

Religion and Beyond

A transcript of a talk by Mark F. Sharlow

Note: This is a lightly edited transcript. No attempt was made to change the informal style of the original talk.

Until now, I have talked mostly about philosophical ideas of God. Most people encounter the idea of God, not through philosophy, but through religion. Next I'll say a few words about the religions of the world.

First, we must distinguish between the world's great religions (like Christianity, Hinduism, etc.) and the many sects that people have made out of these religions. In their essential, main ideas, the great religions of the world agree with each other! They all share the same basic set of ideas. They do put different emphases on things, and sometimes one religion leaves out things that other ones leave in. But they can be reconciled, if we just view them in the proper light. For example, Christianity has one God, and Hinduism has lots of gods. But on closer inspection, it turns out that Hinduism actually teaches that there is one supreme underlying reality, and all the "gods" actually are manifestations of this supreme reality. So Hinduism actually has one divinity underneath it all. In Christianity there definitely is one God, but most Christians think God manifests in three different ways, called the Persons of the Trinity. Christianity also recognizes that there are many beings, called angels, that are supposed to act on behalf of God. Therefore, Christianity and Hinduism have roughly similar pictures of God. The supreme reality is one, but it manifests as many. If you go through the world's main religions this way, and try to find

similar elements in different religions, you find out that the religious teachings of the world are roughly the same in their core. This is not a new idea. Many scholars and ecumenists have discovered this fact and these similarities.

Sometimes a religion will deemphasize something to the point of not including it in their teachings, while other religions will emphasize the same thing. For example, we have the situation with Christianity and Islam where they disagree on the divinity of Christ. That seems to be a very crucial difference, because it's crucial to Christianity that Christ was divine, and mainstream Muslims do not believe that a human being can be God. I think the real disagreement here is in our understanding of what it means for a human being to be divine. As I explain in my writings, a human being can reflect the qualities of God. In a sense, perhaps we are all divine, or at least capable of being divine. But Christians believe that Jesus is *uniquely* divine—divine in a way that the rest of us are not. This can be true if Jesus is a more perfect exemplar of God than are the rest of us. However, during the time when Islam began, many Christians presumably understood the expression “Son of God” in a very biological way—basically, an act of fertilization by God had occurred. In Islam, this material conception of Jesus’ origin is denied. In other words, the relationship between God and Jesus is not believed to fall into the same category as human reproduction. This does not contradict real Christianity! If the idea of Son of God was popularly understood the wrong way, then one might try to do without the “Son of God” terminology, and call Jesus something else. This might have made good sense at the time—but it does not contradict the idea that Jesus shares in the divinity of God. Christianity and Islam can coexist, at least on this point of doctrine.

Many differences among religions are just differences of emphasis. One religion might emphasize something, like the divinity of Christ. Another religion might say, No, your mental picture of that isn't quite right. The Christians took an idea about Christ that is true if properly understood. However, they expressed it in a form that the people of their time could understand. The mental picture of a son—a literal, biological son—is something that people could understand. The exact relationship between God and Jesus of Nazareth is subtle and profound; it is not something that can be understood easily. But you couldn't very well propagate the

Christian teaching to the world by saying, “There’s a man who stands in a relationship to God. This relationship is hard to understand. This man is even closer to God than were earlier prophets. Maybe we don’t understand the relationship; but let’s just set that problem aside and follow his teaching.” That’s not very helpful or understandable for people. So instead, to make the teaching accessible to all, they stressed the mental image of “Son of God.” And that image is true—Jesus really is the “Son of God,” *if you understand that phrase a certain way*. This way of describing Jesus is not a lie. But if you understand the expression “Son of God” in a different way—the literalistic, biological way—then it’s true that Jesus is *not* the “Son of God” in that sense. So there isn’t necessarily any real disagreement between a religion that calls Jesus the Son of God and a religion that refuses to use that phrase. They might just have two different ways of understanding a perplexing reality.

