

## FRANCIS GRIFFIN AND THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY FONZ:

### Religious Exclusivism and “Real” Religion

DAVID KYLE JOHNSON

In the opening to every show, Peter and Lois complain about violence in movies and sex on television. The Griffins, though, suggest we are all lucky that there’s a “family guy” like Peter – someone who is a defender of the “good old-fashioned values on which we used to rely.” Apparently, or at least according to the theme song, Peter is a champion of *family values*. But anyone who watches the show knows better! Not only does Peter love media sex and violence (recall Peter’s love for *The A-Team*, his addiction to the “pornographic marriage counselor,” and his campaign against TV censorship in the episode “PTV”), but his devotion to family values is completely lacking. He tells sexist jokes at work (for example, in the episode “I am Peter, Hear Me Roar,” Peter suggests that “women have breasts . . . [s]o you have something to look at while you’re talking to them”); he’s a drunkard (recall Peter drinking his *real father* Michael Seamus “Mickey” McFinnigan – who is the town drunk in the Irish village of McSwiggin – under the table at Wifey McBeaty’s Tavern in “Peter’s Two Dads”); he is not religious at all (in “Holy Crap,” he suggests that there is a book of the Bible where Jesus swallows a puzzle piece and a man in a big yellow hat takes him to the hospital); and he’s a sexist/bigot (again, in “I am Peter, Hear Me Roar,” he suggests that women aren’t people but objects made for men’s amusement by Jesus Christ). Peter is nowhere close to being the “family guy” suggested by the show’s title.

Peter’s legal father, Francis Griffin – grandson of Willie “Black Eye” Griffin and nephew of Adolph Hitler (see “Untitled Griffin Family History”) – is a different matter. Francis is a staunch Catholic and a defender of family values. Unlike Peter, Francis may indeed be a “family guy.”

Yet, because he makes *unjustified judgments*, no one likes Francis (except perhaps Peter, who is devoted to him because he is his son). In the episode “The Father, The Son, and The Holy Fonz,” Francis condemns Peter and his new religion – The Church of the Holy Fonz – as “unreal” and an “abomination.” In “Holy Crap,” the first episode in which Francis appears, he expresses his religious beliefs – without argument – to everyone in earshot. Francis forces his standards of moral behavior on anyone he can, and he verbally condemns and demeans anyone who disagrees with, or acts contrary to, his standards. (For example, in acts of “kindness,” Francis suggests that Lois – a Protestant – “won’t burn in hell after all . . . [but will] . . . just go to purgatory with all the unbaptized babies” and calls Meg a harlot and tells her that God will give her leprosy for holding hands with a boy.) Francis believes that Catholicism is the only true faith (he is a *religious exclusivist*), and he is therefore entitled to “evangelize” others in this brutal manner.

In this chapter we’ll argue that Francis’s exclusivist claims and evangelism are unjustified and immoral. Evangelism, the process of spreading one’s religious beliefs to others, isn’t *always* immoral – but when it takes the form that Francis defends, it doesn’t get much worse. One of the reasons that Francis-style evangelism is so nasty is that it *excludes* other (perhaps real) religions (like the Church of the Holy Fonz) without any real reasons. As we’ll see, distinguishing the *real* religions from the *unreal* ones is much more difficult than the old codger lets on.

### Holy Crap

Francis is despicable in his *Family Guy* debut, calling Lois a Protestant whore (a label he had posted on Peter’s car on Peter and Lois’s wedding day) and calling all of his co-workers sinners. Beyond that, Francis declares flash photography in church earns you a ticket to hell and beats up a Fox cameraman who wears a hat in church. Foretelling



the end of a *Dike Van Dike* episode, Francis prophesies that “Laura burns the roast and God kills her for parading her bum around in those pants!” Finally, assuming that Chris – because he is a teenage boy – masturbates every time he is in the bathroom for more than two minutes, Francis makes Chris go days without a bowel movement.

*Chris:* [exits the bathroom] Sorry grandpa, you might want to give that a minute or two.

