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ARTICLE

Religious Alief

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Abstract

Traditional philosophy of religion has been put under pressure to reform from different theoretical camps in the last few decades. One of the most salient charges is that the focus on belief as the mark of religion fails to capture a wide variety of religious phenomena and practices, particularly those outside of the Abrahamitic traditions. As a response to this challenge, this article proposes and develops the notion of religious alief as an additional analytical tool to conceptualize religious phenomena that elude characterization in terms of belief. This article first introduces religious aliefs as largely *automatic, habitual mental states* that influence behavior, feelings, and attitudes, even when a person does **not** hold an overt or tacit belief in the supernatural content involved. Subsequently, this article argues that religious phenomena such as apotropaic rituals, purification rituals, spontaneous prayer in crisis, jinx (and other folk-religious notions), certain taboos, and the recently coined Somethingism can be explained in terms of religious aliefs.

Keywords: Alief; religious belief; philosophy of religion; epistemology; cognitive science of religion; non-belief; ritual practice; somethingism

1. Introduction

> [I]t is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail. – Maslow (1966)

This article proposes that many religious practices, especially outside Abrahamitic traditions, are better explained by the notion of *religious alief*. In the last two decades, traditional philosophy of religion (PoR) has come under attack from a variety of different perspectives.[1] Schellenberg and Draper (2022) charge PoR with, among other things, tribalism, familiarism, recentism, ignorance about religion in general, and

[1]This is a non-exhaustive list of major publications, primarily monographs and edited volumes, that call for reform in the philosophy of religion: Bilimoria et al. (2025); Loewen & Rostalska (2023); Draper and Schellenberg (2017); Kanaris (2018); Burley (2020); Trakakis (2008); Bilimoria & Irvine (2009); DuJardin et al. (2021); Wildman (2010); Knepper (2022); Knepper (2013); Knepper (2023); Schilbrack (2016);

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underrepresentation of non-Christians. De Cruz and De Smedt (2016) attest confirmation bias as a rampant feature in traditional PoR. Draper and Nichols (2013) criticize that traditional philosophy of religion is too partisan (for theism), too polemical (against perceived enemies), too narrow (in its scope), and uses not philosophical, but religious criteria for evaluating the quality of claims. Other critiques come from feminist thinkers (Hollywood 2004; Dickman 2018), the post-colonial tradition (Schilbrack 2021, Schilbrack 2023; Raschke 2019; Masuzawa 2007), or cognitive science (McNamara 2009; Atran and Henrich 2010; Boyer 1992).[2]

Among the most pressing charges is that PoR's focus on belief as *the* central notion through which to understand religion is unable to account for the whole breadth of religion and religiosity. Some scholars allege a "continued near-complete blindness to all but a single religion" (i.e., Christianity; Stepien 2023: 739) while simultaneously understanding religion specifically as "an individually chosen, privately held, system of beliefs pertaining to 'God'" (Knepper 2022: 2).[3] The systematic problem is that the notion of belief as a one-size-fits-all is unable to accommodate certain cognitive religious phenomena, such as ritual or the veneration of spirits in certain cultures. The challenge presumably implied by this criticism is that PoR ought to be fundamentally reformed as a field to include aspects of the anthropological study of non-Abrahamitic religions. So far, the majority of scholars working in PoR have seemingly either been resisting or ignoring this challenge.

So, what might be the way forward? Mizrahi (2020: 558) suggests that if, in order to circumvent confirmation bias in favor of Abrahamitic religions, "philosophers of religion need to restructure their analytical tasks," then they ought to consider "religious beliefs, questions, and arguments couched in non-Christian terms." One of the goals of this article is to develop the notion of religious alief as a multi-purpose tool in the toolbox in the service of fulfilling such analytical tasks. Additionally, Carroll (2016: 39) suggests that the new task for philosophers of religion is to "investigate concepts used by other philosophers, scientists, and religious studies scholars to [. . .] clarify concepts and advance arguments of contemporary practical urgency."

Within this wider context, this article argues that some of the problematic implications of this charge of belief-centrism can be alleviated or side-stepped if we introduce the concept of alief into the arsenal of PoR. Situated "between" belief and imagination, aliefs denote a class of automatic, habitual mental states which may contradict a related or analogous belief. For example, walking over a bridge made of transparent material, I might believe – i.e., be completely convinced – that the bridge is safe. Yet, walking over it, I might tremble, shake, and turn back, betraying that I have an alief indicating grave danger. The notion of aliefs has been put to fruitful use in a variety of philosophical debates, yet has been virtually absent in debates on religious belief and related cognitive states (e.g., experience, faith).

Schilbrack (2017); Schilbrack (2021); Loncar (2023); Mikel Burley (2024); Draper & Nichols (2013); Hongladarom, Joaquin and Hoffman (2023); Sherman (2018); Gasser (2020); Gäb and Gasser (2024).

[2]As a reaction, some scholars have been bringing cognitive science and religion into fruitful contact (De Cruz 2014), for example, focusing on, among other things, the way in which religious belief is conditioned by presumably innate cognitive structures predisposing humans to certain biased beliefs (Biabanaki 2020; Lemanto 2022). Others have focused on criticizing PoR's focus on belief or faith as the central category of the study of religion (Eshleman 2016; Palmqvist and Jönback 2025; Sherman 2018). Some have focused on thinking religion in terms of practice (rather than cognition) (cf. Knepper 2023; Casewell 2022).

[3]For one dissenting, but salient voice against this trend cf. Lewis (2015).

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This article offers an analysis of some religious phenomena as aliefs, such as taboo, certain thanatological reverences, superstition and folk belief, spontaneous prayer in crisis, or certain rituals (purification rituals and apotropaic rituals). The contention is that such phenomena are often ill-suited to an analysis in terms of belief, yet fit well within the notion of alief.