One sometimes hears people compare systems of thought, religious or otherwise, to “maps” of reality. This metaphor works well for religions. Here is what it tells us. Spiritual reality is like a world that the human mind is trying to map. We make mental maps of spiritual reality. The religions of the world are among these maps. We have to be careful not to confuse the map with the reality. One map centers at Bethlehem; another map centers at Sinai; still another map centers at Mecca. Like actual maps of the Earth, religions reflect a real world that they cannot fully represent. A flat geographic map cannot represent accurately a round planet; the mapmaker has to allow some distortion into the map. Similarly, a religion uses familiar human concepts and images to represent a realm that is beyond those concepts and images. Hence all religions contain inaccuracies and distortions. That is one way to think of the differences among the world’s religions. They just place different things at the center of their pictures of spiritual reality. The real situation is more subtle, more complicated, and very difficult to grasp.

We now have a way of reconciling differences among religions: just be careful about what words we use. Perhaps something called a “god” in one religion is called an “angel” in another religion. Perhaps someone called “Son of God” in one religion is called a “holy prophet” in another religion. Maybe the disagreement is about words and not about facts.

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One of the main arguments against religion comes from the cruelty and other bad behavior that religion seems to encourage. People of conscience cannot accept this behavior. The evils of religion fall into three categories, which I will now discuss.

One kind of evil attributed to religion comes from things that people have added to the original teaching. One example is the subordination of women. This occurs in many religions, including Christianity, though Christianity is not the religion most famous for it. The subordination of women does *not* have a basis in the teachings of Jesus! It has a basis in some of the writings attributed to Paul, but it's important to remember that these are not the words of Jesus. One can ask whether the Gospels even contain the exact words of Jesus, but that is a separate issue. The main question is whether St. Paul has as much authority as Jesus. To a Christian, he cannot. So if you leave out the mistakes that Paul made, and mistakes that later theologians made, then you find that that the subordination of women does not exist in *pure* Christianity.

Another kind of evil consists of things that people add to a religion, not after the fact, but while the religion is being created. An example of this might be the religious warfare and extermination mentioned in the Old Testament. If the Old Testament history is correct, the ancient Hebrews committed all sorts of violence in the name of God. Atheists constantly carp on this fact, using it to “prove” that God is bogus. Instead, why not just admit that the ancient Hebrews made a mistake? Even if they knew something about God, they still were imperfect, just like everyone else in the world. Like all of us, they had the biases and prejudices of their time. Even if they felt that God had ordered them to kill, this does not imply that God really ordered them to kill. They did their best to understand the will of God, but they just made mistakes—the kind of mistakes that an ancient civilization (no matter how brilliant) might make. Atheists may think the Old Testament proves that God is bogus. Maybe it just proves once again that humans are fallible.

A third kind of evil attributed to religion comes from scriptural passages that can't be interpreted literally. Some passages in the world scriptures are poetical and metaphorical. The Koran contains passages about severe punishments, such as cutting off the hand. Yet if you read the

Bible, you find the same idea: Jesus said “And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off...” (Matthew 5:30, KJV). In the Bible, it’s clear that this is not an actual punishment. The context of this biblical statement (Matthew 5) makes it obvious what Jesus meant: it’s better to lose many things than to compromise your relationship with God. Personally, I’ve always thought this passage meant that there are things in the human personality, in the human mind, that we have to cast out. If we find in ourselves a habit that our conscience can’t live with, we have to work on cutting off the habit, because otherwise it could drag us away from God. (Prejudice is one example of such a habit.) But no Christian should chop off anyone’s hand! By understanding what Jesus meant by cutting off the hand, we might be able to better understand what that means in Islam. Jesus, after all, is one of the prophets mentioned in the Koran.

If there seem to be cruelties in the teachings of the great religions, then we have not yet fully understood the teachings. Either we have taken something out of context, or we have ignored the historical setting, or we are taking it all too literally. When you look at the world scriptures and try to find out what the founders of the great religions meant, you have to realize that not everything in there can just be taken at face value.

