

Can any belief be a ‘religious’ belief?

This essay argues that, under both substantive and functional definitions, not all beliefs can be religious, given the difference between sharing similarities to a religious belief or functioning religiously and truly, involuntarily believing religiously. First, this essay will analyze different interpretations of religious beliefs and thus infer conclusions about their nature; second, under the premise that all religious interpretations are correct in their own perspective, and given that religious understanding is inherently subjective, the essay will advance the theory of “involuntarism”, using religion’s loosest definition (functionalist) to prove that, even then, not any belief can be a “religious” belief.

Because a religion is fundamentally defined as a deeply held conviction or idea tied to a faith, usually involving supernatural, spiritual, or divine aspects, differing interpretations and debates about what really constitutes a religious belief have all offered distinct methods of understanding what really is a religion and the act of believing. Substantive vs. functional theories represent the main disagreement.¹ Substantive definitions specify the need for supernatural, divine content present within the belief,² such as the reference of a deity, or that the believer practices and understands the religion. Edward Tylor, in *Primitive Culture* (1871), minimally referred to religion as “belief in spiritual beings.”³ Functional definitions, however, emphasize the effect of religion through the lens of faith, hope, and moral understanding, therefore defining a religious belief as anything that can bring those psychological effects consciously to the believer.

By the substantive definition, atheists show that not every belief can become religious for a given person, since withholding assent to divine content makes it impossible for that content to be believed religiously. An atheist may understand the proposition that God exists as fully as any believer—often more so—and still not accept it as true; comprehension is not assent. However, they can possess normal beliefs that achieve the same effect as “religious” ones. They can ponder

¹ Daniel L. Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
<https://archive.org/details/ninetheoriesofreligion2015pals>

² Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923).
https://archive.org/details/ideaofholyyinquir0000otto_k1y1

³ Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1871). <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Primitive-Culture-by-Tylor>

the Christian God, Adam and Eve, and philosophical thoughts on morality that offer the same consolatory and guiding effects as “religious” thoughts.⁴ This raises the notion of functional interpretations that do not strictly require a divine subject. Émile Durkheim, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), argued that religion is defined by the distinction between the profane and sacred, thus interpreting a religious belief as needing to concern something as sacred.⁵ William James, one of the leading philosophical and psychological thinkers of the twentieth century, stated in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) that “Religion... shall mean the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”⁶ Thus, by these means, any belief can become religious when considering its effect on the human if properly embodied; any thought can have the qualities of being supernatural, spiritual, or divine, and hence “religious” when considered from different angles. Even beliefs that seem normal and insignificant can be morally elevated when understood through the contexts of humanity, existence, and character, despite lacking fundamental religious characteristics such as the reference of a divine subject. Paul Tillich, one of the most influential theologians in the twentieth century, interpreted this as *idolatry*, a religious category⁷—stating that faith is “the state of being ultimately concerned,”⁸ and whatever concerns the believer ultimately functions as their god. If the fundamental purpose of religion is what defines it, then any belief that helps individuals process existential questions, alleviate anxiety about the unknown, and provide a moral and communal framework⁹ can be treated as inherently “religious”.¹⁰

So from these two perspectives, the actual question diverts from “what constitutes a religious belief” to “can a belief not involving a religious/divine subject be considered religious?”

⁴ Gen. 2:4–3:24 (NRSV)

⁵ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1912). <https://durkheim.uchicago.edu/Summaries/forms.html>

⁶ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902).

⁷ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

⁸ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

⁹ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967). https://archive.org/details/sacredcanopyelem0000berg_m2h4

¹⁰ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952).

All interpretations are correct in their own sense and context. Even when mutual coexistence is assumed, this essay argues that not any belief can be religious, because the functionalist explanation is only attributable to beliefs sharing similarities with religious thoughts or assuming a religious function, therefore not making a belief intrinsically religious. A distinction must be made between a belief fundamentally being religious rather than functioning religiously. Different beliefs can have similar effects, and if humans **voluntarily** elevate a belief's status of importance in their consciousness, it only makes the belief function religiously. This essay introduces the theory of **involuntarism**, where truly religious beliefs are not voluntarily held, making certain beliefs impossible to be religious on all accounts.

First, Cardinal John Henry Newman described in *A Grammar of Assent* (1870) how notional assent is an intellectual, abstract acceptance¹¹ of a proposition or general idea rather than a personal, vivid conviction tied to lived experience (real assent).¹² Religious beliefs, in the lived sense, require real assent rather than mere notional assent. And the gap between the two cannot be closed by deciding to close it. One can agree with something completely and still not live by it; everyone does this subtly.

Second, even where notional assent is present, will alone cannot create real assent, because belief itself is not subject to the will, described as doxastic involuntarism. As Bernard Williams argued in *Deciding to Believe* (1973), one cannot believe at will, since belief aims at the truth and tracks how the world seems to the believer rather than what they would prefer to hold.¹³ A person cannot, by an act of resolve alone, believe that a white wall is green simply because it would comfort them to do so. And if merely believing a proposition lies beyond the reach of the will, then living by it and allowing it to govern conduct and reshape character is less voluntary still. William James argues that a person can only have faith in a “live option”, which is a belief that

¹¹ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: Burns, Oates & Co., 1870).
<https://www.newmanreader.org/works/grammar/index.html>

¹² Frederick D. Aquino and Matthew Levering, eds., *John Henry Newman's "An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent": A Critical Guide* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2023).

