religious objection to the vaccine. Because of this "sincerely held" requirement, the district court had to test the *credibility* of the student's claim. The court properly performed that test by evaluating the evidence presented, including the student's own testimony. Ultimately, the court found that the student's claim was not credible. It was really his parents who opposed the vaccine, not the student.

Because the court's findings are supported by substantial evidence and consistent with our interpretation of the ICRA, we do not disturb them. We affirm.

I. Factual and Procedural Background.

The district court's dismissal ruling included extensive findings of fact, including express credibility determinations. We are grateful for the court's

detailed findings, which have aided our review. We provide the bulk of them here:

- "Andrew [Perry] is a former undergraduate nursing student" at Dordt University (Dordt). He "filed this action . . . based on Dordt's denial of his request for a religious exemption from the COVID-19[] vaccine mandate in place at" certain medical facilities that Dordt used for clinical rotations. "Andrew contends he held a sincere religious objection to the COVID-19[] vaccine, and [Dordt's] denial of his vaccine exemption request was discriminatory. Dordt asserts that Andrew had no sincere religious objection to the COVID-19[] vaccine. Rather, Dordt asserts that Andrew's parents, Gayln Perry ('Gayln') and Emmett Perry ('Emmett'), refused to allow Andrew to receive the vaccine based on their own opposition and forced Andrew to request a religious exemption by threatening to withhold any financial assistance for his continuing education."
- "As a part of Andrew's nursing studies at Dordt, he was required to complete clinical rotations. Dordt partnered with multiple medical facilities to allow students to participate in clinical programs . . . ."
- "COVID-19[] hit the Dordt campus when Andrew was a sophomore in 2020. Andrew testified that it changed the campus. Masks and social distancing were required. A COVID-19[] vaccine was not developed until Spring 2021. Even after the COVID-19[] vaccine first came out, it was not mandated on the Dordt campus."
- "After the COVID-19 vaccine came out, Andrew's parents, particularly his mother, Gayln, had significant issues with this vaccine. Gayln was adamantly opposed to Andrew getting the vaccine."

- "Despite Gayln's opposition to Andrew getting the COVID-19 vaccine, Andrew volunteered and received training to help give the vaccine to others in April 2021."
- On May 4, the chair of Dordt's nursing department, Dr. Deb Bomgaars, "sent an email to all the nursing students advising them that Dordt's clinical partner, Avera Health, would be mandating the COVID-19 vaccine for all students participating in clinical training in all Avera facilities after July 1." The email also "advised students that they would have to get the COVID-19 vaccine and provide proof of vaccination to Dordt by August 1 . . . to remain in the clinical program."
- The next day, May 5, "Gayln sent an email to Dr. Bomgaars advising her of all the medical dangers of the COVID-19[] vaccine" and "inform[ing] Dr. Bomgaars that she did not want Andrew to take the vaccine." "A flurry of emails was exchanged between Gayln and Dr. Bomgaars over the next several days."
- In an email dated May 19, "Dr. Bomgaars made it clear . . . to the nursing students that Dordt was not requiring students to get the COVID-19 vaccine, but Avera was." The email "also reminded [the students] that other clinical sites . . . were also considering possible vaccination requirements."
- Andrew asked his parents about taking the COVID-19 vaccine so he could continue his schooling. But his parents were "significantly opposed" to the vaccine, although Emmett's "opposition was not nearly as strong as Gayln's."
- Indeed, "Gayln threatened to cut off all financial assistance to Andrew if he received the COVID-19 vaccine." This was important because

"[v]irtually all the money that Andrew used for his continuing education in the nursing program came from his parents," including "tuition, room and board, and spending money"—"Andrew was 100% financially dependent on his parents."

