

Unveiling the Illusion: Exploring the Voluntary Nature of Belief

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Abstract. Belief is a complex aspect of human cognition that shapes our understanding of the world and influences our behavior. This paper examines the voluntary nature of belief, with a focus on religion as an illustrative example. By examining voluntarism, non-voluntarism, and free will in the context of religious belief, this paper delves into the intricate relationship between the freedom to believe and external factors, including civil liberties and social norms. While belief is often considered a matter of personal choice, socialization, cultural environment, and personal circumstances can significantly influence and limit the voluntariness of belief. By acknowledging that the voluntary nature of belief is susceptible to external influences, society can work towards fostering genuine freedom of religious belief and supporting individual autonomy in diverse belief landscapes. This commitment to fostering genuine freedom of belief contributes to a more inclusive and tolerant society that values the autonomy and agency of its members.

Keywords: belief; religion; voluntarism; civil liberties.

1. Introduction

Belief, the attitude toward accepting something as true or real, encompasses various dimensions shaping our understanding and behavior. (Howard, 2002). Religion serves as a foundational framework that not only provides guidance but also shapes other belief systems, as it occupies a position of prominence by encompassing metaphysical, moral, and existential dimensions (Usó-Doménech & Nescolarde-Selva, 2016). In this capacity, Consequently, a scholarly exploration of voluntary beliefs necessitates a deliberate consideration of religion's pervasive sway, acknowledging its profound impact on individual and collective perspectives (Cohen & Rozin, 2001; Moon et al., 2022). Religion's unique claims, effects on thinking, practices, and rituals, as well as its implications for morality, intergroup conflict, family structure, and cultural development have garnered considerable attention within various belief systems, making it a salient exemplar to explore the voluntariness of belief (Mahoney, 2010; Purzycki et al., 2022; Rowatt et al., 2013; Strawn & Brown, 2013).

This paper aims to investigate the voluntary nature of belief, with religion as a prominent example. While religion serves as a case study, our analysis extends to beliefs in general. By examining the voluntariness of belief in the context of religion and its broader implications, we seek to address the question of whether belief can be considered voluntary. Ultimately, our goal is not to provide a definitive answer to the question of whether belief is voluntary, but rather to foster a nuanced and informed discussion that encourages further exploration and reflection and provide valuable insights into the nature of belief and its relationship with individual agency and societal influences.