The upshot of this analysis in terms of aliefs is as follows. Traditional PoR might be able to sidestep more extreme and more fundamental calls to reform that demand, for example, entirely practice-based or anthropologically inspired approaches to the study of religion. Thus, traditional PoR can resume its traditional project with relatively minor disturbance, i.e., by introducing vocabulary most practitioners in (analytic) PoR are already familiar with from other contexts. This proposal thus is conciliatory: Since aliefs are a "domestic" conceptual resource, traditional PoR can arguably address the most fundamental criticism (i.e., belief centrism) while resisting the stronger demands to give up its identity as a philosophical subdiscipline. Towards the end of the 20th century, certain philosophers of religion, like William Alston, helped shift the field from questions about belief (particularly due to authors like Plantinga) to questions about non-doxastic attitudes (faith, acceptance, hope). This proposal on religious alief aims to contribute to a recent movement that tries to shift the focus further from conscious, agential mental states to non-agential, subpersonal modes of religious cognition. In other words, focus on alief can help reorient the field from a more specialized philosophy of religion to a more generalized philosophy of religiosity (or spirituality) as such.

The first section recounts the criticism from belief, i.e., the recent attacks against traditional PoR in terms of its focus on belief in something transcendent as the main feature of religion. I will attempt to demonstrate how this critique applies in detail with an example from Shintoism as a religion that seems not primarily to be about belief. The second section first gives an overview of the concept of aliefs to then apply this notion to PoR in the third section, outlining what I call religious alief.

As an important caveat, I will not attempt a conceptual analysis, but instead rely on most people's pre-theoretical understanding of religion. Furthermore, I will treat religion, magic, and superstition as a continuum rather than assuming that these phenomena are *entirely* unrelated. This is for the reason that it is preferable to avoid a situation in which the concept of religion is set up in such a way that non-monotheistic, non-Abrahamitic religious practices are excluded as a matter of conceptual necessity. If we were to understand religion in such a restricted manner, we would turn back to where the original conversation started, that is, with PoR focusing almost exclusively on belief in an omnipotent God, seemingly with the implication that other religious practices are mere superstition or "irrational" belief in magic. Thus, perhaps the most contentious consequence of this is that I consider spirituality to be continuous with (organized) religion. Accordingly, the argument presented here proceeds under the assumption that PoR is able to accommodate religious phenomena beyond monotheism.

2. The problem with religious belief

Belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God is arguably the central feature of Abrahamitic religions.[4] This is, for example, attested by Goethe's famous Crucial Question (*Gretchenfrage*) in his *Faust*: "Well, tell me, you must, about your

[4]"Just as things began to change, we were told there could be no change – that no matter how much scholars or practitioners of religion recalibrated the modern-Western conceptualization of religion, we could

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religion – how do you feel?," as a code for asking Faust whether he believes in God and as a test for his overall moral fiber (Goethe 2014: 122). Traditional philosophers of religion have long followed the same instinct. Classical figures in PoR have focused on the nature of religious belief (e.g., Augustine, Aquinas, Kierkegaard, or James). But also leading figures in much of (particularly analytic) PoR since the 20th century have focused on questions pertaining to the existence of God and subsequent belief in God: Alston (1991); Craig (1979); Craig (2008a); Craig (2008b); Craig and Moreland (2003); Hick (1966); Hick (1989), Plantinga (1967); Plantinga (1993); Plantinga (2000); Plantinga (2015); Plantinga and Tooley (2008); Plantinga and Wolterstorff (1983); Swinburne (2004); Swinburne (2005); van Inwagen (2006); Ward (2008a); Ward (2008b); Wolterstorff (1976); Wolterstorff (1995); Zagzebski (1991); Zagzebski (2012). According to traditional PoR, religion is primarily about belief, which is centered on propositional attitudes toward metaphysical claims (e.g., "God exists," "Jesus rose from the dead"). Religious practice is typically seen as derivative of belief (e.g., one prays *because* one believes) (cf. also Aguas 2023).[5] In other words, belief is commonly seen as the downtown of religion, the rest is just the quiet suburbs.

This focus on belief in the existence of God has recently been criticized as myopic (cf., e.g., Knepper 2023; Eshleman 2016; Sherman 2018; Komjathy 2023). This alleged myopia has at least two related aspects. First, it is exclusionary of any non-monotheistic religion. Secondly, and relatedly, the notion of religious belief (at least as it is usually understood in academic philosophy) is not able to capture a variety of cognitive phenomena related to different religious practices. Some examples are awe and reverence, gratitude (e.g., in prayer), fear of divine punishment, hope for divine reward, ritual practice, superstition (e.g., jinxing), magical thinking, agency detection, appeasement behavior (towards a spirit or deity), or divination. While it is not the case that such phenomena have *nothing* to do with belief, simply ordering such phenomena under the moniker of "belief" does not seem to do them justice, as it does not seem to exhaustively explain what they are about. For example, as pointed out by Wittgenstein, whether and to what extent the practitioner of a religious ritual (e.g., ceremonially burning an effigy) *really believes* in something transcendent is often not the point of that ritual (Wittgenstein 2002: 36).

Take Shinto as a case in point. Known in Japanese as 神道 ("way of the gods"), Shinto constitutes Japan's indigenous religious tradition. However, it diverges from Western models of religion in that it lacks formal doctrines, centralized institutions, or canonical scriptures. Instead, Shinto comprises a web of rituals and customs centered on kami (神), a term encompassing spirits, deities, ancestors, natural phenomena, and sometimes even exceptional individuals or objects. Kami are not supreme gods in the monotheistic sense, but rather a local sacred presence. Shrines (神社, *jinja*) are devoted to specific kami and are maintained by priests (神主, *kannushi*). These shrines may be dedicated to features of the natural landscape, historical figures, or mythic beings. Devotion to the kami emphasizes ritual cleanliness, offerings, and shared acts of reverence rather than adherence to dogma. Shinto does not possess a scripture comparable to the Bible, nor does it have a founder figure or prophet. Historically and even now, most Japanese

only ever see religion as organized sets of privatized beliefs, the study of religion as the liberal-theological affirmation of a diversity of such beliefs." (Knepper 2023: 54).

[5]Additionally, it might be relevant to note that some authors who focus on diversifying or globalizing PoR still focus on belief as the mark of religion, cf. e.g., Krongyoot (2023).

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people engage in both Buddhist and Shinto observances due to over a thousand years of coexistence and syncretism (神仏習合, *shinbutsu shūgō*), resulting in blurred boundaries between the two traditions. A typical pattern is to celebrate weddings at a Shinto shrine and conduct funerals at Buddhist temples.