*Francis:* I know what you were doing in there, and it’s a sin! If you ever do it again, you’ll burn in hell!

*Chris:* But I do it everyday; sometimes twice.

*Francis:* Mark my words lad: you may think you’re alone in there, but God’s watching. [Francis exits]

*Chris:* God’s watching me do number two? Oh man, I’m a sinner and God’s a pervert.

Francis’s behavior is fueled by the view that his religious beliefs and moral convictions are true, and that anyone who believes differently or has different convictions is mistaken. But this isn’t so strange. As the philosopher Alvin Plantinga points out, to hold a belief or conviction is to believe that it is true; and to believe something is true is to believe that its opposite is false; and to believe that its opposite is false is to believe that those who believe its opposite are mistaken.<sup>1</sup> For example, if I believe “Brian can talk” then I must believe that “Brian can’t talk” is false and consequently must believe that anyone who believes he can’t talk is mistaken. Thus, part of believing something is believing that those who disagree are wrong. But no one can be morally blamed for this, can they? If they can, then no one is morally permitted to believe anything! Thus, we can’t morally blame Francis for simply believing something is true and believing that those who disagree are wrong – unless we’re willing to blame ourselves for the same thing (and I’m not willing to do that).

So what is morally wrong with what Francis does? I will simply say it (though, unlike Francis, I will offer arguments for my view below): Francis lacks adequate justification for his religious beliefs but, nevertheless, tries to shove them down everyone’s throat. His religious condemnation and conversion techniques – what Francis might call his methods of evangelism – are immoral.

In response to this, Francis might insist that he does have sufficient justification for his beliefs. He would probably cite as sources of justification the Bible, the tradition of the Catholic church, and

perhaps even personal religious experiences. But the problem is that these sources don’t provide adequate justification. There are millions of religious people, all with many religious beliefs contrary to Francis’s Catholic beliefs, and all these people have scriptures, traditions, and religious experiences of their own. Additionally, thousands of years of unresolved conflict have shown that there is no definitive way to prove who is right. This is a problem – and not just for Francis.<sup>2</sup>

The problem here is an inductive one. Inductive arguments are based in observation and prediction. For example, suppose that Quagnire told me that he didn’t try to seduce my daughter, but then I find out that he told four other fathers the same thing and then openly admitted that he only told one of us the truth. Am I justified in believing that Quagnire didn’t try to seduce my daughter? No! Since Quagnire lied 80 percent of the time, he is not a reliable source of the truth. The probability that trusting him will lead to a false belief is high, and thus a belief based on his testimony is not justified. None of the fathers – even the one whose daughter he didn’t try to seduce – is justified in believing what Quagnire says in this case.

Similar reasoning applies to religious beliefs. Take the five major world religions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. These religions have distinct and mutually exclusive doctrines.<sup>3</sup> That is, no two of these religions could be true at the same time. Still, we have no way of proving which one (if any) is true.<sup>4</sup> Each religion bases its beliefs on Scripture, Historical Tradition, and religious Experience (“SHITE” for short).<sup>5</sup> But, since only one of these religions can be true, we know that at least 80 percent of the time SHITE leads to false beliefs.<sup>6</sup> So the inductive evidence suggests that our own SHITE did not lead us to true beliefs – our religious beliefs are not justified. Just like Quagnire, SHITE is not a reliable source of truth. The probability that trusting SHITE will lead to a false belief is high, and so a belief based on it is not justified. No one – even a person who happens to belong to the one true religion (as perhaps Francis does) – has justified religious beliefs.<sup>7</sup>

Some philosophers, like William Clifford (1845–79), have argued that holding any belief without sufficient evidence is immoral. Clifford’s argument runs as follows. Suppose you own a ship on which people are about to take a voyage. You could check the ship to ensure that it is seaworthy, but instead you simply choose to believe, without evidence, that it is seaworthy and send it on its way. It seems



clear that you have acted immorally. If a belief-based action could harm someone if the belief were false, then you better have good evidence that the belief is true.<sup>8</sup> Clifford suggests that all beliefs influence actions, and thus all beliefs could lead to actions that harm others. Consequently, if we believe anything without evidence, we are doing something immoral. Thus, Clifford suggests, it is a moral imperative to refrain from believing something unless we have sufficient evidence. So Francis Griffin is behaving in an immoral fashion by simply holding his religious beliefs without sufficient evidence.