- "Andrew wanted to remain in the nursing program at Dordt. He liked the staff, the environment, and the significant friendships that he had made while a student at Dordt; however, he knew that he would not have the financial ability to remain at Dordt if his parents cut him off financially." For several months, he "agonized over a way to obtain the COVID-19 vaccine so that he could continue in the clinical program at Dordt[] without upsetting his parents," especially "his mother."
- On May 19, "Andrew sent an unsolicited email to Dr. Bomgaars." In this email, Andrew said: "**I personally do not have a problem with the vaccine.** The main issue revolves around my parents' beliefs and concerns. With that being said, I want to respect my parents' opinions and worries as much as I can, but if it begins to interfere with my nursing education, I think that that needs to be addressed. So would me not getting the vaccine, in your opinion, hinder my nursing education?" (The bold is the district court's.)
- "Dr. Bomgaars responded that Andrew was not required to get the COVID-19 vaccine at this time, as the clinical partner [with whom] Andrew was working was not requiring it. Dr. Bomgaars hoped to work with Andrew and his mother on a solution."
- "Andrew testified at trial regarding his motivation for sending" his May 19 email. "Andrew testified that he sent this email out of fear, but not because his parents threatened him financially. Andrew testified

that he was still investigating information about the COVID-19 vaccine, and he was just conflicted. The Court did not find Andrew's testimony to be credible regarding his true motivation for sending [his May 19 email]." "The Court [found] that it is more likely that Andrew was facing financial pressure from his mother to refuse the vaccine." Andrew's email "never state[d] that he ha[d] any religious concerns about taking the vaccine."

- A few months later, on October 20, "Dr. Bomgaars sent an email to Andrew stating that all clinical partners of Dordt would require students to obtain the COVID-19 vaccine by the beginning of spring clinicals in 2022." The email also informed Andrew "that Dordt was unable to provide him with a comprehensive nursing education without sending him to clinicals, and all of their clinical sites were now requiring students to receive the COVID-19 vaccine."
- "Andrew talked with Dr. Bomgaars about the vaccination requirement several times in the Fall of 2021. Andrew discussed with Dr. Bomgaars that he considered getting the COVID-19 vaccination behind Gayln's back. Emmett was also aware of Andrew's idea to secretly get the COVID-19 vaccination without Gayln's knowledge. In December 2021, Emmett even discussed with Dordt Chief of Staff (the former Dean of Chapel), Aaron Baart ('Baart'), the possibility of Andrew getting the COVID-19 vaccination without Gayln's knowledge."
- On November 8, "Andrew sent an email to Baart inquiring about what information he would need to claim a religious exemption to the COVID-19 vaccine." "Baart responded that Dordt required documentation supporting a published position by his religious

denomination of an opposition to vaccinations, and supporting evidence of proof of a religious exemption that he was previously granted in kindergarten through 12th grade."

- On November 11, "Gayln and Emmett sent a four-page letter to Baart in support of Andrew's religious exemption request." "It was significant to the Court that Andrew had not yet officially made such a religious exemption request."
- Three days later, on November 14, "Andrew emailed a letter to Baart requesting that he be excused from receiving the COVID-19 vaccine based upon a religious exemption." "The basis of his religious exemption request [was] that his body is a temple of God and that he must be a steward of his own body. Thus, Andrew assert[ed] that if he were to knowingly put something in his body that would only hold risk for his body, he would be violating that religious belief. Andrew testified at trial that while it might be easier to go with the crowd the way other students did, that would trump his religious convictions."
- On December 2, "Baart sent an email to Andrew . . . denying his request for religious exemption" because Andrew "did not provide the documents that were required" as support for his application. The district court found "that Andrew did not provide" those documents "because either they didn't exist, or they were not likely to be helpful to any religious exemption request."
- On December 28, "Andrew sought a medical exemption from being required to obtain the COVID-19 vaccine." That request "was denied on December 31."

- Because "Andrew was unable to participate in Dordt's clinical program at any of its clinical site partners without receiving the COVID-19 vaccine, the only way [for] Andrew . . . to continue his nursing education with the financial assistance from his parents was to apply to another nursing program." "Andrew applied to 20 other programs, but they would not take his nursing credits from Dordt, and they would not accept his request that he not be required to get the COVID-19 vaccine. It is noteworthy that Andrew did not file suit against any of the other nursing programs."
- "Andrew applied for and was accepted into Palm Beach Atlantic University ('PBA'). Thus, Andrew left Dordt in Spring 2022, after his junior year of study, to attend PBA."
- The district court also made some specific findings about the credibility of Andrew's claimed religious objection: "At trial, Andrew was cross-examined extensively regarding the sincerity of his request for a religious exemption. As stated above, Andrew's request was based upon his religious belief that he could not knowingly introduce anything into his body that held only risk for his body." The district court did "not find Andrew to be credible on this issue." The court noted that "Andrew clearly did not have issues with introducing other things into his body that were unhealthy or a risk to his health." Specifically, the court noted that "Andrew conceded that he had been drunk with friends in the past" and also that "he vapes nicotine." The court also noted Andrew's testimony "that Gayln objects to his vaping, but has never threatened to cut him off financially if he did not stop vaping." "Gayln also never threatened to cut off Andrew financially for drinking alcohol to excess."