What matters for our present concerns is that Shinto practice is primarily ritualistic rather than doctrinal. Common elements include shrine visits, purification rites such as *misogi* (禊) or *harai* (祓い), seasonal festivals (祭り, *matsuri*), and ancestor veneration. A central theme is purity (清め, *kiyome*), while defilement (穢れ, *kegare*) is associated with death, illness, or misfortune, and is ritually addressed before entering sacred spaces or during key life events.

Strikingly, many Japanese people, when asked whether they are religious or believe in the kami, respond with confusion or amusement. This holds true even for those who actively participate in rituals like *Temizuya* (手水舎, the customary hand and mouth cleansing ritual) or who bow respectfully at a *torii* gate (鳥居). It is also widespread to carry *omamori* (お守り), small cloth talismans believed to provide blessings related to things like health, academic success, childbirth, or traffic safety. Yet for most practitioners, these acts are not connected to any strong sense of belief as the term is typically used in Western religious contexts. To many Japanese people, "religion" (宗教, *shūkyō*) is something associated with what is perceived to be foreigners (Christians, Jews, Muslims) rather than something they themselves do. Prayer, shrine visits, and bowing are often described instead as cultural habits rather than religion (cf. Hendry 2019: 157ff.; Breen and Teeuwen 2010: ch. 1).

Multiple explanations have been proposed for this attitude. One view holds that the concept of religion only entered Japan with the opening to the West during the Meiji era (cf. Masuzawa 2005). Another, more critical reading, suggests that "religion" itself is not a neutral or universal category, but a conceptual product of Christian-inflected Euro-American thought (Josephson 2012: 3). Under this lens, what counts as "religious" in Japan was to some extent constructed by external imposition. One could also point to the *uchi/soto* (内/外, inside/outside) dynamic in Japanese culture, which may encourage seeing religion as something external, foreign, or imposed from outside the cultural "interior" (cf. Hardacre 1986, 2017; Hamabata 1994; Ashby 2013).

Somewhat ironically, this reluctance to identify Shinto as a religion parallels the narrow focus of traditional (analytic) philosophy of religion, which often centers on doctrinal belief, typically in a monotheistic framework. An analytic philosopher, encountering such practices, might argue that Shinto adherents do possess latent or tacit beliefs that could be made explicit upon reflection. But to frame it that way risks distorting the phenomenon. Rather than treating Shinto's apparent lack of belief as a deficiency to be corrected, it might be more helpful to question the conceptual tools being used. If one concludes that Shinto does not qualify as a religion simply because it lacks belief in an omniscient deity, moral laws, sin, salvation, or an afterlife, then the problem lies with the categories, not with the practice. If one's primary analytical tool is the concept of belief, then every religious phenomenon is evaluated in terms of belief. But belief is not the point of these practices. Rather than trying to read belief into ritual behaviors, we should consider that practice itself, without substantial restrictions in terms of belief, can constitute full-blown forms of religious life.

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3. Gendlerian aliefs

In 2008, Tamar Gendler introduced the concept of alief in a series of articles (Gendler 2008a, 2008b). According to Gendler, aliefs are a *sui generis* mental state comprised of co-activating representational (*R*), affective (*A*), and behavioral (*B*) components. The representational component typically involves a quasi-perceptual construal of a situation (often primitive, non-conceptual, and not necessarily consciously endorsed by the subject). The affective component consists of an automatic emotional or physiological response to the represented content (e.g., fear, disgust, anxiety) and is likewise not subject to deliberate control. The behavioral component consists of a disposition to act in a certain way, often habitually or reflexively, and possibly in tension with what the subject overtly believes about the situation they are in. To take a standard example, a person walking across a transparent glass bridge may believe that the structure is entirely safe, yet still experience fear and hesitation. This can be described in R–A–B terms: the subject *represents* the situation as involving danger (R), feels fear (A), and is disposed to step back or freeze (B), despite *believing* the bridge is secure. In this sense, aliefs are usually belief-discordant, i.e., one's alief that one is in danger on the transparent bridge is in conflict with one's belief that the bridge is completely safe. What this illustrates is that aliefs, unlike beliefs, are not necessarily sensitive to considerations of truth, nor are they under voluntary control. Part of Gendler's motivation for introducing aliefs is for cases which are not well described by either attaching belief or imagination as a label (Currie and Ichino 2012: 788). In this manner, aliefs are a mental state "in between" belief and imagination, less reality-sensitive than belief, but more reality-sensitive than imagination (Gendler 2008a: 651). Aliefs also fall between reason-based explanations of behavior and entirely rational physical-cause explanations (Gendler 2008b: 555). As such, positing aliefs is originally motivated by considering that humans are "simultaneously embodied and capable of rational agency," two facts that can conflict (Gendler 2008b: 572).

Since its inception, the notion of aliefs has been applied to a variety of contexts, for example implicit bias (Gendler 2011), magic (Leddington 2016; Cavedon-Taylor 2025), humor (Kramer 2022; Jackman 2012), moral psychology (Kriegel 2012), cognitive ailments like OCD (McRay and Dennett 2009), international politics (Holmes 2015), the psychology of pleasure (Bloom 2010), placebo effects (Haug 2011), and social robotics (Martens and Hildebrand 2021). But the notion of aliefs has also almost immediately drawn criticism, with some questioning whether something like aliefs even exists or, if they exist, offer any explanatory advantage (Currie and Ichino 2012; Muller and Bashour 2011; Kwong 2012: Mandelbaum 2013; Sinhababu 2017: ch. 7.6; Hubbs 2013; Doggett 2012; Nagel 2012; Egan 2011). For the context of this article, I will take for granted that aliefs exist and present a genuine, prima facie irreducible mental phenomenon.

4. Religious aliefs

The notion of alief has not yet been systematically applied to topics in PoR. To my knowledge, the only exception is presented in Hodge (2011) who suggests that humans have aliefs about the afterlife connected to innate so-called offline social reasoning processes about the continued existence of other people even in their absence.[6] I contend

[6]"[T]he evidence-sensitive belief is that the individual is dead, but the belief-discordant alief is that the individual is still somewhere, doing something." (Hodge 2011: 375).