William James (1842–1910) would disagree, arguing that sometimes refraining from belief is impossible. If there isn't sufficient evidence either way, belief without evidence is inevitable. James argues that, in such a situation, you have the moral right to choose which way you believe, even though you will believe without evidence. James suggests that most religious beliefs are like this. For instance, refraining from believing anything about the existence of God (being an agnostic) is the same thing as believing that God does not exist (being an atheist). Since it turns out that neither "side" has sufficient evidence, one has the right to hold (or reject) belief in God even without evidence.<sup>9</sup> James would suggest that Francis is morally permitted to hold his religious beliefs, even though they are unjustified.

Clifford and James both make good points.<sup>10</sup> But I believe the answer to our question – what is morally wrong with what Francis does – lies in the middle ground. One has the right to hold religious beliefs, even without evidence, under the circumstances described by James. But, as Clifford suggests, it is immoral to risk harm to others with actions based on beliefs that lack sufficient evidence. Consequently, one has the right to hold one's religious beliefs, even though one might lack evidence for them, but one does not have the right to harm, or even risk harm, to others with actions based on those beliefs. If this is right, it is clear why Francis's actions are morally wrong. Even though it is morally acceptable for him to hold his religious beliefs, it is not morally acceptable for him to harm others because of those beliefs. And – whether it be the physical harm of hitting cameramen, the internal harm of keeping Chris from pooping, or the emotional harm of making Meg afraid to hold hands with boys and condemning Lois to purgatory – Francis's actions cause harm. They are thus immoral, given that they are rooted in an insufficiently justified religious belief.

But I think Francis's moral wrongdoing goes even deeper. Francis – in a kind of backhanded way – is also trying to convince others of the truth of his religious beliefs. But again, this is a moral mistake. Although one has the right to choose to believe something without evidence, one does not have the right to try to "correct" others who oppose that belief. Yes, if one has sufficient evidence for a belief, one would be morally justified in trying to convince others of the truth of that belief. We would not have a moral objection if Brian tried to convince Lois that Stewie is trying to kill her, since he would have well-documented, convincing evidence. But without sufficient evidence, such efforts are intrusive and immoral.<sup>11</sup>

This conclusion does not require us to give up our religious beliefs. As James suggests, we still have the right to accept certain religious beliefs even without sufficient evidence. We must, however, also recognize that our religious beliefs are poorly justified.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, we must recognize that we do not have the right to try to forcefully convince, convert, or condemn those who do not share our beliefs. In most cases, we'll need to just keep our SHITE to ourselves. If someone comes to us, seeking religious advice or debate, that is a different matter; if someone is open to your SHITE, share it. But unwanted or forceful evangelism – especially if you are trying to *switch* a person from their religion to yours<sup>13</sup> – is immoral.<sup>14</sup> What is moral is (a) disagreement with other religions – you can still hold your religious beliefs and think that others are wrong – but also (b) an attitude of religious acceptance where we tolerate and respect the religious beliefs of others.<sup>15</sup>

### The Holy Fonz

The senior Griffin's intolerant intolerant behavior continues in his second *Family Guy* appearance. In "The Father, The Son, and The Holy Fonz," Francis makes Lois sit at the kids' table because she is a Protestant, and he demands that Stewie be baptized – because the baby will burn in hell otherwise. Francis even admits to embracing a "believe what I say or I will hurt you" approach to Christian evangelism. Perhaps most painful of all though is Francis's condemnation of Peter's new religion: The Church of the Holy Fonz.