- The court also noted that "Andrew testified on direct examination that it was always his decision, not his parents[']s, as to whether he would get the COVID-19 vaccine or not; however, th[at] statement was inconsistent with his testimony on cross-examination." "Andrew was asked both at trial and in his deposition whether he would have gotten the COVID-19 vaccine if Gayln had changed her mind and agreed that he could get the vaccine. At trial, Andrew testified that he doesn't know whether he would have gotten the COVID-19 vaccine . . . if Gayln had given Andrew her blessing to get the vaccine[, t]hus, removing any financial incentive to not get the vaccine. In Andrew's deposition testimony, however, Andrew testified that he would likely have gotten the COVID-19 vaccine if Gayln had given her blessing for him to do so. Therefore, pleasing his parents and financing his continued education clearly seem to be more significant motivating factors than his alleged religious reason."
- "Andrew had several other instances during his testimony where his trial testimony differed from his deposition testimony. Without enumerating all of those instances, this added to the Court's finding that Andrew was not credible at trial or sincere regarding his alleged religious reason for not getting the COVID-19 vaccine."
- Rather, the court found, "Andrew decided not to get the vaccine so that his parents would continue to pay for his continuing education and to honor his mother and father."

In light of these findings, plus some others that we discuss below, the court concluded that Andrew's religious-discrimination claim must be dismissed. Now Andrew appeals that dismissal.

II. Issues on Appeal.

Andrew's appellate brief raises two issues. His main focus is the district court's alleged error in dismissing his ICRA religious-discrimination claim. But Andrew also claims that the district court abused its discretion by declining to reopen the record after trial to admit additional damages evidence.

Because we believe that the first issue is dispositive, we start and end with it.

III. Standard of Review.

To address Andrew's contentions, we must review both the district court's factual findings and its interpretation of the ICRA. Our review of the ICRA issues is for correction of errors at law. *Boyle v. Alum-Line, Inc.*, 710 N.W.2d 741, 747 (Iowa 2006). As for the fact issues, because this damages case was tried at law and to the bench, the trial court's "findings of fact have the effect of a special verdict, and are binding on us if supported by substantial evidence." *State v. Fordyce*, 940 N.W.2d 419, 425 (Iowa 2020) (citation omitted). "Evidence is substantial if a reasonable mind would accept it as adequate to reach the same findings." *CMT Highway, LLC v. Logan Contractors Supply, Inc.*, 34 N.W.3d 508, 514 (Iowa 2026) (quoting *Meyers v. Delaney*, 529 N.W.2d 288, 290 (Iowa 1995)). "Evidence is not insubstantial merely because [courts] may draw different conclusions from it; the ultimate question is whether it supports the finding actually made, not whether the evidence would support a different finding." *Crow v. Simpson*, 871 N.W.2d 98, 105 (Iowa 2015) (alteration in original) (quoting *Postell v. Am. Fam. Mut. Ins.*, 823 N.W.2d 35, 41 (Iowa 2012)). In deciding whether the evidence is substantial, we view it in the "light most favorable to the trial court['s] judgment." *5th & Walnut Parking LLC v. City of Des Moines*, 36 N.W.3d 741, 759 (Iowa 2026) (quoting *CMT Highway*, 34 N.W.3d at 514). Also,

"[d]eterminations of credibility are in most instances left for the trier of fact, who is in a better position to evaluate it." *State v. Weaver*, 608 N.W.2d 797, 804 (Iowa 2000) (en banc).

