

2026 Sidgwick Essay Competition

Theology Question 2: Can any belief be a “religious” belief?

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There are two ways to interpret this question. The first asks whether every belief counts as a religious belief, that is, whether beliefs are religious intrinsically. The second asks whether any belief can become a religious belief, that is, whether a belief may acquire religiosity through some process.

Based on the two interpretations, this essay contends that no belief is religious in itself; a belief becomes religious only when it is “appropriated” by religious faith. Yet not every belief can be so “appropriated”, so not every belief can be made religious. To establish this, I clarify in turn religion, belief, and faith, and the relations among them.

Religion

The definition of “religion” has long divided scholars. Tylor proposed the minimal definition “belief in Spiritual Beings”;¹ James located religion in the individual’s solitary relation to whatever he takes to be divine;² Aquinas treated religion as the virtue of rendering due worship to God.³ Each theory provides insights, but each tends to presuppose something: a theological definition presupposes theism and thus cannot cover non-theistic religions. In contrast, etymology might provide a more workable definition of “religion” for the purposes of this essay’s question.

The Latin root of religion is *religio*. Lactantius and Augustine gave the most illuminating derivation: *religio* combines *re-* (intensive) with *ligare* (to bind): we are “bound and tied to God by this chain of piety” (*religati sumus*).⁴ On this reading religion is at bottom a relation, which fits the earliest English sense of the word: a state of life bound by monastic vows.⁵ Centuries later it acquired its modern core sense, acknowledgement of and allegiance to a higher unseen power,⁶ suggesting that religion is essentially a transcendent relation, held together by the constraint of dogma.

¹ Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1871), 1:383.

² William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902), 31 (lecture 2, “Circumscription of the Topic”).

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 81, aa. 1–5.

⁴ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 4.28, trans. William Fletcher, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886); cf. Augustine, *De Vera Religione* 55.113.

⁵ Douglas Harper, “religion (n.),” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed July 15, 2026, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/religion>; *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “religion, n.,” accessed July 15, 2026, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/religion_n.

⁶ Harper, “religion (n.).”

Ancient China had no concept directly corresponding to modern “religion,” yet its classical texts discuss comparable practices. In “Discourse on Heaven,”⁷ Xunzi asks why rain sometimes follows a rain sacrifice. He answers: “It is the same as when one does not perform the rain sacrifice and it rains anyway.” The rite is not the cause of rain, but serves to give things a “proper form” by ordering human relations with Heaven, disaster, and communal life. Thus, while the gentleman treats sacrifice as ritual form, ordinary people regard it as “connecting with spirits.” Rain after sacrifice cannot prove that Heaven has rewarded its worshippers, yet people may still experience the rite as a sacred bond and organise their lives around it. Such loyalty and self-restraint do not depend on empirical induction. They suggest that religion arises when human beings encounter higher, unseen forces beyond their control and seek consolation through commitments exceeding rational calculation.

We can now establish the definition of religion/religiosity in the question: a relation to higher unseen power that demands loyal obedience to binding dogmas standing beyond empirical justification.

Belief

Some might say: “The beliefs make up the dogmas; the dogmas make up the religion; therefore beliefs, some if not all, are religious.” This equates pure beliefs and dogmas. In fact they differ, and no belief is intrinsically religious.

As Eric Schwitzgebel observed, “Most contemporary philosophers characterize belief as a ‘propositional attitude’.”⁸ A belief therefore has the canonical form “S believes that p”: it is a subject’s attitude towards a proposition taken to be true. Several features follow. First, belief is an epistemic category: it judges that the world is thus and so, and succeeds or fails by truth, not by goodness or piety. Second, belief can be supported or refuted by evidence. Third, belief has levels, thus there is a distinction between “I am certain of p” and “I am inclined to think that p”. Fourth, belief does not necessarily guide action: assent to a proposition is no commitment to live by it. A quantum physicist may hold the belief “God exists” out of sheer wonder at Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. That belief arises from inference, is sustained by evidence, may be weakened at any moment by a more explanatory theory, and requires of him neither worship nor the service of God. Only when it is taken up into a structure of worship, dependence, repentance and ultimate self-understanding does it become religious. In other words, belief can supply the language and the material of religion but cannot be religious on its own.

Moreover, the content of a belief cannot confer religiosity. No content, not even content pointing at a higher unseen power, is sufficient, and theistic content is not necessary.

Take sufficiency first. Even a belief whose content points directly at the divine is not thereby

⁷ Xunzi, *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, trans. Eric L. Hutton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 179, lines 177–86 (chap. 17, “Discourse on Heaven”).

⁸ Eric Schwitzgebel, “Belief,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2014 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2014), introduction, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/belief/>

religious. The example of the physicist already suggests this; the Epistle of James further confirms it: “Even the demons believe that—and shudder” (James 2:19).⁹ The demons have witnessed God’s works at first hand, and perhaps their certainty that God exists exceeds any believer’s. Nevertheless, no one calls them religious. Aquinas’ explanation points out their belief is no voluntary submission of the will to God but rather forced from them by the evidence of signs.¹⁰ A belief may thus take a higher unseen power as its object and be held with the highest certainty, yet without that voluntary, binding allegiance it remains an ordinary propositional attitude.

As for necessity, religiosity can stand without any belief in a god or personal divine. Theravāda Buddhism posits no creator, and its core propositions, the Four Noble Truths and dependent origination, refer to no god in any sense. But a higher unseen power need not be personal: dependent origination and karma are just such an impersonal higher order, and the sangha’s life under monastic discipline is allegiance to it. Its religiosity is beyond doubt. Conversely, Mother Teresa endured a long inner darkness, the “absence of God”, in which her belief that God exists was shaken, yet she never ceased to pray, to keep her vows and to serve.¹¹ Religiosity, then, resides neither in what a belief asserts nor in how firmly it is held.