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that we can adduce Gendler's notion of alief to further elucidate some other religious phenomena that are in effect better described as aliefs rather than beliefs. In particular, the notion of aliefs is apt to account for belief-behavior mismatches featured in certain religious phenomena. Then I will briefly mention some advantages of understanding such phenomena in terms of alief rather than belief, before elucidating how religious alief might differ from alief in the sense Gendler envisioned. In what follows, I will reconstruct a variety of different religious phenomena which resist a full analysis in terms of (religious) belief and argue that they can nevertheless be more comfortably understood as forms of religious alief.

Nones and Somethingism. Recently, Palmqvist and Jonbäck (2025) have turned their attention to the so-called "Nones," individuals who, when asked about religious affiliation, respond with "none." Yet, most Nones are not atheists in the strict sense, nor are they simply disinterested in metaphysical questions. Rather, they frequently hold views that are spiritual, vaguely theistic, or metaphysically open-ended, falling somewhere between traditional theism and scientific naturalism. Central to this semi-secular orientation is a view they call "Somethingism": a belief that *something* exists beyond the physical or everyday world, even if that "something" lacks doctrinal content of the kind found in organized religion. Somethingism functions, in their analysis, as an ontological anchor for many Nones. Rather than a belief, it is a placeholder for metaphysical intuitions that resist full secularization. When respondents in sociological studies state that they do not believe in God, but that they yet believe in *Something*, they often refer to what Palmqvist and Jonbäck call a *Truly Significant Being* (TSB), i.e., a vague metaphysical presence, force, or dimension that is experienced as existentially meaningful and morally relevant. Importantly, this TSB is not necessarily supernatural in the traditional sense, but it is transmundane, i.e., beyond the ordinary scope of daily empirical life, something we normally do not encounter.[7]

Some detractors of Somethingism may simply discount the Nones as, say, confused believers. To critics, Somethingism seems like an instance of severe cognitive dissonance among Nones: their simultaneous rejection of religion and continued engagement with spiritual or quasi-religious practice. If one insists on belief as the central category of religion, one is forced to conclude that these individuals are either confused, inconsistent, or inarticulate about their metaphysical commitments.

Palmqvist and Jonbäck's recent typology of Somethingism presents a type of belief-behavior-affect ambiguity that challenges belief-centric models of religion and lends itself well to reinterpretation through the lens of alief. The Nones are not confused believers, but alievers. They alieve that "something" is out there. As they describe, many Nones affirm a vague, non-doctrinal, and non-institutional sense that "something" exists beyond material reality. The Nones do not *believe*, but they do *alieve* in something. Their *Truly Significant Being* (TSB) serves not as a theological commitment, but as

[7]The authors identify two core types of Somethingism: Weak Somethingism, which affirms the existence of a transmundane TSB, and Strong Somethingism, which affirms a transcendent TSB that operates on metaphysical, axiological, and soteriological levels, thereby occupying a role not unlike that of God, albeit without theological doctrine. They further parse Somethingism into three typological strands. First, *Old Religion Somethingism* involves a diluted form of inherited religious belief, often retaining a vague sense of justice, fate, or divine order. Second, *New Spirituality Somethingism* (connected to the more familiar term *New Age*) manifests through nature spirituality, wellness culture, or practices like yoga and meditation, where personal experience is sacralized. Third, *Life Question Somethingism* arises from existential reflection rather than religious inheritance, which means a philosophical openness to the possibility of meaning beyond what is scientifically demonstrable.

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something that *feels* intuitively right, even if it is not believed in a classical propositional sense. In other words, for many Nones, the attitude toward the "something" in Somethingism is affectively and behaviorally real, even if not reflectively endorsed. The R–A–B structure of alief maps onto this phenomenon: the world is represented as having an extra-material dimension (R), the individual feels a sense of existential resonance or hope (A), and may engage in behaviors like silent prayer, ritualized meditation, or speaking to the dead (B), while maintaining an overt disavowal of religious belief.

Similarly, *New Spirituality Somethingism* (practices such as mindfulness, forest bathing, energy healing, or intuitive rituals) reveals an alief-based mode of religiosity that is averse to overt belief. In many such contexts, practitioners explicitly reject the metaphysical claims traditionally associated with religion, yet engage in symbolic practices connected to sacred presences, protection, or transcendence. The efficacy of such practices is usually not propositionally asserted but affectively enacted. This too fits the religious alief model: an automatic, habitual cognitive-affective-behavioral stance that does not require endorsement or even coherence to function meaningfully.

Even *Old Religion Somethingism*, which involves thinned-out residues of doctrinal theism (e.g., vague belief in fate, divine justice, or karma), operates more aliefically than beliefically. These are not conceptual commitments one would defend in argument (like, say, a Christian apologist), but affective orientations that shape behavior, such as thanking God after a narrow escape, or feeling guilty in the absence of a clearly endorsed moral code. In this light, Somethingism should not be viewed as just a metaphysical curiosity or a sociological residue of post-Christian societies, but as a manifestation of religious alief. Thus, if we grant that religious aliefs are cognitively significant and not reducible to failed or incomplete beliefs, then Somethingism should be read as a cluster of aliefs, that is, a semi-secular system of affectively charged representational schemas that motivate moral, existential, and ritual behavior in the absence of full-blown belief.

Thanatological convictions. In many religious traditions, thanatological *beliefs* take the form of doctrinal content: belief in resurrection, reincarnation, heaven and hell, ancestral realms, or the judgment of souls. These are typically codified in theological systems, transmitted through teaching, scripture, or communal practice, and are treated as truth-apt, i.e., subject to verification, commitment, or rejection. But there are also certain thanatological practices that fall short of full-blown belief. Yasuo Takamatsu lost his wife Yuko in the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami. She was swept away while working in Onagawa, Miyagi Prefecture. Driven by a promise rooted in her final text message – *"Are you alright? I want to go home."* – he learned scuba diving in 2013 at age 56 to search underwater for her remains. Since then, he's made hundreds of dives (470 by 2020, over 600 by 2024) in the same spot where she disappeared. "'Let's go home together,' Takamatsu said in an interview, as though Yuko could hear him" although he expressly said he is aware he will not find Yuko (Lu 2024). Does Takamatsu really *believe* that his wife is still out there or that he will, at least, find her body? Very likely not. But Takamatsu *alieves* that he may see her again. Arguably, Takamatsu's behavior might be better understood under the Gendlerian R-A-B structure of alief. He has a quasi-perceptual sense of his wife still being "out there" based on a felt sense of presence and mental imagery (R), with a persistent longing and hope (A) that drives him to repeatedly dove into deep waters (B). Finally, Takamatsu's thanatological alief here conflicts with his overt belief: he does not really believe that his wife is still out there or that he will find her, but he alieves that there might be *something*.