IV. Merits.

A. The Prima Facie Case. The Iowa Civil Rights Act prohibits religion-based discrimination by educational institutions. Iowa Code § 216.9 (2022). A student who claims religious discrimination under the ICRA "has the burden of proving by a preponderance of evidence a prima facie case of discrimination." *King v. Iowa C.R. Comm'n*, 334 N.W.2d 598, 601 (Iowa 1983) (quoting *Tex. Dep't of Cmty. Affs. v. Burdine*, 450 U.S. 248, 252–53 (1981)). "A prima facie case of religious discrimination is established" if the student demonstrates three things:

1. The student had "a bona fide belief that compliance with" an educational requirement "would be contrary to" the student's "religious belief or practice."
2. The student "informed" the educational institution "about the conflict."
3. The student was "penalized for failing to comply with the conflicting" educational requirement.

Id. (second through seventh quoting *Murphy v. Edge Mem'l Hosp.*, 550 F. Supp. 1185, 1187 (M.D. Ala. 1982)); *see Kincannon v. United Airlines, Inc.*, 168 F.4th 713, 727 (5th Cir. 2026) (describing analogous requirements to establish a prima facie case under Title VII); *see also Williams v. Legacy Health*, 174 F.4th 1201, 1205 (9th Cir. 2026) (same); *Zarn v. Minn. Dep't of Hum. Servs.*, 165 F.4th 1143, 1150 (8th Cir. 2026) (same).

B. A Bona Fide Religious Belief. For purposes of this appeal, there is no dispute that Andrew met the second and third requirements. As explained,

Andrew's November 14 email certainly "informed" Dordt of his alleged religious "conflict" with the vaccine requirement. *King*, 334 N.W.2d at 601. And Andrew was certainly "penalized for failing to comply with" the vaccine requirement. *Id.* He was prevented from completing clinicals. And that prevented him from completing his nursing education at Dordt.

The fighting issue is whether Andrew established the very first requirement: an objection to the vaccine that was based on *a bona fide religious belief*. For purposes of analysis, this requirement can be broken into two inquiries: (1) whether the professed belief is "sincerely held" and (2) whether the belief is "religious" in the holder's "own scheme of things." *United States v. Seeger*, 380 U.S. 163, 185 (1965); *see Patrick v. LeFevre*, 745 F.2d 153, 157 (2d Cir. 1984) (describing the *Seeger* analysis as a "two-pronged command"). We start with the question of religiousness.

1. *Religiousness.* The religiousness inquiry can present "a difficult and delicate task" for courts. *Thomas v. Rev. Bd. of the Ind. Emp. Sec. Div.*, 450 U.S. 707, 714 (1981). Part of the trouble is that there's "no consensus on how to define religion" for purposes of discrimination cases. *EEOC v. United Health Programs of Am., Inc.*, 213 F. Supp. 3d 377, 393 (E.D.N.Y. 2016) (quoting Donna D. Page, *Veganism and Sincerely Held "Religious" Beliefs in the Workplace: No Protection Without Definition*, 7 U. Pa. J. Lab. & Emp. L. 363, 371 (2005)). On the other hand, because the religiousness question is an inherently subjective one—whether the claimed belief is religious in the claimant's "*own scheme of things*"—a rigid universal definition may not be appropriate. *Seeger*, 380 U.S. at 185 (emphasis added).

In any event, this case does not require us to provide such a definition. At least for purposes of Andrew's prima facie case, the religiousness issue is fairly

cut and dried. Andrew claimed that his Christian beliefs required him to treat his body as a temple and, therefore, to refuse a vaccine that he considered dangerous. The district court expressed no doubt that this claimed belief could qualify as a religious belief. For purposes of this appeal, we do the same.

2. *Sincerity.* Instead, like the district court, we focus on whether Andrew's claimed religious belief was "sincerely held." *Seeger*, 380 U.S. at 185 (describing "the threshold question of sincerity" that "must be resolved in every case"). "Sincerity analysis seeks to determine an adherent's good faith in the expression of his religious belief." *Patrick*, 745 F.2d at 157; *accord Barnett v. Inova Health Care Servs.*, 125 F.4th 465, 470 (4th Cir. 2025). It "provides a rational means of differentiating between those beliefs that are held as a matter of conscience and those that are animated by motives of deception and fraud." *Patrick*, 745 F.2d at 157; *accord Barnett*, 125 F.4th at 470; *Littlefield v. Forney Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 268 F.3d 275, 293 (5th Cir. 2001).