Belief, then, is not equivalent to religious dogma. Belief is merely descriptive, but religious dogma is also prescriptive. Dogmas not only describe the world but also regulate one’s life. They do usually appear in propositional form, but what makes them dogmas is not their propositional form or content— it is the community’s act of setting them up, by covenant, as non-negotiable objects of allegiance. On the first reading of the question, therefore, no belief is in itself a religious belief.

Faith

As Wilfred Cantwell Smith indicates, the modern habit of reducing religion to a set of “beliefs” misreads how the traditions understand themselves. What lies at their core has never been assent to propositions but faith, a total and relational commitment.¹² Tillich characterised this commitment as “ultimate concern”: faith is the state of being grasped by what concerns one’s being unconditionally, and it claims the whole personality, intellect, will and feeling alike.¹³ Note, however, that Tillich is defining faith as such, not religious faith. On the letter of his definition, a communist’s devotion to the end of history is equally an ultimate concern, and

⁹ James 2:19 (New International Version).

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 5, a. 2.

¹¹ Mother Teresa, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the “Saint of Calcutta,”* ed. Brian Kolodiejchuk (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 186–88, 227–28.

¹² Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 128, 142; Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 51–79.

¹³ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 1–4.

Tillich himself admits the nation and worldly success among the contents of faith.¹⁴ Such commitments fail the first section's definition of religion: their objects lie within history and experience; no higher unseen power is involved. Since the question asks about religious belief, the "appropriating" faith must be religious, so Tillich's generic definition needs a religious qualification: faith is the total, relational commitment of the person towards a higher unseen power. The qualification derives from the definition of religion established independently in the first section.

On this definition the categorial difference between faith and belief is apparent (henceforth "faith" means religious faith). Belief is an epistemic category, the intellect's assent to a proposition. Faith is an existential and practical category, a mode of life governing every dimension of living. The definitions of the two concepts generate two crucial differences. First, belief fluctuates with evidence, whereas faith begins where evidence dies out. Kierkegaard declared, "Without risk, no faith": if one could grasp God objectively, faith would be unnecessary.¹⁵ Second, belief does not necessarily guide action (recall the physicist), whereas faith necessarily issues in action, as the Epistle of James puts it: "faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:17).¹⁶

The mechanism of "appropriation" can now be stated. Newman distinguished notional assent from real assent. Notional assent is directed at an abstract proposition. In contrast, real assent is directed at the reality it describes, and so engages imagination and feeling and moves a person to act. To give "God exists" a notional assent, Newman adds, is a theological act; to give it a real assent is an act of religion.¹⁷ By "appropriation" I mean the process in which faith turns a notional assent into a real assent. The propositional content is unchanged, but the belief passes from an intellectual holding into the structure of worship, dependence, repentance and ultimate self-understanding, and is set up as an object of allegiance regulating a life. The belief thereby becomes a religious dogma.

Newman ascribed this transformation to the "illative sense", a personal power of judgement which, where formal logic cannot compel a conclusion, condenses converging probabilities into certitude. William James defended the will's entry at just this point: when an option is living, forced and momentous, and the intellect alone cannot decide it, our passionate nature has both the right and the need to choose.¹⁸

Not every belief, however, can be "appropriated" by faith. Kierkegaard writes: "Faith is the

¹⁴ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 11–12.

¹⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 204.

¹⁶ James 2:17 (New International Version).

¹⁷ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: Burns, Oates, & Co., 1870), 98 (chap. 5, §1).

¹⁸ Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 288, 343–76, esp. 345–46, 359–60; William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897), 2–3, 11.

objective uncertainty with the repulsion of the absurd, held fast in the passion of inwardness.”¹⁹ The absurd, the object that reason cannot exhaust, is the proper object of faith. For a belief to be appropriated, its content must stand in objective uncertainty, leaving room for commitment. The belief that “water boils at 100°C under standard pressure” cannot be “appropriated”: it can be verified through and through, and in the face of certainty commitment is superfluous and passion has nowhere to lodge. A falsified proposition cannot be appropriated either, since commitment to a known error is obstinacy, not faith. Only beliefs that point to ultimate reality and lie in principle beyond empirical adjudication qualify. On the second reading, then, a belief can become religious through appropriation, but only if its content stands in constitutive uncertainty and points to a higher unseen power.

An objector may say the essay contradicts itself. The section on belief denies that content can confer religiosity; here, content is erected as a threshold for “appropriation”. However, the objection confuses two roles content plays in the two arguments. What the earlier section denies is content as the conferrer of religiosity. However “sacred” its content, no belief can make itself religious. Religiosity is conferred only by “appropriation”, a relational act. This section establishes content as the qualification for “appropriation”: it is the act of faith, and faith can only be directed at what lies beyond empirical adjudication, and so content determines whether “appropriation” can take place at all. Take military requisition (or appropriation, in this place) as a similar situation. What confers military status on a merchant ship is the requisition order, not the hull. Still, not every hull can serve. For instance, a canoe cannot be requisitioned. Qualifying conditions do not make military status an intrinsic property of the hull. The two claims are therefore consistent. Religiosity comes from the relation, and the relation has conditions of admission.

Conclusion

No belief is religious in itself, yet some may become religious when faith appropriates them—provided their content stands in constitutive uncertainty and points to a higher unseen power. By recasting “which beliefs are religious?” as “how is a belief held?”, this essay relocates religiosity from the content of propositions to the posture of persons. Religion, then, was never a catalogue of sacred sentences. It is the human act of binding oneself, beyond all evidence, to what exceeds one's grasp—as Xunzi's mourners knew, the rite does not bring the rain, but the bond.

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¹⁹ Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 1:611.

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