What are the scriptures of the great religions of the world? Where did these scriptures come from? Did God literally read them to people? There are many different opinions on this. My opinion is that they were not revealed in any way that would remove the need for human interpretation. The scriptures of the world are the results of religious experiences by the founders of the great religions. For some religions, like Hinduism, there’s no definite time when the religion started; there are many founders. For some other religions, there’s a definite founder who can be called *the* founder. In either case, we have to take the scriptures of the world to be a record, or a chronicle, of the religious experience of these remarkable people. I don’t think God read off truths word for word. God doesn’t need to do that, because people are capable of having experiences of God on their own! So why would God need to give a literalistic revelation? Another argument against literalistic revelation comes from the theological problem of evil. Believers and atheists alike have noticed that God doesn’t seem capable of fixing the evil in the world. There is some reason why God does not, or cannot, control evil. Philosophers and

theologians have debated this reason for ages. But whatever the reason, if God doesn't or can't control the material world even enough to stop small evils, then what makes us think that God can completely control the accuracy of the writing that occurs during a religious revelation? Controlling the goings-on in the human brain is not an easy task!

We cannot take the scriptures of the world literally. By saying this, I do not mean any disrespect for those scriptures! It's possible that every line in the scriptures contains wisdom—but it's a wisdom that has to be ferreted out. We have to let conscience and reason be our guides.

The original religious scriptures of humanity are of great value because they represent a record of the religious experience of people—sometimes of a nation or a tribe, sometimes of one person. We should try to understand the meaning of these scriptures. We should try to understand what the people who wrote them thought or intuited—what led to the writing of those scriptures. We have to read the scriptures more or less as poetry. We can't assume that anything in there has the same meaning that it would have in ordinary everyday language. Even the most perfect of spiritual teachers has a limited capacity to express profound ideas in words that everyone can understand. So there's always the possibility of *slippage* between the original religious experience and what later followers—even the closest disciples of the original founder—might have heard.

We need to read the scriptures of the world as a record of transcendent experience over the ages. And I think that's another way of saying: as poetry.

Another question is whether a religion, especially an organized religion with a faulty mental picture of God, can lead people to a real knowledge of God. I think it can, but only for certain people. A person of conscience and reason, who grows up in a conventional religion, will not be able to believe certain things in the conventional religion. As a result, this person will come to an understanding that is closer to the truth. For example, someone might be taught in Sunday school to believe in a vengeful supreme being—but might later come to believe in a benevolent supreme being instead. I'm thinking especially of the Old Testament conception of God, which

is a conception quite full of human failings. Could this inadequate idea of God provide any knowledge about the real God? The answer is yes—in a way. The ancients felt that God was vengeful, and that God did certain things that we know today are morally reprehensible. But still, they had a conception of a supreme being—and that put them far ahead of their time in terms of their understanding of the divine. The people at that time assigned ungodly attributes to God, and blamed unholy events on God. They ascribed attributes to God that a truly supreme being would not have. But that's a result of the fact that the human mind has difficulty understanding God, and that the prejudices of one's own era get in the way and taint one's view of God. That does *not* mean that the ancients knew nothing about God. They possessed the idea of a supreme being. They were trying to reach out to the Ultimate—to God. They were having legitimate transcendental experiences. Unfortunately, they viewed those experiences afterwards through the cruelty-ridden lenses of their time. They ended up with an inadequate concept of God. But still, they had a partial intuitive grasp of God. One doesn't need to get everything right to have such a grasp. One only needs to have one's heart pointed in the right direction.

Can one find God or know God through a religion that's been contaminated by human error, as all the living religions have been? Yes—one can find God that way. The best way to find God would be a way that couldn't easily lead to error. It would be a way that doesn't give you a whole bunch of invented things to believe. But most believers do not know of such a way; they simply have an organized religion. As to whether organized religion “works,” in the sense that it leads people closer to God—the answer is, it can lead *some* people to God. It depends largely upon the person. If you take a religion that has a lot of cruelty in its teachings due to human error, and believe that religion uncritically, then you are not going to approach God. (That is how inquisitions and terrorism start.) But if you are a good person at heart, and mix your religion with *conscience*—absorb the teaching but then live by the noble parts—then it's possible that organized religion could bring you mentally close to God.

One good thing about received religious teachings is that people who already have a right conception of value can gain something from the teachings. People who have a conscience, who have some sense of right and wrong, can learn a religion and winnow out the truth from the lies.