Prayer in crisis. Arguably, one salient example of Somethingism may be found in atheists, secularists, or Nones spontaneously praying in crisis and hardship. When

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Thomas learns of his father's inoperable cancer diagnosis in the hospital, he has to take a moment to sit outside the hospital, clasping hands and praying. Thomas does not usually pray or think about wanting to pray. That is not part of his life or part of who he is. But in this case, he does not know what else to do. Does Thomas *really* start to *believe* in God in those moments? Does he *really believe* that his prayer for saving his father from what was most likely an incurable disease would be heard? Probably not, if he answered us honestly. But he does alieve that there maybe is *something* or *someone* who may be able, who may be the only one, to help him in his darkest hour. He has a reflexive sense that there might be someone or something capable of intervention (R), providing him with the slightest bit of desperate hope next to the felt grief (A), making him clasp his hands and voicing a silent plea for help (B). Similarly, a staunch atheist may find themselves in an airplane under heavy turbulence, with one of the engines failing and the pilot alerting the crew and passengers that they are in grave danger. The atheist may, willingly or unwillingly, find themselves pressing their hands together, calling out for God, or for some divine intervention. Does the atheist *really believe* that God exists and that he might save them? Very likely not. But in this case, it may be appropriate to say that the atheist alieves that God exists. We can also describe the atheist's sense that there might be something able to save them (R) with a spike of panic-tinged hope (A), causing them to automatically pray (B), although, after the plane ends up not crashing, swiftly return to their atheist belief.

Rituals. Furthermore, a variety of religious rituals found in non-Abrahamitic religions can be fruitfully understood as involving alief rather than belief. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on purification rituals and apotropaic rituals. In practices such as *temizuya* in Shinto, people perform cleansing rituals before entering shrines by washing their hands and rinsing their mouths. This gesture is widely practiced even among those who deny or are indifferent to the idea of spiritual impurity. The action is not grounded in metaphysical conviction but arises from a pre-reflective sense that one must not enter sacred space "unclean". Such alief is usually habitually acquired in early childhood. The social cues, architectural setting, and cultural habits coalesce to activate an affective and behavioral response. If you were to ask people performing Temizuya if they *actually believe* they are unclean, they would most likely deny it. What compels the action is not belief in impurity, but an alief that something is not quite right unless this purification is performed. The ritual is affectively and normatively charged, yet not propositional in nature. This suggests that the act is not belief-driven but alief-driven: the individual represents themselves as impure (R), feels discomfort or unease (A), and performs the cleansing (B). The ritual's power lies not in propositional assent but in the automatic, embodied responsiveness characteristic of alief.

Apotropaic rituals are things people do "just in case" to protect themselves from bad luck, curses, spirits, or danger. Practices like carrying an omamori, throwing salt behind one's shoulder, keeping a rabbit's foot, hanging horseshoes over doorways, hanging a dreamcatcher above your bed, or even just keeping a lucky coin on you count as apotropaic rituals. Such items still find continued usage by individuals who explicitly deny believing in their supernatural efficacy. While some people may expressly capital-B Believe in the efficacy of these rituals, a variety of people engage in such practices without full belief.[8] For example, if you ask a modern Icelander if he truly believes that painting a *Vegvísir* stave on his car will help him not get lost even in bad weather, he might simply reply something along the lines of "better safe than sorry!". Such

[8]The author of this article also has a charm for road safety in their car, just in case.

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apotropaic rituals persist precisely because they are alief-based. They stem from automatic, enculturated responses to the threat of misfortune. Even if one does not believe in evil spirits or luck, the overt gesture offers a felt sense of safety or control. The ritual works not because it is believed to work, but because it feels appropriate in the moment.

Omens, Jinxing, and Speaking into Existence. Folk beliefs (avoiding the negatively charged term "superstition") are informal, traditional beliefs held by a community, usually passed down orally through generations. They often concern luck, health, nature, fate, protection, and morality, and are not usually based on scientific or religious doctrine (though they may coexist with either). They can also include broader ideas like weather lore, healing practices, or daily taboos. For this purpose, I just want to demonstrate how two types of folk belief can be understood as alief (rather than belief): bad omen, jinxing, and speaking into existence.

Bad omens are signs or events that are traditionally interpreted as warnings of misfortune, danger, or death. They appear in many cultures and often reflect deeper beliefs about fate, morality, or the supernatural. They can be visual signs (like seeing a certain animal), sounds, dreams, or even accidents, which are then interpreted not as random, but as meaningful messages from the universe, gods, spirits, or nature. Leaving home for work the other day, Thomas finds an almost dead, still twitching cockroach in front of his door in the hallway, as the first image of the outside world greeting him that day. He likes to think that he is not overly superstitious, but he cannot help but feel unease about the day. As if the cockroach was a sign of bad things to come today, he made sure to drive extra safely and observe the speed limit on my way to work that day (nothing bad worth remembering happened that day). Did I *really believe* that the dying cockroach was numinous sign, a divine or spiritual message? No, not really. But I certainly *alieved* for a time that something bad might happen today. The representation (R) could be phrased roughly as: "This is a bad sign; something unpleasant is going to happen today." Although the subject does not believe this in any rational or religious sense, the scene resonates with culturally ingrained associations (cockroaches as symbols of decay, corruption, or contamination) and the timing of the encounter (first thing in the morning) lends it narrative or symbolic weight, as if it were an omen. This representation is immediately accompanied by affect (A): a sense of unease, discomfort, perhaps a vague anxiety that lingers without any clear source. It is not a full-blown fear, but a bodily and emotional disposition that colors the subject's outlook on the day. Finally, this alief had behavioral (B) consequences: I drove extra carefully that day.

Jinxing refers to the idea that speaking too confidently or optimistically about a hoped-for outcome can somehow cause that outcome to fail or go wrong. Common in everyday language and popular belief, jinxing is often invoked when someone says something like, "There's no way we'll lose this game," only for their team to lose shortly afterward, prompting others to accuse them of having "jinxed it." The underlying logic is superstitious rather than rational: it assumes that verbalizing a desired future exerts a negative causal influence on it, as if a higher power (God or "the universe") "punishes" overconfidence of those tempting fate. While most people do not take jinxing literally, they may still act as if it's real, avoiding bold predictions or prefacing them with phrases like "knock on wood" to counteract the jinx.