This sincerity-versus-deception inquiry "is, of course, a question of fact." *Seeger*, 380 U.S. at 185; *Wright v. Honeywell Int'l, Inc.*, 148 F.4th 779, 782–83 (5th Cir. 2025). And, in some ways, it is just like the ordinary fact questions that trial courts answer every day. For instance, like any fact question, the sincerity inquiry must focus on the evidence presented at trial.

Yet we agree with the Fifth Circuit that "judicial inquiry into the sincerity of a person's religious belief 'must be handled with a light touch, or judicial shyness.' " *Wright*, 148 F.4th at 783 (quoting *Davis v. Fort Bend County*, 765 F.3d 480, 486 (5th Cir. 2014)). This means that the sincerity inquiry must be carefully limited to a "*credibility* assessment." *See Moussazadeh v. Tex. Dep't of Crim. Just.*, 703 F.3d 781, 792 (5th Cir. 2012) (emphasis added). It must be limited to whether the student's claim of a religion-based objection "is *honest*." *Ackerman v.*

Washington, 16 F.4th 170, 181 (6th Cir. 2021) (emphasis added). The inquiry must not spill into unconstitutional questions about whether the belief itself is religiously *valid*. The court may not ask what beliefs "ought or ought not to be an essential element of religious faith." *State v. Amana Soc'y*, 109 N.W. 894, 897 (Iowa 1906). It may not consider "the 'truth' " or falsity of a religious belief. *Seeger*, 380 U.S. at 185. It may not consider whether a belief is "mistaken or insubstantial." *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.*, 573 U.S. 682, 725 (2014). It may not reject a belief as lacking "reasonableness." *New Doe Child #1 v. Cong. of the U.S.*, 891 F.3d 578, 586 (6th Cir. 2018). It may not insist that a belief be "acceptable, logical, consistent, or comprehensible to others." *Thomas*, 450 U.S. at 714. Instead, the inquiring court must be satisfied if "the asserted belief is truly held." *Detwiler v. Mid-Columbia Med. Ctr.*, 172 F.4th 1072, 1076 (9th Cir. 2026) (Forrest, J., dissenting) (citation modified).

To be clear, though, this "truly held" inquiry does not require courts to read minds. Courts may (indeed, they must) rely on external phenomena—including the claimant's words and deeds—to decide what the claimant truly believes. *See Moussazadeh*, 703 F.3d at 791; *Jackson v. Mann*, 196 F.3d 316, 320 (2d Cir. 1999). But at the risk of some repetition, we again caution judges to tread carefully. We judges must not allow our own notions of "what a religion should resemble" to distort our analysis. Laurence H. Tribe, *American Constitutional Law* § 14-11, at 861 (1st ed. 1978); *see Thomas*, 450 U.S. at 714. For example, when a court evaluates whether a belief is sincerely held, it can be appropriate for the court to *consider* whether there is alignment between (1) the claimant's alleged belief and (2) the doctrines of any religious organization to which the claimant belongs. *Ackerman*, 16 F.4th at 181. If there is such alignment, it might provide evidentiary support for a claim of sincerity. *See Haight v. Thompson*,

763 F.3d 554, 566–67 (6th Cir. 2014). At the same time, courts must not demand orthodoxy by *rejecting* an individual's claimed beliefs simply because they don't align with the doctrines of a particular religious organization. *See Thomas*, 450 U.S. at 715–16. For one thing, religious beliefs can be sincerely held by people who are not members of any religious organization. *Jackson*, 196 F.3d at 320. Plus, some members of a religious organization may sincerely hold beliefs that don't align with organizational doctrine. *Moussazadeh*, 703 F.3d at 791. Martin Luther was still a "devout Catholic priest" when he posted his Ninety-five Theses. David Morris, *Martin Luther as Priest, Heretic and Outlaw: Luther the Priest*, Libr. of Cong. (last updated Dec. 6, 2023), https://guides.loc.gov/martin-luther-priest-heretic-outlaw/luther-the-priest [https://perma.cc/9EQ4-NP72]. Søren Kierkegaard was "a loyal son"[1] of the Church of Denmark, and yet he also published ferocious criticisms of the Church. Howard A. Johnson, *Kierkegaard and the Church: A Supplement to the Translator's Introduction*, *in* Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Attack upon "Christendom"* xxi (Walter Lowrie trans., Princeton Univ. Press 1968) (1944). Yet even "[h]eretics have religious rights." *Grayson v. Schuler*, 666 F.3d 450, 453 (7th Cir. 2012). And, heretical or not, "[a] *personal* religious faith is entitled to as much protection as one espoused by an organized group." *Vinning-El v. Evans*, 657 F.3d 591, 593 (7th Cir. 2011) (emphasis added).