Sometimes they can recognize the parts that people have added to the religion—the artificial lies and the artificial distortions. A religious person might love God and their neighbor, but they might also find something cruel in their religion. When they find that cruel part, their sense of decency will say “no”, and the person will say “No, I don’t believe that”—or at least they’ll have reservations. It’s a matter of their moral intuition and kindness winnowing out the lies from the truth. It’s the same way with factually wrong beliefs about the universe—ancient beliefs that we now know are false, like literal seven-day creationism. Some people are brought up in religions that teach creationism, and eventually they start to believe in evolution. They do that because reason leads them to see that evolution is more rationally satisfactory than creationism. But they still believe in God. A lot of people realize that you don’t have to believe in the details of a specific organized religion to believe in God.

Even an imperfect mental image of God could be helpful in understanding God—at least for the person who sincerely believes in and loves that God-image. If you strip away the humanly created cruelties and the humanly added junk, there’s a lot of beauty and goodness in the various world religions’ conceptions of God. Each of these religions puts the accent on a slightly different syllable—sometimes on very different syllables. But it’s all the same word! You can find God in beauty and goodness. Elsewhere I’ve argued that you can find God in nature, or in a human being. Also, poetry and art can lead to truth. I’ve said this elsewhere too. Aesthetic experience, and subjective experiences of the kind that occur in art, can sometimes lead one to spiritual truth. Poetic experience confirms that there’s a great meaning in things. Some philosophical arguments I’ve proposed elsewhere, about intuitions of the ideal, underwrite this same conclusion.

A mental picture of God, the God-image of a religion, is not entirely unreal. At very least, such a God-image is a chunk of information in the human brain. If fictional characters from novels are chunks of information in the brain, then so are fictional characters from folklore, mythology and religion. Thus, even a false God-image is something real—an idea, with a psychological or neurological reality. It might not be a real God, but it is not an utter nothing either.

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If it's possible to find a taste of the divine through nature, through humanity, or through other means, then why couldn't a religious concept of deity (a natural phenomenon in the brain) be an avenue of approach, too? There's really no reason why not.

I'm definitely not recommending that everyone goes out and joins an organized religion. It's a very good thing that organized religion has lost its tight grip on humanity. I think it needs to lose more of its grip! Religion is a personal matter, based on personal feelings, values, intuitions and choices. There is no one established religion that's the correct one to follow, excluding all the others. Organized religion is dangerous if it asks you to turn off your reason and put your beliefs under the authority of an institution. People should think for themselves and feel for themselves! But if a person belongs to an organized religion, and finds that the religion is a source of beauty and goodness, then that religion might help that person to better understand God.

That's my opinion of organized religion, and of all received religious traditions, in a nutshell. If we are careful to interpret everything nonliterally, in the light of conscience and reason, we might find that those traditions can be very uplifting. If you find goodness, beauty and love in a tradition, then that tradition might bring you closer to God. If you follow the cruelty and oppression in the tradition, then following the tradition will have the opposite effect.

Personally, when I think of religion, I don't usually think of organized religion at all. When I use the word "religion," I usually mean the aspiration of the human spirit to understand higher things, and especially the impulse to understand how we are connected to the ultimate meaning and purpose of things. When I think of religion, I don't think of ritual, ceremony, or systems of dogmas. To me, religion is a quest. You don't have to have all the answers to be religious. The opposite of real religion is the kind of narrow, cynical thinking that assumes that there's no meaning in things, that only science is real knowledge, and so forth. Another enemy of real religion is the kind of pseudo-religious thinking that approves of violence, hatred, and cruel unnecessary moral rules. Both of these attitudes are opposite to a real religious attitude. Perhaps some people adopt the cynical attitude because they have strong religious feelings inside, and are

afraid of those feelings.

This is my general view of the religious traditions of humanity. There is a lot of truth in these traditions, but we have to interpret all of them in the light of conscience and reason. By doing this, we can overcome the illusions of literalism and dogmatism, and ferret out the truth revealed in the experiences of the religions' founders, and in the ideas of later thinkers who shared in their insights.