Conversely, some people believe that talking out loudly about a possible future negative event causes that event to actually occur or to be more likely to occur. This is, so to speak, speaking a bad event into existence simply by mentioning it (rather than just quietly thinking about it in soliloquy). For example, an anxious couple may be awaiting

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his blood sample results. They are concerned, for he has had symptoms that are congruent with a variety of both serious and less serious diseases. Meeting her parents for coffee on a Sunday, the in-laws inquire about his health status, when the mother-in-law nonchalantly asks: "what are you going to do if it is cancer?." The boyfriend's face becomes pale and distorted with sorrow, while the girlfriend blows up at her mother for saying this. It is not as if they had *not* known that cancer is a real possibility. It is also not the case that they think the mother-in-law has cruel intentions (she has been nothing but supportive otherwise). Yet, they are appalled at the mother-in-law speaking those words. Does the couple *really believe* that her mother's words cause the test results to indicate cancer? No, but they cannot help the discomfort in concert with the alief that speaking about it will speak the diagnosis into existence. What is operative here is seemingly not belief but alief: an automatic, emotionally laden association between speech and misfortune that bypasses more rational evaluation.

Taboo and Punishment after Apostasy. Taboos, such as dietary restrictions, contact with the dead, or prohibitions on entering certain spaces, often persist in individuals who do not consciously endorse the associated metaphysical framework. A person may claim not to believe that consuming a specific food is impure or dangerous, yet still feel hesitant or guilty when presented with it. One common example is apostate Muslims eating pork for the first time. While they expressly and earnestly do not believe in God (at least the God of the Koran) anymore and accordingly may not believe in any doctrine associated with the pork taboo, they may still feel a revulsion at having a plate full of saucy, slow-smoked BBQ ribs in front of them. They do not believe that eating pork is really sinful, disgusting, or in any metaphysical derogation, yet cannot help but still physically feel revulsion. The representational content of their alief may be "this food is impure" (R) even though they explicitly reject such metaphysical claims now, resulting in a gut-level reaction of nausea (A), expressing itself in physical avoidance behavior, e.g., pushing the plate away (B). They do not *believe* they are doing anything wrong, but their religious alief structure has not yet been dismantled. This would be ill-described as hypocrisy or intellectual inconsistency, but a physically experienced deep-seated example of belief-behavior-affect mismatch. The pork plate becomes a site of internal friction, where the alief "this is disgusting" persists long after the belief "this is forbidden" has been discarded.

Similarly, a person who professes disbelief in divine judgment may still experience guilt or anxiety after violating a moral or cultural norm. This unease is not grounded in belief but is a residue of alief: the automatic affective association between wrongdoing and consequence. It is not reflective assent to a doctrine of punishment, but a patterned emotional response rooted in early enculturation or persistent religious schema. This affective residue is closely tied to the persistent sense of being watched, an internalized observer figure that lingers even after theological belief has been abandoned. Individuals raised within religious frameworks often grow up with the idea that God is omniscient, always present, and morally evaluative. Over time, this figure becomes internalized as a kind of moral witness, even when belief in God fades. The gaze of this internalized other remains affectively active, shaping moral emotions like guilt, shame, and self-correction. Cognitive science of religion has described this as a product of the human tendency toward hyperactive agency detection: we are primed to see intention and watchfulness even in the absence of actual observers. In this light, the feeling of guilt after wrongdoing, even in the absence of belief, is best understood not as a vestige of failed belief but as a durable alief, an emotionally structured cognitive pattern that continues to shape experience and behavior even when doctrinal belief is no longer present.

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Sense of being blessed or cursed. Attributing fortunate or unfortunate events to supernatural causes – feeling "blessed" when things go well or "cursed" when they go poorly – is a remarkably persistent mode of interpretation, even among individuals who reject belief in divine agents or metaphysical causality. These expressions often emerge spontaneously, without reflective endorsement. One might say, half-jokingly, "I must be cursed" after a string of bad luck, or offer a quiet "thank God" after a near miss. Yet beneath the humor or social convention may lie a genuine affective and behavioral orientation toward the event as *charged* with significance. These responses are sometimes better understood as alief rather than belief: an automatic, emotionally structured construal of events as meaningful, as if overseen or determined by some unseen force. The alief at play here reflects a deeper psychological mechanism, namely, the tendency to see pattern, agency, or purpose in what is otherwise random or contingent. In this sense, such reactions may be seen as secularized or residual forms of magical thinking. They are not superstitions in the strict sense of positing causal laws, but rather intuitive frames that carry the emotional weight of explanation. Even if one disavows the idea of blessings or curses, the *feeling* of being singled out (either for favor or for punishment) can be strong, and it often motivates behavior: avoidance, gratitude, ritual gestures. These reactions are best understood as alief-expressive, not as failures of rationality, but as part of the persistent affective residue of religious cognition in secular or post-belief contexts.

Before continuing, it is perhaps important to delineate the notion of religious alief from adjacent concepts. A larger part of contemporary religious epistemology deals with the notion of faith. The structure of faith may seem to mirror religious alief as it is presented here. According to Howard-Snyder (2013), faith does not require belief. Instead, faith is best understood as a voluntary, practical commitment to a proposition or person, often under epistemic risk. Faith requires acceptance for practical purposes, a commitment to act as if p is true, and sometimes *hope* that p is true.

Jackson (2021, 2022) emphasizes a relationship between faith and hope as *future-oriented affective attitudes*, especially where true belief is absent. Hope involves a desire for p to be true and an uncertainty about p. Faith often includes hope but goes beyond it insofar as faith adds a practical orientation in the sense of a willingness to rely on or act in light of p with a degree of steadfastness that exceeds hoping.

Malcom and Scott (2022, 2021) offer a somewhat different account of faith, a pragmatic, action-oriented account of faith on which faith is not a cognitive state such as belief, but a practical stance toward the world. On this view, faith is closely bound up with an agent's moral orientation, sense of identity, and life-structuring commitments, shaping how one deliberates, acts, and understands oneself over time. Faith here is a matter of "true grit," i.e., the capacity to stay resilient in the face of adversity (cf. also Howard-Snyder and McKaughan 2022).