3. *Application.* We return now to Andrew's case. The central question before the district court was whether Andrew could establish a prima facie case.

[1]It has been noted, though, that Kierkegaard dissociated himself from the Church "in his last months." Howard A. Johnson, *Kierkegaard and the Church: A Supplement to the Translator's Introduction*, *in* Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Attack Upon "Christendom"* xix–xx (Walter Lowrie trans., Princeton Univ. Press 1968) (1944); *see* Walter Lowrie, *A Short Life of Kierkegaard* 254–55 (Princeton Univ. Press 1970) (1942) (noting Kierkegaard's deathbed refusal to take communion "from a parson" and his remark that parsons "are royal functionaries" who "are not related to Christianity").

To do so, Andrew had to prove that he had a sincere religious objection to the COVID-19 vaccine. As explained, the sincerity analysis is essentially a credibility determination. The district court plainly understood this point. And so the court properly focused on whether Andrew *really* objected to the vaccine for religious reasons. Ultimately, the court was not convinced. As the dismissal ruling explained, the court "did not find Andrew to be credible in his testimony that" he requested the vaccine exemption "for religious reasons." As support, the court relied on the many detailed fact findings that we have already mentioned (although with some qualifications that we will discuss below). The court also added this:

> Andrew's email in May 2021 clearly showed that he did not have an issue with the COVID-19 vaccine at that time. While it is possible that his opinion could have changed in November for religious reasons, the Court does not find that it was likely for religious reasons. The Court finds that it was more likely for financial reasons. The most telling statement would be the one that he made at the time of trial . . . that he would consider getting the COVID-19 vaccine if his mother had given her blessing to do so. If he refused the vaccine solely for religious reasons, it would make no difference whether his mother was agreeable or not. If it were truly his decision, he would not have to think about it; he would again refuse the vaccine. Andrew's argument would have carried more sincerity if he had contended he was trying to follow the religious commandment of "honor thy father and mother"; however, that is not a claim that he ever asserted in this case. Therefore, the Court finds that Andrew's religious exemption request was not sincere and cannot form the basis for a claim of religious discrimination in this matter.

The court's findings are supported by substantial evidence, and its conclusion is consistent with the law we have described. Therefore, we affirm.

C. Counterarguments. We have considered all of Andrew's counterarguments. We discuss some of them here.

1. *Sincerity revisited.* Andrew's central claim in this appeal is that "a court reviewing a civil rights claim" is categorically prohibited from "scrutiniz[ing] the sincerity of a plaintiff's religious belief." We reject this claim. We think that Andrew's theory conflates the very different questions of (1) whether a claimed belief is valid or true *from a religious perspective* and (2) whether that belief is *sincerely held* by the claimant.

As we have explained, the first question is simply outside the judicial sphere. Courts may not question the validity of religious principles. We cannot say what people should or should not believe.

But courts may—and sometimes must—decide what someone *actually* believes. This case is an example. When a court is presented with a religious-discrimination claim like Andrew's, the court must decide whether the claimant *sincerely* holds their asserted religious objection. *See, e.g.*, *Ackerman*, 16 F.4th at 181 ("Courts need not take a prisoner at his word and can 'filter out insincere requests.' " (quoting *Haight*, 763 F.3d at 566)); *Jackson*, 196 F.3d at 321 ("Courts are clearly competent to determine whether religious beliefs are 'sincerely held.' "); *cf. Cutter v. Wilkinson*, 544 U.S. 709, 725 n.13 (2005) (noting that "prison officials may appropriately question whether a prisoner's religiosity, asserted as the basis for a requested accommodation, is authentic"); *Harris v. Muhammad*, 165 F.4th 1345, 1353 (9th Cir. 2026) (noting, as a hypothetical, that certain federal protections for prisoners' religious rights do "not entitle insincere believers in the 'Church of Surf 'n' Turf' to luxury lobster and steak dinners").