¹³ Bernard Williams, "Deciding to Believe," in *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956–1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).
<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/problems-of-the-self/deciding-to-believe/49CC82B20E24A5F8021ACCF8E2BB03F7>

already feels like a genuine possibility to them.¹⁴ A dead option, which is one holding no reality or appeal for the believer, cannot be willed into a living conviction. Which beliefs are even candidates for being lived, then, is settled in advance by the believer's constitution, history, and formation. This is the rigorous form of what is called one's "natural": a religious belief, in the lived sense, is received.¹⁵

Third, this naturalness functions as a necessary condition rather than the whole essence of religious belief. It would be a mistake to claim that being involuntary is itself what makes a belief religious, for many beliefs are involuntary and embodied but lack the sense of being religious: the conviction that fire is hot is lived and governs conduct, but it is simply not a religious belief. Naturalness, then, is not sufficient alone. It serves instead as a filter—a belief cannot be a lived religious belief unless it has actually taken root involuntarily—and what distinguishes a religious involuntary belief from a normal one is that, in Tillich's sense, it helps orient the whole of a life rather than settling a single fact about the world.¹⁶ Two consequences follow from treating naturalness as the filter. First, not every belief passes through it for a given person. Most remain notional. Second, the gate cannot be forced, as one cannot decide to embody beliefs against their character. Together these defeat the claim that any belief can be religious, for they show that religiosity in the lived sense is both selective and unmanufacturable. One cannot transform an arbitrary belief into one genuinely lived by, and so it is false that any belief can become a religious one.

It may be objected that to function religiously simply is to be religious. This is the position of the thoroughgoing functionalist, held by thinkers such as Durkheim, John Dewey,¹⁷ and J. Milton Yinger.¹⁸ On this view, a belief that consoles, orients, and binds a community is thereby

¹⁴ William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/26659/26659-h/26659-h.htm>

¹⁵ Eph. 2:8–9 (NRSV)

¹⁶ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951). <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/S/bo59572089.html>

¹⁷ John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1npdn9>

¹⁸ J. Milton Yinger, *The Scientific Study of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1970). https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/faculty_schol/532/

religious,¹⁹ and nothing more is needed to be said. However, the inference from shared function to shared nature is invalid. Different things can perform the same function without belonging to the same kind. This is a principle long recognized in the philosophy of mind as multiple realizability,²⁰ where one and the same role may be realized in entirely different substrates.²¹ Just because a belief gives comfort, meaning, or moral guidance doesn't make it a religious belief, just like using one tool as a substitute doesn't turn it into the real tool. The functionalist conflates a definition by causal role with a definition by constitution.²² A second difficulty compounds the first. Where a belief did not originally carry a religious function and is deliberately enlisted to perform one, the effect it produces is contrived rather than authentic. Comfort that one deliberately creates for oneself is only an imitation of real religious belief. It's something one chooses to act out, not something one truly believes. Even were the functionalist interpretation granted, such a belief could at most function religiously; it could not be religious.

This raises a deeper objection, as some thinkers deny that there is any fixed thing that makes a belief religious at all. Talal Asad argued that "religion" is not a natural category with a hidden essence, but a label that different cultures have used in very different ways.²³ Wittgenstein made a similar point with his idea of family resemblance, where the things we call religious may share no single feature, only a loose web of overlapping likenesses, like the members of a family.²⁴ If this is right, then there is no real essence for the distinction to point to and for the line between being religious and functioning religiously to exist. The functionalist would then win by default, because "being religious" would mean nothing more than counting as "religious" to someone.²⁵

¹⁹ Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

²⁰ Hilary Putnam, "The Nature of Mental States," in *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers, Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). <https://home.csulb.edu/~cwallis/382/readings/482/putnam.nature.mental.states.pdf>

²¹ Ned Block, "Troubles with Functionalism," in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 9, ed. C. Wade Savage (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978). <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/185298>

²² Jerry A. Fodor, "Special Sciences (or: The Disunity of Science as a Working Hypothesis)," *Synthese* 28, no. 2 (1974).

²³ Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," in *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). <https://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~sj6/asadfirstchapter.pdf>

²⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953).

²⁵ Kevin Schilbrack, "Religions: Are There Any?," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 4 (2010): 1112–1138. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfq086>

But this objection misses what the distinction is actually about. Asad and Wittgenstein are asking what all religions share across cultures. This essay's claim is not saying there is one shared feature running through every religion in history. This essay argues that within a single person's life, there is a real difference between a belief that grips them without their choosing it and a belief they have talked themselves into. That difference does not need a universal definition of religion in order to exist, because it can be seen one person at a time. So even if Asad is right that "religion" has no fixed essence as a category, the distinction still holds because it lives only in the relation between a person and what they believe.

It is true, then, that under the loosest functional definition almost any belief may come to resemble a religious one, providing the consolations and orientations that religion offers. But resemblance and function are not identity.²⁶ A belief becomes religious in the fullest sense only when it is received rather than chosen, lived rather than merely assented to,²⁷ ultimate rather than incidental, and this manner of holding is selective and cannot be produced at will.²⁸ Not every belief can cross that threshold for a given person. The answer to whether any belief can be a religious belief is therefore no: a belief may be made to function religiously, but it cannot be made to be religious.

²⁶ See nn. 20-22, 24 above.

²⁷ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1963; repr., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

²⁸ See nn. 11, 13, 14, and 16 above.