In any case, religious alief seems reasonably distinct from all of these contemporary accounts of faith. Although religious alief shares affective and motivational features with faith, it differs from these attitudes in certain respects. Aliefs are not voluntary stances that agents can adopt. Whereas faith is typically reflectively endorsed, alief often operates independently of an agent's reflective stance and may persist even after religious commitments have been explicitly rejected. This difference is reflected in the level at which alief operates. Faith is ordinarily an agent-level attitude, often construed as a form of trust embedded in interpersonal relations (including one's relationship with God). Alief, by contrast, is best understood as subpersonal or pre-reflective. It does not presuppose trust in a person or authority, nor does it involve the normative

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commitments characteristic of faith-based stances. Aliefs also differ from faith and hope in their temporal and evaluative profile. Most notably, religious alief as a mental property is not specific to the future or uncertainty regarding that future. Religious aliefs are typically not truth-aimed or subject to epistemic assessment. As a result, aliefs are largely insensitive to counterevidence and reflective reconsideration. Religious alief thus captures a class of non-voluntary, automatic mental states that are not rationally assessable in the same way that faith might be.

For these reasons, religious alief should not be understood as a competitor to non-doxastic theories of faith, but as a complementary explanatory category. It is especially apt for cases such as residual ritual behavior, spontaneous prayer by atheists, or persistent taboo responses following apostasy, i.e., phenomena that remain difficult to accommodate within existing models of faith or acceptance.

5. Some caveats

This section details some caveats and additional features of religious alief. It seems that religious aliefs have the same features of aliefs more generally that Gendler described.[9] One cannot alieve at will, just like one cannot believe at will. Consider again the ex-Muslim who finds it difficult to eat pork, although he does not have any good reason to anymore. In defiance of his former life, he may *wants to* be able to eat pork, but cannot do it (yet). Additionally, alief seems to be the right tool to explain the belief-behavior mismatch featured in a variety of religious practices, which do not feature the level of conviction necessary for belief. Particularly, the lifestyle of the Nones, a belief in *something*, is likely more aptly understood as an alief: a lack of overt belief supplemented by an alief in *something* beyond.

To reiterate, one of the central features of aliefs is that they are more reality-sensitive than imagination, but less reality-sensitive than belief. Does this apply to religious alief? Religious aliefs, arguably due to their connection to the transcendent, are usually relatively reality-insensitive. They are resistant to factual correction and functionally operative even when the person explicitly denies the content they seem to imply. For example, many people using an omamori continue to use them even if negative things happen despite their alleged protective power: if my charm did not work this time, it might just work next time. Many will also keep alieving in the power of jinxing and speaking events into existence, even despite numerous instances in which their words were causally not efficacious. Considerations regarding reality are rarely of serious concern in disregarding or maintaining one's religious aliefs.

The same structural pattern emerges in what might be called thanatological aliefs, those related to death and the continuing presence of the dead. In the case of Yasuo Takamatsu, the Japanese man who has spent years diving to search for the remains of his wife lost in the 2011 tsunami, it seems unlikely that he explicitly believes she is still alive or waiting to be found. Yet his behavior is driven by something stronger than propositional doubt. Takamatsu alieves that she is still, somehow, "out there." He represents her as absent rather than annihilated (R), experiences longing and emotional closeness when diving (A), and continues his underwater search (B), even while acknowledging the rational improbability of ever finding her. This maps almost exactly onto what Hodge (2011) (mentioned at the beginning of this section) describes as the alief involved

[9]"So it looks like, just as it is (something close to) conceptually impossible to believe at will, it is practically impossible to alieve at will" Gendler (2008a: 651).

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in offline social reasoning: "the evidence-sensitive belief is that the individual is dead, but the belief-discordant alief is that the individual is still somewhere, doing something."

Likewise, cases of jinxing or superstition, such as avoiding saying that things are going well in fear of "jinxing it," fit this model. The subject may firmly reject the idea that their words can causally influence future events, but still experience discomfort (A), imagine potential misfortune resulting from the utterance (R), and engage in compensatory behavior, such as knocking on wood or avoiding the statement (B). In this way, the subject alieves something that they explicitly disbelieve. Religious awe provides another illustration: standing in a grand temple, a person may not consciously believe in the divinity of the space but nonetheless feels reverence (A), perceives the environment as sacred or charged with presence (R), and adopts behavior accordingly (lowering their voice, bowing, removing their shoes) (B). These phenomena do not appear to be explained purely by belief or by imagination, but rather by the kind of automatic, pre-reflective responsiveness that Gendler identifies as characteristic of alief.

The notion of religious aliefs as developed here requires some additional qualifications regarding differences from the way Gendler first introduced aliefs in general. Perhaps the most salient difference is about perception. Gendler's prime examples afford perception a central role. Gendler is particularly concerned with visual inputs and affective response patterns. This may certainly occur in the case of some religious aliefs as well. For example, the dying cockroach as a bad omen predominantly operates on a visual level. Or the sight of deliciously barbecued pork ribs may make the ex-Muslim uncomfortable. But other examples of religious alief seem to be mostly or entirely unrelated to visual inputs or perceptual inputs more generally. This is for principled reasons insofar as some religious alief is concerned with transcendent elements. For example, jinxing something, the atheist's hesitance about selling his soul (which he believes does not exist), or fear of divine punishment (even though one does not believe in the divine) do not require perceptual inputs in the way that Gendler's common examples of alief require. Regarding alief in either the transcendent or even alief related to pagan deities who may (in principle) be perceivable, it seems ill-guided to insist on sense perception playing a role in triggering an affective response pattern.