As Peter struggles to find a religion, Francis suggests that he look in his heart and turn to the person that has “always been there for him, offering wisdom and truth.” After searching his heart, Peter starts a church that worships Arthur Fonzoirelli – the Fonz – from *Happy Days*. Francis, after attending a service, calls it an abomination and declares that it is not a “real religion.” By this, Francis is not merely suggesting that the doctrines of *Fonzieism* are false. Francis is making the more serious charge that – unlike other religions that Francis merely disagrees with – *Fonzieism* is not a religion at all.

Most people would agree with Francis’s assessment: *Fonzieism* is not a *real* religion. But even though Francis’s assessment is probably correct, once again, it doesn’t look like it is justified. In fact, the problem may go even deeper. It may be that *nothing* can justify such an assessment.

Francis suggests that *Fonzieism* is not a real religion because its worship service only consists of people “singing songs and listening to a bunch of tall tales.” Brian, however, brings up a good point when he argues that this doesn’t seem to be a good reason for thinking *Fonzieism* isn’t a real religion. Singing in worship services is common and the scriptures of most religions do contain quite a few tales that are “tall.”<sup>16</sup> Brian is in fact suggesting that this aspect of *Fonzieism* makes it more like a real religion, not less.

In reply, Francis might suggest, despite what Brian thinks, the stories and doctrines of the Bible are true. So it really is because the tales and doctrines of *Fonzieism* are fiction that *Fonzieism* is not a *real* religion. But, even if we ignore the problem of establishing that the stories and doctrines of the Bible are true, this is still a bad argument. If Francis thinks that true tales and doctrines are what makes a religion *real*, since Francis doesn’t think that any other religion is true, Francis would have to think every other religion is *unreal*. But, like most people, he does not think this.

It doesn’t look like *having true tales* is a good criterion for distinguishing *real* from *unreal* religions. So let’s give it another try. One might argue:

“It is the fact that we know the tales of *Happy Days* to be fiction that makes it a non-real religion. Even though we can’t prove the truth of the tales of other religions – Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, etc. – we also don’t know that they are false. And it is the possibility that their tales are true that makes these religions real.”

However, even if we ignore the fact that scientific evidence calls into question the legitimacy of many stories from many religions, this is still a bad argument. Many people from many religions do not take all the stories of their scriptures literally. Many Christians consider many biblical stories allegorical or exaggerations. They suggest these stories have “true lessons” but admit that they could not have actually happened – they are “truthful fictions.” (Some followers of other religions employ similar reasoning.)<sup>17</sup> But, even though Francis might disagree with such people, I doubt he would be willing to dismiss them as *non-religions*. Even though non-literalists claim that the tales of their religion are *truthful fictions* – just like Peter would admit that the tales of *Happy Days* are *truthful fictions* – they are still religious people. So it doesn’t look like “a religion must have tales that could be true” is a good criterion for distinguishing between *real* and *unreal* religions either.

One might suggest that *Fonzieism* is not a real religion simply because Peter just made it up. But Peter didn’t just make it up.<sup>18</sup> Rather, he founded the Church of the Holy Fonz because he had a religious experience; he looked into his heart and concluded that founding *Fonzieism* was the right thing to do.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the way in which *Fonzieism* was founded is similar to the way Joseph Smith founded Mormonism. Both Peter and Joseph were trying to figure out which religion they should belong to and both had a religious experience that motivated them to start their own religion. Even though you may not be a Mormon, unless you are willing to dismiss Mormonism as an *unreal* religion, you cannot dismiss *Fonzieism* as an *unreal* religion simply on the basis of the way it was founded.

Lastly, one might suggest that *Fonzieism* is not a real religion because it doesn’t worship a deity or deities. But, ignoring the inevitable argument that Peter would submit on behalf of Fonz’s divine status, the fact that Buddhists don’t worship a deity or deities quickly eliminates this as a legitimate response.

