



Dialogue: Response

Is Clouser's Definition of Religious Belief Itself Religiously Neutral?



Pierre Le Morvan

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Let me begin by noting points of agreement and my admiration for Roy Clouser's project. "Prospects for Theistic Science" strikes me as correct in the main. I agree that no theory, scientific or otherwise, can escape having religious presuppositions. This extremely important point merits far more attention than it has yet received in the literature. I also concur with his definition of religious belief. I know of none more accurate or comprehensive. Going beyond noting points of agreement, however, this response will point to some key areas where Clouser's stance on religious neutrality deserves further discussion and clarification.

In his article, Clouser builds on some central points articulated in his *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*. In both works, he deploys what he takes to be the correct definition of religious belief to show that no theory is religiously neutral in the sense of having no religious presuppositions. Though he wisely does not conflate definition with theory, one interesting question worth posing in this connection concerns whether Clouser's definition of religious belief is itself religiously neutral.¹ Note that "religious neutrality" can be taken in at least two senses:

- (1) x is religiously neutral if and only if it has no religious presuppositions,
- (2) x is religiously neutral with respect to y relative to religious presupposition(s) p if and only if x and y share presupposition(s) p .

Understanding (1) and (2) requires understanding what is meant by "presupposition." Following Clouser, we may understand it as a belief informationally required for another belief; thus, "no one could coherently hold the belief while denying any of its presuppositions, even though its presuppositions are not known by being logically inferred from the other belief."² Worth noticing here is that "a presupposition need not be conscious to exercise its influence on the other beliefs of the one who believes it."³

Employing Clouser's definition of religious belief articulated in "Prospects for Theistic Science," we may thus say that for x to be religiously neutral in sense (1) is for x to have no presupposition about the divine "no matter how that is described," or no presupposition "about how the nondivine depends on the divine," or no presupposition "about how humans may stand in proper relation to the divine, where the meaning of 'divine' is (minimally) having the status of utterly unconditional reality" (see p. 6).

Let me explain religious neutrality in sense (2) with an example. Take the Jewish and Muslim faiths. Though they differ in numerous respects, as monotheistic faiths they also share a number of religious presuppositions. Consider the overlap in the religious presuppositions of these two faiths. Call these " p ." The Jewish faith is religiously neutral in sense (2) with respect to the Muslim faith (and vice versa) relative to p . Religious neutrality in sense (2) is thus a relational notion.

Having distinguished senses (1) and (2) of "religious neutrality," the following issues come to the fore. To begin, I see no reason

Pierre Le Morvan received his Ph.D. in epistemology from Syracuse University. He is assistant professor of philosophy at The College of New Jersey, with research interests that include the philosophy of perception, the nature of knowledge, and theodicy and animals. Pierre and his wife Karen reside in Ewing, New Jersey and enjoy vegetarian cooking, science fiction, and keeping up with their toddler, Anne. He can be contacted by email at lemorvan@tcnj.edu.

to think that Clouser would take his definition of religious belief to be religiously neutral in sense (1). If he did so, then it would presumably follow on his view that *definitional religious neutrality* in sense (1) is not only possible but actual, as exemplified by his own definition of religious belief. And why should this definition be the only one so neutral? If definitional religious neutrality is not only possible but actual in one case, why could it not be so in others?

How does [Clouser's definition of religious belief] capture the essence of religious beliefs qua religious belief that have religious presuppositions at odds with his?

Accordingly, clarification of Clouser's position on the following matters would be helpful. First, to the extent that his definition of religious belief is *not* religiously neutral in sense (1) and therefore has religious presuppositions, should he not concede that it would be justifiably rejected by those who reject for whatever reasons these presuppositions? Or is his position that his definition has religious presuppositions that no one may justifiably reject? Second, I understand that Clouser has argued at length that his definition captures the essence of religious beliefs *qua* religious belief. However, if his definition of religious belief has religious presuppositions that many may reject, how does it capture the essence of religious beliefs *qua* religious belief that have religious presuppositions at odds with his? Does it capture the essence of religious beliefs *qua* religious belief in virtue of at least some religious presuppositions shared by all religious beliefs?

These questions naturally lead us to consider whether Clouser's definition of religious belief is religiously neutral in sense (2). It either is or is not. Suppose Clouser took the position that it is. In fact, Clouser appears to commit himself to the religious neutrality in sense (2)—and so, of the non-neutrality in sense (1)—by pointing out that his definition of religious belief has been endorsed by significant Christian and non-Christian thinkers alike (p. 14, note 4).⁴ Although these Christian and non-Christian thinkers undoubtedly differ on a number of religious presuppositions, their religious presuppositions presumably overlap to a sufficient degree for them to concur on the definition of religious belief. For how else could they so concur? Moreover, since Clouser has argued at length that

his definition captures the essence not just of Christian or even monotheistic religious belief, but of religious belief *tout court*, would it not follow that it has to be (to that extent at least) religiously neutral in sense (2)? Has Clouser not uncovered one or more shared religious presupposition(s) of all religious beliefs, and does this not show that definitional religious neutrality in sense (2) is not only possible but actual, as exemplified by his own definition of religious belief? And if definitional religious neutrality in sense (2) is not only possible but actual in one case, could it not be so in others?

Suppose Clouser took the position that his definition of religious belief is not religiously neutral in sense (2). To the extent that it is *not* so neutral and therefore has religious presuppositions not shared by those who accept other religious presuppositions, we may ask yet again whether the latter would not be justified in rejecting this definition on whatever grounds they have for rejecting Clouser's religious presuppositions. Yes, Clouser has argued that his definition captures the essence of all religious beliefs *qua* religious belief (or at least of all those he is familiar with); but if his definition of religious belief has religious presuppositions not shared by those who accept other religious presuppositions, a question arises once more concerning how his definition could succeed in capturing the essence of religious beliefs *qua* religious belief that have religious presuppositions at odds with his own.

Finally, though I have briefly explored herein whether Clouser's definition of religious belief is religiously neutral in senses (1) and (2), I think it would be helpful for Clouser and his defenders to clarify whether any theory of religious (non)neutrality they maintain is itself religiously (non)neutral in senses (1) and (2). I see no way of neatly separating the issues raised herein concerning definitional religious neutrality from theoretical religious neutrality.

Summary

This response paper distinguishes between two kinds of religious neutrality: (1) *x* is religiously neutral if and only if it has *no* religious presuppositions, and (2) *x* is religiously neutral with respect to *y* relative to religious presupposition(s) *p* if and only if *x* and *y* share presupposition(s) *p*. I raise the question whether Clouser's definition of religious belief is itself religiously neutral in senses (1) and (2), and argue that his views thereon deserve further discussion and clarification. ☞

Notes

¹Strictly speaking, it would be more accurate to say "whether *believing* Clouser's definition of religious belief is religiously neutral."

²Roy Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University, 1991), 106.

³*Ibid.*, 106.

⁴Cf. Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*, 16–24.