The district court plainly appreciated this distinction. The court said that although it was "not permitted to consider the validity of the religious belief"

claimed, it was "permitted to consider whether the Plaintiff sincerely holds that belief." That is entirely correct.

2. *Performance versus sincerity.* As part of its sincerity analysis, the district court found that some of Andrew's dangerous *behaviors*—his vaping and binge drinking—were inconsistent with Andrew's claimed religious *belief* that he must reject a vaccine that he considered dangerous. Andrew suggests that this sort of reasoning was improper. It was especially improper, Andrew suggests, because Dordt did not know of his vaping or binge drinking when it denied his religious-exemption request. We disagree.

It is true that courts must not replace the sincere-*belief* test with a pharisaical perfect-*performance* test. *See Moussazadeh*, 703 F.3d at 791. After all, "even the most sincere practitioner may stray from time to time." *Id.* As Judge Posner put it, "[A] sincere religious believer doesn't forfeit his religious rights merely because he is not scrupulous in his observance; for where would religion be without its backsliders, penitents, and prodigal sons?" *Grayson*, 666 F.3d at 454.

As we have already mentioned, though, it is not improper for courts to *consider* whether the claimant's words and deeds align with the claimant's claimed beliefs. *See Ackerman*, 16 F.4th at 181. Those observable phenomena are a proper part of the court's effort to determine what the claimant sincerely believes. Indeed, the sincerity inquiry demands that the district court conduct "a full exposition of facts," including facts (like Andrew's vaping and drinking) that weren't necessarily known by Dordt when it rejected Andrew's religious-exemption request. *Patrick*, 745 F.2d at 157 (noting that "[a] more cursory evaluation raises the spectre that the sincerity issue was decided by reference to the factfinder's perception of what a religion should resemble").

And the district court here did not conflate sincere belief with "scrupulous . . . observance." *Grayson*, 666 F.3d at 454. True, the court discussed Andrew's vaping and drinking. But as we read the ruling, the court did not make those transgressions dispositive. Rather, the court properly considered them as part of a much larger evidentiary picture. And, ultimately, the court's sincerity determination was based on facts relating to Andrew's *credibility*, not his performance or observance. Those facts showed that although Andrew was personally willing to take the vaccine, he was also well aware of the financial repercussions of defying his mother's prohibition. We find no error in the court's approach.

3. *Dordt's approach.* Much of Andrew's brief is devoted to alleged flaws in Dordt's process for handling religious-exemption requests. Above all, Andrew claims Dordt engaged in illegal religious discrimination when it denied his request because he failed to provide the requested denominational statement and K–12 records. Indeed, Andrew claims Dordt acted illegally by even requesting those documents.

We need not—and, therefore, we do not—resolve these concerns. As explained, Andrew could not prevail unless he proved the elements of his prima facie case, including the sincerity of his claimed religious objection. The district court found against Andrew on the sincerity question, and we see no basis to disturb that finding. Therefore, Andrew's claim cannot prevail, and we must affirm its dismissal.

Indeed, even if we were to assume that Dordt's documentation requirements were improper, we would still affirm. True, the district court discussed those requirements, as well as Andrew's response, in its findings of fact. But when the district court explained its conclusion that Andrew was not

credible in claiming a religious objection, the court made it clear that it was not relying on Andrew's compliance or noncompliance with "Dordt's requirements to provide a denominational statement and proof of prior vaccination history." This express disclaimer reassures us. It shows that *even if* Dordt's documentation requirements were improper, they did not drive the district court's determination of the dispositive issue in this case: the presence or absence of a sincere religious objection.

V. Disposition.

The district court was correct in dismissing Andrew's suit. We affirm.

District court judgment affirmed.