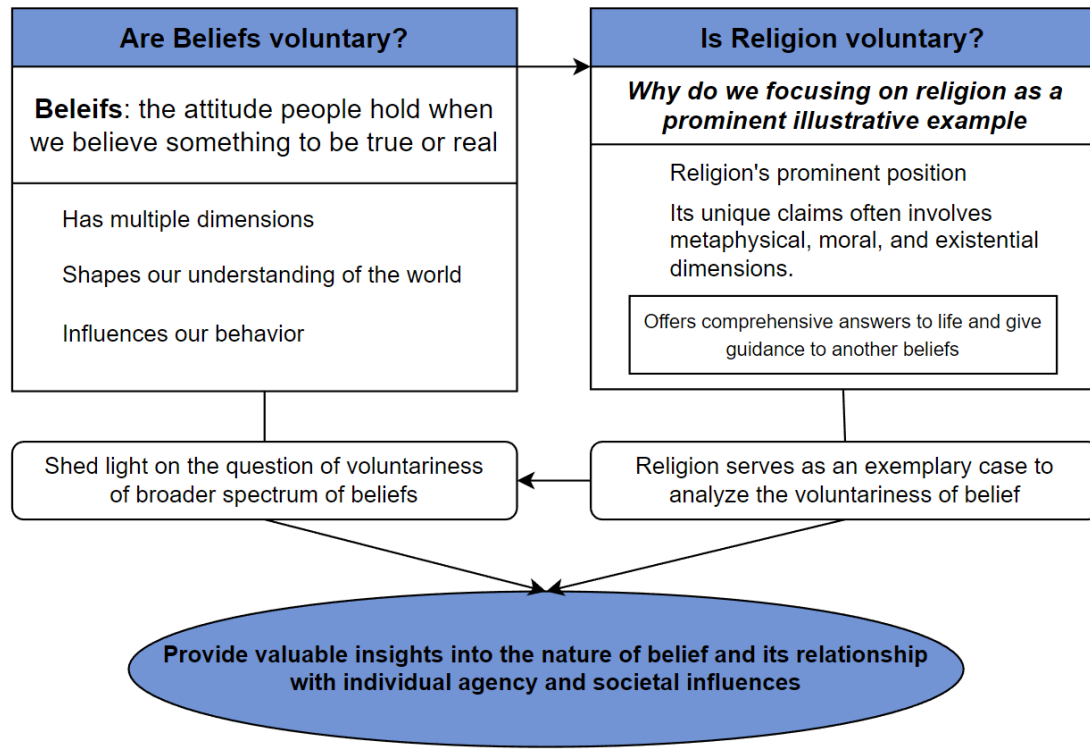


Fig. 1 Exploring the unique position of religion in beliefs and provide the goal of this essay.

2. Voluntarism, Non-Voluntarism, and Free Will

The freedom to believe in religion is contingent upon the right to exercise free choice and human free will (Kane, 2001). The capacity of individuals to freely choose their religious beliefs can be significantly impacted by civil liberties and the actions of state systems and officials. In certain countries, there exists a practice of subscribing to a state religion or endorsing particular religious preferences through constitutions or propaganda (Temperman, 2010). Consequently, such practices have the potential to influence people's choices through official endorsement. Nevertheless, the protection of citizens' fundamental right to freedom of religious belief is widely accepted in most modern countries (Bielefeldt et al., 2016). As a result, individuals can autonomously exercise their right to determine their religious affiliations or choose to be non-religious.

The right to freedom of choice allows individuals to freely choose their religious beliefs. However, for this choice to be genuinely voluntary, individuals must have unrestricted freedom and the capacity to make independent decisions based on their free will. Voluntarists believe that individuals are accountable for their beliefs, the depth of those beliefs, and how they respond to them, all within their control (Yee, 2002). Free will emphasizes an individual's control over their decisions and actions. Erich Fromm argued that human freedom is derived from the ability to choose between good and evil. (Foster, 2017).

Often viewed as voluntarists, Christians stress the idea that every individual has a moral obligation to willingly choose to believe in Christ. This underscores the concept that, in matters of belief, people possess the free will to decide their belief system. On the other hand, they promote Christianity by presenting God's absolute dominion over the belief systems within human world. This complex dynamic leads to what has been referred to as the "paradox of grace" (Hamilton, 1972).

The belief system constructs an illusory freedom of choice, particularly in religious contexts. Religious doctrine grants individuals the perception of free choice while reinforcing their moral obligations to the religion. This is achieved by establishing a belief object that exercises absolute control over human destiny, thereby influencing people to choose the religion. Historical examples, such as the sale of indulgences by the Church, highlight how religious institutions have shaped the illusion of control (Juhász, 2019). People's belief systems are influenced by the promises and

imaginings created by religion, limiting the impact of their autonomy and free will against external influences. Consequently, religious choices are not purely determined by absolute free will.

Non-voluntarists argue that personal convictions are shaped by external factors alongside volition (Qu, 2017). John Locke's concept of "tabula rasa" suggests that the mind is a blank slate devoid of innate knowledge at birth, emphasizing that individuals acquire knowledge through sensory experiences (Petryszak, 1981). Religious beliefs manifest an individual's recognition and position within society, influenced by external factors that shape their convictions, principles, and perspectives on life. Consequently, external factors limit individuals' freewill and eventual religious affiliation by impacting their understanding of religious belief.

