

GOD WITHOUT RELIGION

God, Religion, and Faith: Conceptual Differentiation and Existential Inquiry



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Abstract

This article examines the difference between the concepts of religion and belief, questioning whether belief in God necessarily requires adherence to an organized religion and whether religions can exist without belief in God. Faith is considered a direct and internal relationship between the individual and God, while religion is a horizontal structure shaped by rituals and norms that provides social order. Ibn Tufeyl's work "*Hay bin Yakzan*" argues that belief in God is rationally and historically possible without religion, in light of modern deistic thought and anthropological findings. At the same time, it draws attention to the existence of ethical and cultural systems that can provide social order without belief in God. In this context, the article sets out the philosophical and historical foundations of non-religious belief in God, starting from individual existential questions.

Keywords: God, Metaphysics, Religion, Faith, Philosophy, Rationality, Deism, Hay bin Yakzan, Philosophical Theology, Existence, Anthropology

Introduction

Throughout human history, belief in God and the concept of religion have often been treated as synonymous, with the assumption that one cannot exist without the other. However, this approach is open to philosophical and historical scrutiny and overlooks the diversity of individual belief experiences. This article addresses precisely this point: it examines the questions of whether belief in God necessarily requires adherence to a religion and whether religion must necessarily be built upon belief in God.

Our aim is to show that belief in God is also possible through the individual's direct experience, internal questioning, and existential search; therefore, a rational belief in God can be developed without religion. Similarly, we wish to emphasize that cultural or philosophical religions can be constructed that provide social order, offer moral orientations, and form a worldview, even without belief in God.

Throughout the text, the distinction between religion and belief will be clarified, and historical, philosophical, and anthropological examples will be used to illustrate how this distinction manifests itself at both the individual and societal levels. In this context, the article seeks to answer the following fundamental questions:

- Is a religion necessary to believe in God?
- Can religions exist without belief in God?
- Can an individual's existential questions only be answered through religions?
- Are morality and order only possible through theologically based systems?

The Distinction Between Faith and Religion and the Foundations of a Religious or Non-Religious Understanding of God

Faith and religion are not the same thing. Although these two concepts are often confused, they have quite different aspects. Faith is a vertical relationship; it expresses the direct and internal bond between the individual and God. In this context, faith encompasses spiritual bonds such as individual connection, respect, fear, submission, or love toward a sacred being. Religion, on the other hand, is approached on a horizontal plane; it concerns rules, rituals, and normative structures aimed at regulating society. In other words, religion is the social form of belief in God.¹

When this distinction is not made, people assume that belief in God is only possible within the context of a specific religion. However, throughout history and even today, there have been individuals who believe in God without being affiliated with any particular religion. For example, a person can believe in a creator without believing in any revealed book, prophet, or ritual. This person can establish their own moral code because they fear God or respect Him. This attitude is based on faith, not religion.

Religion is a structure with an area of application. Therefore, it has practical dimensions: rituals, social rules, value judgments such as halal–haram distinctions. It also has an ideological

¹ Emrah Bozkurt, "The Concept of Religion", *Havâss Dergi*, sy.1, May–July 2017, Trabzon 2017, s.32-37.

nature.² This shows that religion acts with the aim of shaping social order, not individual behavior. Just as ideologies are used to determine a society's values, behaviors, and direction, religion similarly aims to bring order to people's lives and provide a worldview.

God is neither a part of this structure nor an extension of it. On the contrary, religion is seen as a system believed to have been sent by God. That is, a person first believes in God, then turns to the religion they believe God has sent. Believing in God is the result of rationality; accepting religion, however, emerges as a choice put into practice. Therefore, one does not believe in religion; religion is accepted and practiced. Faith or belief is directed solely toward God.

There are also historical and intellectual examples that support this distinction. In particular, Ibn Tufeyl's work "Hay bin Yakzan" is an important source in this context. In the story, a child born and raised on an island completely isolated from civilization reaches God solely by observing nature and his own existence. Without encountering any prophets or holy books, he arrives at the concept of God through reason and observation. This is an important philosophical construct showing that belief in God can develop without revelation or religion.

Similarly, modern deist thought continues along these lines. Deists believe in a creator but do not limit this creator to any particular religion. According to them, there is a God who created and organized the universe but has not intervened in this order since then. This thought defends a moral life with a sense of respect and responsibility towards God. In other words, morality requires not religion, but an inner commitment to God. Deistic thought develops a knowledge-based understanding of morality, arguing that evil stems from ignorance and that a knowledgeable person cannot do evil. However, it should be noted that although every human being has the potential for reason, not everyone can use this reason to the same degree and cannot comprehend and put into practice this concept in the way deists think. This is why religion is necessary because, rather than rationality, moral teachings can be adhered to through poetic, narrative stories that appeal to emotions and a system of reward and punishment.

However, anthropological findings also reveal that even before organized religions emerged, people had some kind of concept of a transcendent being. Structures such as animism, totemism, or worship of natural forces seen in primitive tribes were belief systems based on the idea that there was an order, a power, or a spirit. The fact that these systems developed before organized religions shows that the idea of God or divine power existed before religions. In other words, even before religious systems emerged, humanity believed in meaning and order in the universe and in a power behind this order.

In this context, belief in a god without religion is both individually possible and has a deep historical past. Although religion is the institutionalized and socialized form of belief in God, the orientation toward God is, at its core, the individual's direct relationship with existence and meaning. Therefore, belief precedes religion and can exist independently of it.