So what are we left with? Perhaps only our intuition. There doesn’t seem to be a criterion by which we can establish that *Fonzieism* is not a real religion. But some would argue that we can still justifiably label it as such. How? Consider the classic philosophical pile/heap problem. Take a pile of sand, say 10,000 grains. Such a small pile is not a heap. Now, slowly add one grain at a time. Eventually you will have a collection of sand as big as a sand dune; and clearly that

collection is a heap of sand. Question: At what point did the pile of sand become a heap of sand? Was it after 1,000,000 grains? 100,000,000? No one knows. And in fact, it seems to be no one knows because there is no objective criterion for delineating piles from heaps. A conclusion that one might draw is this:

“There is no objective criterion that delineates piles from heaps, but this does not mean that we can’t label certain things piles and certain things heaps. Some things are clearly heaps and some things aren’t. It just means that there will be some cases where it is unclear whether something is a heap, and in those cases there may be no fact of the matter about whether there is a heap or not.”

A person, like Francis, who wants to call Fonzieism an *unreal* religion might embrace this conclusion and likewise suggest:

“The fact that I cannot identify what makes Fonzieism an unreal religion does not mean it is a real religion. There may in fact be no objective criteria which delineates real from unreal religions – which does mean there will be some “borderline cases” where there is no fact of the matter about whether a certain thing is a religion – but there are still clear cases of things that are not real religions, and Fonzieism is one of them.”

But there are a couple of things that we might say in reply. First, we might simply deny the intuition, admitting there are clear cases of things that are not religions, but Fonzieism is not one of them. Clear cases of non-religions are things like social clubs, fans clubs, and gaming clans. It is not intuitively clear that Fonzieism is not a real religion; it is intuitively clear that it is a “borderline case.”

Second, one might suggest the above conclusion is the wrong conclusion to draw from the pile/heap example. The fact that there is no objective delineating criterion does not mean that there are borderline cases; it means that there are no objective facts about whether things are piles or heaps. “That is a heap” is a way in which a human might describe a piece of the world, but it does not represent an independent property that piece of the world has. If we say something is “clearly a heap,” it is probably true that most people would describe it as a heap. But if someone does not, they are not making a mistake,<sup>20</sup> but merely describing the world differently. The mistake is thinking that there is an objective criterion that makes a collection of

sand a heap or not. In the same way, one might suggest, there aren’t any facts about whether things are religions or not; there are only ways people describe the world. And if someone deviates from the norm – perhaps by calling Fonzieism a *real* religion – they are not wrong but merely different. It’s not a mistake to describe Fonzieism as a *real* religion, nor is it a mistake to describe it as an *unreal* religion. The mistake is thinking that there is an objective criterion that makes something a religion or not.

I must be clear: the conclusion here is *not* that Fonzieism is a *real* religion. The conclusion is actually twofold: (a) If Fonzieism is an *unreal* religion, identifying what makes it so may be impossible; (b) it may be impossible because there is no objective criterion by which one can establish something is a religion. Thus there may be no justified way to establish that Fonzieism is not a *real* religion, and so one who claims it is a real religion may be justified in doing so.

### The Holy Mission

There is a practical lesson to take from this chapter. When it comes to religion, we need not be concerned about converting others to our religion, whether other religions are *right*, or whether other religions are *real*. What we need to be concerned with is our own attitude toward religion and the religious acceptance of others. It is wonderful to hold and be devoted to your religious beliefs, and it is even all right to think that those who disagree are wrong. But, in the absence of definitive proof, we must tolerate and respect the beliefs of others and their right to hold those beliefs, even if we would describe their religion as “unreal.” But regardless – and whether Fonzieism is *real* or not – perhaps we are best off following Fonzie’s example of bravery and acceptance. *Please rise . . . and now sit on it . . .* for a reading from the Letters of Porsie to the Tuscadaros:

Yeah, and did Fonzy downstairs cometh from his apartment from above the garage, and sayeth he “Reassemblith will I the pieces of my motorcycle, though I suffereth from temporary blindness. And yeah, for I am holy, befriendith will I, Sticks Downy, the only Negro in the state of Wisconsin.” Amen.

The Fonz be with you.