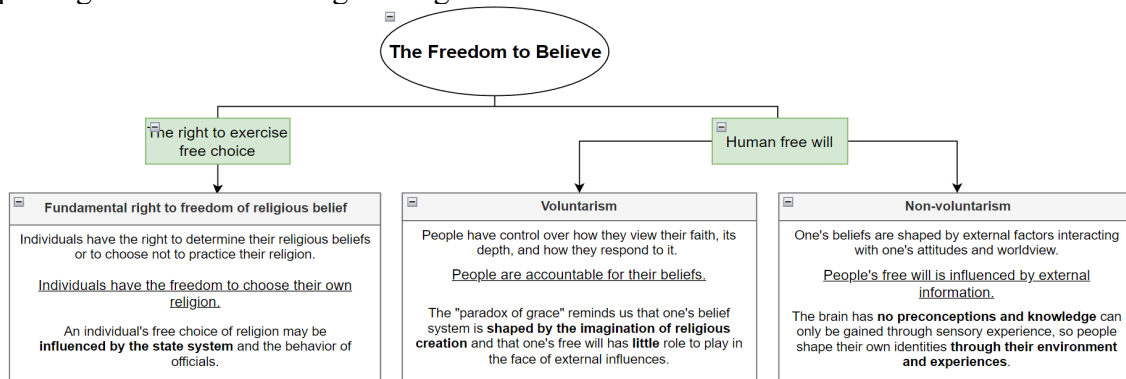


Fig. 2 The Freedom to Believe and external factors affects Free Will.

3. The Influence of Religious Environment and Atmosphere on Free Choice

The religious atmosphere and environment may exert an influence on individuals' freedom to choose their beliefs (Voas & Storm, 2021). Social conformity theory explains that people have a need to belong and conform (Feldman, 2003). When a culture or group favors a specific religion, societal pressure promotes conformity in belief selection (Kurdi, 2021).

It is important to note that childhood experiences have a lasting impact on the formation of worldviews. Children often passively accept beliefs before developing independent thinking (Dávila et al., 2017). They quickly internalize cultural atmosphere and values as their own viewpoints and attitudes (Kane, 2001). Consequently, children's religious beliefs are not solely a result of free will (D' Onofrio et al., 1999). The case of Brethren children exemplifies the influence of socialization, social pressure, and personal autonomy in shaping religious identity. Social pressure from family and community compels individuals to conform to shared beliefs, driven by the need for affiliation and approval (Herriot, 2018).

Additionally, a variety of factors in the society have a non-negligible influence on people's choice of religious belief. A Pew Research Center surveys indicates that higher levels of education are associated with lower levels of religious commitment (Gecewicz & Smith, 2017). One of explanations is that the more educated someone is, the more likely they will resort to science for explanations of natural phenomena, whereas religion is intended to explain supernatural occurrences and psychological phenomena for which no scientific explanation exists.

The influence of an individual's economic status and physical well-being on their inclination towards religion is a subject that has sparked much interest. Religion often provides security, purpose and meaning to the disadvantaged, and can also provide real help (e.g. church-run giving campaigns) and a sense of security. Giving to the poor and helping those with impairments and illnesses is often seen as a religious obligation, and religious organisations have been identified in research as an important factor in reducing poverty worldwide (Schweiger, 2019). Dr Tom Rees conducted an independent study which demonstrated that in the absence of effective social security, individuals who are marginalized in society tend to seek solace in religion (Rees, 2009). People facing health problems or low economic levels thus turn to religion. In addition, the pessimistic prophecies popular in the Christian teachings about the human at the end of the world may also help some people to

attribute their suffering to a higher purpose in order to reduce their psychological stress. According to Hull, individuals tend to choose the option that has uncertainty process or "arrangement of fate" when provided with two similar outcomes (Hull et al., 2022). The locus of control is instrumental in explaining this behavior in individuals. One who has an internal locus of control believes that they have a greater influence in their lives compared to someone with an external locus of control, who instead, attributes the course of their life to exterior forces (Lefcourt, 1991). Disadvantaged individuals' tendency to attribute their expectations to fate rather than their own abilities increases their likelihood to be religious.

Gender disparities in religious convictions arise from variances within risk preferences that each gender makes (Miller & Hoffmann, 1995), originating from the categorization of gender traits from influential shaping forces in society (Blackstone, 2003). Miller and Hoffmann's claim proposed that individuals exhibiting religious behavior are aligned with risk aversion, while non-religious behavior corresponds with risk-taking. Functional sociology and gender role studies demonstrate that men are viewed as task-oriented leaders who represent the family, while women assume nurturing roles like raising children and maintaining the household, leading to their marginalization within society (Bales & Parsons, 2014). Consequently, gender differences and stereotypes that have developed over human and society co-evolutionary processes have influenced gender risk preferences (Miller & Hoffmann, 1995). Patriarchal societies shaped women as roles to be protected and rescued by the need to rely on external forces when confronting risk and hardship. In this case, women tend to show a greater preference for risk avoidance and a lack of self-efficacy to use their own strengths to meet challenges (Kambarami, 2006), so women tend to place their hopes in external forces such as religion, which reinforces their devotion to religious beliefs.