Humanity's search for God on a spiritual level is often not based on direct religious knowledge or external revelation. On the contrary, this search often begins with the process of observing nature, questioning life, and seeking answers to existential questions. Humans ask themselves questions such as "Why do I exist?", "Why does death exist?", "What will happen

² Emrah Bozkurt, "The Concept of Religion", *Havâss Dergi*, sy.1, May–July 2017, Trabzon 2017, s.37-39; Emrah Bozkurt, "What is Ideology?", academia.edu, April 2024.

to me after I die?”, “*Do I have a soul?*”, “*Is my soul mortal?*” in an attempt to understand both themselves and the plane of existence in which they find themselves. These questions lead humans into a process of questioning not only on an individual level, but also on a universal level. One reason for the existence of religions or metaphysical models is that they provide packaged answers to these kinds of existential questions.

During this process of questioning, humans wonder not only about their own existence, but also about the existence of the universe. When observing the sky, nature, living things, stars, and order, they begin to think that these cannot have come about by chance. This is because the human mind works through causality. By observing that everything has a cause and every structure has a creator, they learn. These observations enable them to arrive at the idea of a creator without encountering a religion or divine teaching directly. At this point, belief in God emerges as a result of the individual's internal thought process, independent of religions and theological systems.

This structure, which we define as faith, represents the direct, unmediated, and experiential bond between humans and God. This bond can be established without relying on any ritual or sacred text. As in many deistic systems of thought, a person can arrive at the idea of a creator simply by observing nature, questioning the meaning of life, and asking questions about the workings of the universe. The important point here is that this process is shaped by the individual's own inner search. Therefore, it is possible to believe in God even in a context where religion does not exist, and this constitutes the fundamental point at which the concept of faith diverges from the concept of religion.³

At this point, propositions frequently voiced by some thinkers, such as “*there can be no religion without God*” or “*God cannot be conceived without religion*” also become open to debate. In this text, we have demonstrated that the idea of a God without religion, that is, believing in God without associating Him with any religious system, is possible. Now, looking at it from the opposite perspective, we must consider that religious structures or systems can be built without any belief in God. This situation is particularly evident in Eastern cultures. This is because religion is not only a theological structure in which God is worshipped, but also an ideology, a moral teaching, a way of life, and a worldview for societies.⁴

For example, Buddhism stands out as a religion that does not have the idea of God at its core. Buddha is not considered a divine being, but an enlightened human being. At the core of Buddhism is the idea that individuals achieve enlightenment through their own inner journey. The goal here is to break free from the cycle of rebirth and attain Nirvana. The main focus is not worshipping a divine creator, but achieving one's own mental transformation.

Similarly, Jainism also focuses on personal discipline and principles of moral living. It is based on the idea that in a universe where souls operate according to universal laws, salvation will again be achieved through the individual's own efforts. It does not include any concept of a creator God.

³ Emrah Bozkurt, “The Concept of Religion”, *Havâss Dergi*, sy.1, May–July 2017, Trabzon 2017, s.32-37.

⁴ Emrah Bozkurt, “The Concept of Religion”, *Havâss Dergi*, sy.1, May–July 2017, Trabzon 2017, s.37-39; Emrah Bozkurt, “What is Ideology?”, academia.edu, April 2024.

Confucianism, on the other hand, has been regarded among religious structures as a doctrine aimed more at establishing moral and social order. Concepts such as the virtuous individual, social hierarchy, tradition, and order are central to it, rather than God.

In Taoism, the concept of “*Dao*” is also considered the fundamental principle of the universe; it is a principle identified with the workings of existence rather than a personal God. Following the path of Tao means living in harmony with nature and leading a virtuous and simple life.

These examples show that religious structures, belief systems, and even ideologies that guide societies can develop without belief in God. In this context, defining religion solely in relation to God is both historically and culturally inadequate. Religion is a powerful system that shapes individuals and societies and can emerge independently of God.

Conclusion

This article emphasizes that faith and religion must be separated from one another, arguing that belief in God is an individual, direct, and internal experience, while religion is the social and practical organization of this belief. A person's belief in God often stems not from belonging to a religion, but from reaching the idea of a creator through their own intellect, observations, and existential questions. In this sense, belief in God is directly related to the individual's search for meaning in the universe and in themselves.

At the same time, it cannot be overlooked that religions have played a powerful role in human history because they offer collective, systematic, and easily internalized answers to fundamental existential questions posed by individuals, such as “*Why do I exist?*”, “*What is death?*”, and “*What is the meaning of life?*” In this context, religions are not merely a form of worship of a divine being; they are also ideological structures that guide human behavior, provide value systems, and hold societies together.

In light of all this, the fundamental conclusion we have reached is this: Neither can belief in God be reduced to a religion, nor does the existence of religion necessarily depend on belief in God. God can be thought of as a meaning, a reason-why, reached in the individual's intellectual and emotional journey; religion is the socialized, ritualized, and cultural form of this search for meaning. Therefore, belief in God is possible without religion, and cultural or philosophical religious structures that keep people in an ethical order can exist without belief in God. However, the difficulty of maintaining this moral order without belief in God should not be overlooked. This awareness paves the way for both individual freedom and intellectual diversity and allows for a broader perspective on the world of belief.