Furthermore, Gendler holds that "for the most part, discord between alief and belief is an undesirable state" (Gendler 2011: 15). This certainly seems to obtain in cases such as the avowed atheist praying in the crashing airplane; should they survive such an incident, discomfort in the face of discordant belief (atheism) and alief related to prayer may arise. Yet, this might not be the case for all religious aliefs. Consider, for example, the Nones who do not fully believe in transcendent entities, but have a sense of *something* transcendent being there. Most of such Nones probably do not feel discomfort at such tension, but embrace it as part of their form of life. Why are religious aliefs of this nature not associated with the same discomfort as other Gendlerian aliefs? One reason is that such belief-alief mismatch is not connected in any way to fear or visceral disgust as in other examples (the see-through bridge, the apostate eating pork ribs), and thus presents a relatively low-stakes commitment. In addition, in the process of secularization, most western liberal societies have established certain cultural scripts in which such a belief-alief mismatch need not make anyone as uncomfortable as, say, a man of medieval Europe would have been in case he found a mismatch between his belief in God and his alief-related behavior. Therefore, in some cases of religious alief, the mismatch of belief and alief might be a neutral or sometimes positive, rather than entirely negative state.

Norm violation presents another point of departure. Gendler asserts that aliefs are connected to certain kinds of norm violations (the movie-goer *should* exhibit fear only in

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the face of actual danger, the anti-racist *should* react similarly to members of different racial groups) (Gendler 2008b: 553). Gendler seems to understand norm violation here as a case of something being abnormal, something that is not normally the case. But it is questionable whether such norm violation occurs in religious aliefs *tout court*. In the case of religious aliefs, the type of *ought* or *should* in question is commonly culturally specific as opposed to the more instinctive, naturally pre-programmed alief-related behavior related to fear and disgust in Gendler's examples. This point is furthermore related to the relatively strong reality-resistance of religious aliefs. In the case of apotropaic rituals, one might think that a norm that is violated is that the charm *should* have protected me against misfortune, even though I just broke my leg. But most people alieving in such rituals do not reason that way, but rather keep the charm for protection against *future* misfortune. The fact that this *should* be violated in such cases does not stop the alief.

6. Possible implications

What is the upshot of this proposal surrounding religious alief? The upshot can be seen to incorporate three aspects: methodological, subfield-level, and research generation. Thus far, this article has mainly focused on the methodological aspect: Introducing religious alief broadens the range of phenomena that philosophy of religion can treat as philosophically significant without first translating them into beliefs.

Regarding the second aspect, in the subfield of PoR, religious aliefs can perhaps be utilized to explain different phenomena of moral psychology, such as specifically religious guilt (e.g., after apostasy), moral action motivated by a sense of being watched by a higher power, or anxiety about metaphysical forms of punishment. Regarding religious epistemology, the notion of religious alief can shine a light on mental phenomena that elude calls for justification. To reiterate, the proponents of Somethingism are sometimes described as holding confused, incoherent, or poorly justified beliefs. Yet, if their cognitive orientation toward the transcendent is alief-like rather than belief-like, then such diagnoses miss the target. In many religious practices, rationality is simply not a category in question. Regarding social aspects of PoR, religious alief can help explain the phenomenon of secularization without full disenchantment. In many contemporary societies, doctrinal belief has declined, yet religious practices, symbols, and moral orientations continue to shape social life. This phenomenon is often described as post-belief religiosity. Religious alief helps to make sense of this pattern by explaining how religion can remain socially operative even when belief, in the classical propositional sense, is absent or explicitly rejected.

Thirdly, introducing the concept of alief can potentially generate further related research questions. If religious aliefs are taken seriously as a distinct class of cognitive attitudes, this raises questions about their acquisition and transmission: how such aliefs are formed through ritual, upbringing, and social practice. Relatedly, it becomes possible to ask how religious aliefs interact with institutions and structures of authority, and to what extent they can be cultivated, reinforced, suppressed, or reshaped by deliberate social or political means. It also invites comparative and cross-cultural investigation. If some aliefs are shaped by enculturation rather than doctrinal instruction, then their content and structure may vary significantly across religious traditions and social contexts. This in turn raises questions about the boundaries between religious alief and adjacent phenomena, such as moral or esthetic aliefs, and about how these different domains of alief interact in lived experience. Finally, attention to religious alief suggests a

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temporal dimension that has been largely neglected: the life-cycle of aliefs under conditions of secularization, including their persistence after belief-loss and the conditions under which they fade, transform, or reattach to new symbolic frameworks. In this way, religious alief does not offer a new explanation for familiar puzzles, but helps generate a set of novel research questions that broaden the scope and future trajectory of philosophy of religion. Ultimately, it may figure as a puzzle piece to further move PoR into a broader territory of philosophy of spirituality. Focus on aliefs can enable engagement with a growing cultural phenomenon often described as "spiritual but not religious" (the aforementioned *Somethingism*).

7. Conclusion

This article introduced the notion of religious alief and offered a reconception of a variety of religious phenomena (particularly those generally found in non-Abrahamitic religions) in terms of alief rather than belief. The contention was that at least some salient religious phenomena (jinx and other superstitions, a staunch atheist praying in times of crisis, or keeping apotropaic items) are more amenable to an analysis in terms of aliefs compared to ascribing agents full-blown belief. The phenomena reconstructed in the third part present just a selection for the sake of space and focus. There is a variety of other religious phenomena that the notion of religious alief can be applied to, for example, agency detection (e.g., hearing a deity in a whisper of the wind), religious awe, feeling a divine presence, the feeling of being blessed or cursed, or the hesitancy of an atheist when asked if they would sell their soul.

As an upshot, this is supposed to be a conciliatory proposal for the current pressure on traditional PoR to reconceive itself to become less focused on monotheistic religion (particularly Christianity) and more inclusive toward religious phenomena more broadly conceived. Religious alief as a cognitive category of analysis is arguably more inclusive than religious belief and suited better to describe certain phenomena we find outside of the Abrahamitic traditions. This is not to say that the rich tapestry of scholarship on religious belief turns out to be useless, far from it. According to critics of traditional PoR, all PoR had was a hammer (belief) which turns everything into a nail. This article attempted to carve out an additional tool to give us more options.

One key result of adducing and further developing vocabulary such as religious alief is that traditional PoR might be able to address some of the pressing charges levied against it without giving up its identity entirely, as may be demanded by some detractors. Certain detractors of PoR cite religious phenomena outside of Abrahamitic traditions as examples of things that traditional PoR may have difficulties accommodating. But by developing vocabulary such as that of religious alief, traditional PoR may be able to keep the majority of its methodology and style while offering an analysis of (at least some) elements non-Abrahamitic, non-Western traditions. In other words, traditional PoR may have conceptual resources that are relatively "domestic" to meet the charges of recent decades.

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