It is crucial to recognize that this loyalty towards belief is founded in social identities and psychological patterns of thinking that are primarily shaped by socialization. Given that the brain, serving as the fundamental basis of cognition and thought, is itself a product of socialization (Pickersgill, 2013), people are restricted by their own thinking processes with no genuine freedom. It is noteworthy that male and female gender roles are not innately associated with male and female biological characteristics, in sociology, the feminist view might say that gender roles are assumptions (Williams, 2023), suggesting gender roles can be learned. The biosocial perspective contends that interactions between individuals, communities, and the environment stimulate the formation of gender roles, cause people to rationalize the inequality of gender (Wood & Eagly, 2012). This elucidates that the decision to adopt a given belief based on gender roles is not one of human's free will, but rather passive.

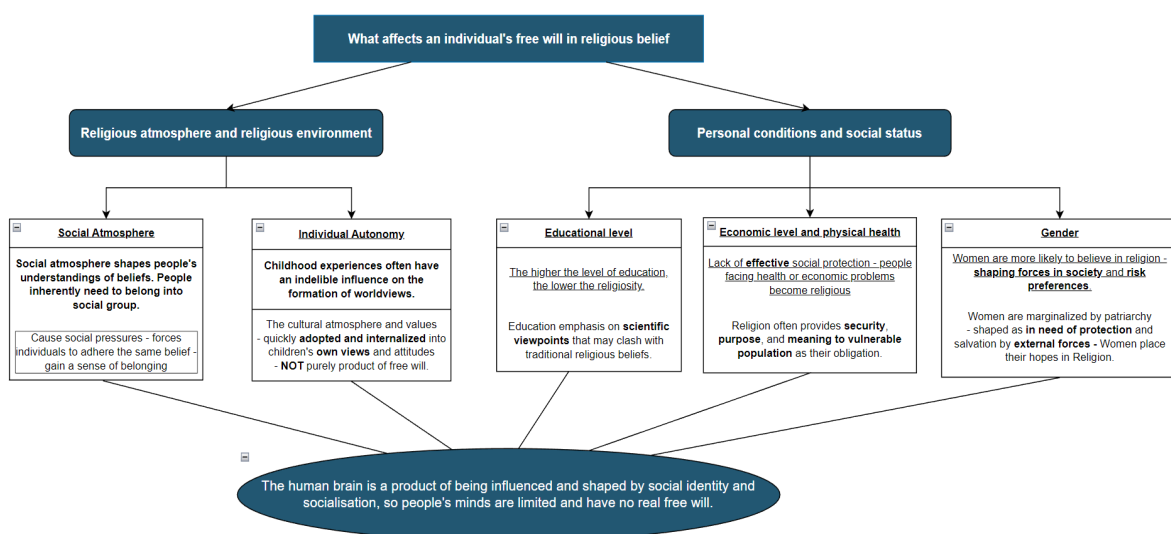


Fig. 3 Exploring the relationship between internal/external factors, and free will.

4. Discussion

The voluntary nature of discussing religion is important for the understanding of belief, influences between autonomy and constraints, and practical implications for society. Through highlighting the tension between individual freedom and religious doctrines, practical implications include informing social policy, promoting respect for diverse beliefs, and protecting religious freedom. This fosters a deeper comprehension of belief systems, the influence of external factors, the intricacies of personal autonomy, and the implications for social policy and harmony.

Within the realm of reason, beliefs are contingent upon the availability of evidence, and evidence influences how deep we embrace a belief. Nevertheless, religious beliefs lack tangible evidence, divorced from rational judgment, this can potentially yield adverse effects, such as fostering fatalism and perpetuating social class divisions. Moreover, the constraints imposed by religious beliefs curtail genuine freedom and voluntariness, impeding individuals' autonomy. Consequently, despite the prevailing emphasis on freedom of belief, socio-cultural conditioning, developmental influences, and the religious environment collectively contribute to non-voluntary choices. We propose that by enhancing social protections, developing robust welfare systems, optimizing income distribution, and fostering individuals' sense of well-being and control, we can mitigate passive belief choices. Embracing these measures would pave the way for broader personal freedoms, aligning with the trajectory of democratic and civilized modern societies.

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