The Idea of God in the Conflict Between Science and Religion

A lightly edited transcript of an impromptu talk by Mark F. Sharlow

A lot of the conflict between believers and unbelievers is caused by a specific problem with the concept of God. Believers and unbelievers usually don’t understand this problem. This problem is the cause of a lot of the conflict between believers and atheists, and of some other conflicts about religion too.

The problem is that the idea of God isn’t a clear idea. The idea of God is more ambiguous and muddy than we usually realize. For example, when people think of God, they often think of God as the creator – the maker of the universe. And then, on the other hand, they often think of God as a being that is an ideal for us – a perfect being; someone (or something) worthy of our highest love. And that’s a different concept of God. It could be that God is both the creator and a perfect being – but it’s also logically possible that there is a being who is a creator and not a perfect being, or who is a perfect being and not a creator. There are different ideas of God.

Religious people usually use more than one concept of God at the same time. They think of God as the creator. They also think of God as being the object of our highest love – and that’s a different idea of God. Many religious people think of God as the most perfect and admirable being in the universe. That isn’t the same idea as the idea of a creator. They believe that the same being is a creator and a perfect being – but those two ideas still are not the same and are not interchangeable.

These are two ideas of God. There are other ideas mixed up with those ideas, too. When
people talk about God, they often think of God as fulfilling both of those ideas at once: God is the Creator, and God is the perfect being. Besides those two ideas, we might also want to say that God is the source of meaning in the universe – the source of meaning and value. Religious people tend to think that people matter, and that people matter because we matter to God. We are “children of God,” as they like to say poetically. God cares about us. Many believers seem to think that this is the reason we really matter. According to this view, the worth of the individual is rooted in God; God is the factor that gives real meaning and value to our lives. A lot of religious people think of God as approving and disapproving of our actions, just as a human moralist might approve and disapprove. But you don’t have to believe that way to think that God is the source of meaning and values. Religious people often feel that without God, the universe would just be a meaningless collection of matter, of things. That feeling points up one of the concepts about God that they have, which is the concept of God as the source of meaning and value.

Religion contains these ideas of God as the source of the universe, and of God as the source of meaning and value, and of God as an ideal being worthy of our greatest love – the greatest possible being, or the most perfect being. There may be other ideas of God as well.

Now the problem is that these different ideas about what God is like tend to run together in many religious people’s minds. These believers talk about God as if they think God is all those things. The trouble is, God might NOT be all those things at once. We have to consider the logical possibility that God is not all of those things. For example, maybe God didn’t literally create the universe. Maybe God is not the literal cause of the universe, but maybe God is the ideal being worthy of our highest love, and the source of all meaning and value. There are various possible combinations of these ideas of God – combinations that might be true.

A lot of the conflict between religion and antireligion is the result of people’s confusion among these different concepts of God. For example, atheists argue that the universe and everything in it has natural causes, and they argue that there’s no intervention by any supernatural being. Then they think they have shown that there is no God. This seems to be the most common of
all atheistic arguments – the most basic atheistic argument. This argument completely ignores the possibility that God exists but did not literally create the universe or anything else. It also ignores the possibility that God is involved in the creation in some tangential way besides direct causation. If this last possibility were true, everything could be a result of natural causes but God still could be involved in creation in some indirect way. People sometimes feel that God “has a hand” in good events, even though they know the natural causes of the events. Maybe they should be thinking of God as being present in that same tangential way in the creation of the universe – so that God is involved with creation, but didn’t literally cause the creation of the universe in place of natural causes.

There are different ideas about what God is like. There could still be a God even if some of the ideas were wrong. There have been religious sects that believed there was a God but didn’t believe that God was the source of our present universe. For example, there were the Gnostics back in the early Christian centuries. They thought there was a God, but they didn’t think that God was the builder of the universe – they thought something else was the source. I’m oversimplifying Gnosticism a bit here; there were different kinds of Gnostics. But some of them thought that way, even though they definitely believed in God. I’m not endorsing Gnosticism here. I’m just using the Gnostics as an example to point out that it’s possible to believe in God without believing that God is the literal creator.

So this is the problem. This is what causes a lot of the conflict between religion and unbelief, and a lot of the supposed conflict between science and religion. (I said the supposed conflict between science and religion.) There may be concepts of God that are just inappropriate based on what we know today – primitive concepts of God that are out of date today. Also, some of the ideas of what God is like can be understood in different ways. These ideas don’t necessarily mean just one thing; they are somewhat vague. For example, if we think of God as creator, does that mean that God started the universe instead of natural causes starting it? Or does that mean that the natural causes that started the universe, whatever they were, somehow were examples of God’s goodness? These are serious questions that we need to ask if we are serious about understanding the God concept instead of either arbitrarily clinging to it or arbitrarily
There are many different ways of thinking about God. The so-called war between science and religion is based mostly on one of these concepts. It’s based on the concept of God as the cause of the physical universe. What’s worse, it’s based on a simplistic version of that concept: a God who is the cause of physical things and events in a way that rules out natural causes. That is the concept of God that causes most of the conflict between science and religion. So maybe God isn’t like that. Maybe that concept just doesn’t fit the real God. If you believe God is an ideal being, then you can believe in that being without believing anything contrary to science.

You can believe there is a being that somehow is present in all the good things that happen. You can believe in this being without believing anything contrary to science. In my earlier writings I showed how you can do this. Others have shown the same thing; earlier philosophers pointed out other ways.

You can believe that God is the ideal being and is the ultimate ground of the dignity and worth of persons, without believing anything contrary to science.

There is more than one idea of God – so if somebody says that they believe in God or they don’t believe in God, it’s important to pin them down on exactly what they mean by “God.” It could be that they accept a concept of God that’s different from the God concept you believe in. We need to be careful about this before we criticize anyone’s ideas about God.

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