Making Peace Between Science and Religion

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

Religious believers could eliminate most of the conflict between science and religion if they would only realize that they don’t necessarily understand what they believe. For example, followers of many religions believe that God created the universe, and created life, and so forth. And they have a mental picture of that creative process that makes it look like God created the universe and life and so forth in much the same way that a human being would create something – like a piece of pottery, for example. This is the traditional picture of how God creates things: God is a supernatural cause, external to nature, who miraculously creates things in nature through intelligent action. But actually that’s just a mental picture. The essential belief for the religions that believe God created the world is that God creates things – the world and things in it. This belief doesn’t require a particular mental picture of how things are created. The believers could adopt a more sophisticated mental picture of creation without contradicting their basic creed.

For example, they could believe that God encompasses the universe – that natural processes are parts of God, or at least that some natural processes are parts of God. That way, they could believe that the source of creation is God without believing that there is a supernatural cause. They also could believe that the things in the universe, and even the universe itself, have natural causes. That wouldn’t rule out God being the creator, because those natural causes themselves could be in God – could be parts of God.

Another possibility is to believe that God indwells in some way in natural processes. That’s
kind of a vague and puzzling way of saying it, but there are different ways that this
“indwelling” could happen. For example, God could be what philosophers call an abstract
entity – that is, something that can have other entities, like ordinary physical objects, as
instances. (In our daily experience, properties and relations of things are abstract entities.)
Then perhaps the creative processes in the universe, the natural processes that bring things into
being, could be instances of God. In this way, they could be in God – encompassed by God.
Then the source of creation would be from within God.

There are other models of divine creation too. I discussed this elsewhere in my writings. There
are other possibilities for the way that God could be a creator without excluding natural causes.
God could be a creator even if everything in the universe has natural causes.

Believers could do a lot to eliminate the conflict between science and religion just by shifting
their mental pictures of the basic concepts in their belief systems. If they believe God created
the world, do they also have to believe the process of creation resembles their mental picture of
supernatural pottery making? Or could divine creation be something subtler – for example,
could the natural creative processes be within God? I’ve explored these possibilities in my
writings. These ideas are not new to philosophers. Perhaps the natural processes that create
things are somehow exemplars of God, or parts of God, or even somehow identical to God or
unified with God. You could shift the mental picture from the simple pottery-making kind of
creation to a mental picture in which the natural processes themselves are in some way
encompassed by God. If believers would stop assuming that their traditional mental picture of
creation is the only possible mental picture, then maybe they could come to an understanding of
creation that would be more reasonable and not in conflict with science.

Similarly with the idea of the soul. People tend to think of the soul as a ghostly being that
inhabits the body. Science has no need for such a being. But why couldn’t we think of the soul
as the set of features of the body, and especially of the brain, that make us what we are? That
would be compatible with the view that there is not a ghost in the machine (as the expression
goes), but the idea of the soul would not lose anything essential. I don’t think religious
believers would lose anything essential. The set of features could even be immortal in some way. It could be embodied in another body later on, either here on Earth or possibly even somewhere else. I’m not saying that this happens, just that it’s a possibility. There could be a soul and an afterlife without any supernatural agents or ghostly substances at all.

What I’m getting at is that if people would abandon the mental pictures that they traditionally have, and realize that they might not fully understand the words and ideas in their religious creeds, and that perhaps another interpretation would be better or at least possible, than a lot of the problems, or perhaps all of the problems, between science and religion would go away.

This approach – the elimination of outdated mental pictures – also could solve a lot of other misunderstandings, like the misunderstandings between religions. It’s just a matter of realizing, when you believe something that’s passed down to you from spiritual teachers, that the way that you have come to understand that teaching is not necessarily right. Even if you believe the teaching is right, you can leave yourself open to revising the way you understand it.

If people would just entertain the possibility that they might not understand their religion, that would eliminate a lot of the problems within religions, and between religions, and between religion and science.

Speaking of problems within religions, consider the moral issues, the issues of conscience and decent feeling, that are raised by the idea of hell. Why do religious people have to believe that hell is a place of eternal torment? Why can’t they just believe that it’s a state of nonexistence, or perhaps a bad state that’s not everlasting? These expressions like “everlasting hell” come down to us from various sources of teaching. But do those ways of speaking really mean that you stay in hell forever, or does it mean that hell itself will always be there – the place, or the state, or whatever hell is will always be there?

Believers need to ask these kinds of questions. You can take the many different religious creeds that people believe in, and by understanding them differently, you can prevent a lot of bad
beliefs and misunderstandings. There are many other examples of this too, besides the ones I just gave.

If believers would just realize that they might not fully understand the creed that they adhere to, and open up the possibility that there could be other understandings of it, the world would become a much better place. Believers also should consider that their theologians might have not gotten everything right. After all, those theologians are only human. They could easily make mistakes. If people would realize that they themselves might not fully understand the basic creed that they adhere to, and that some of the things they have been told about it might not be true, what an enormous difference it would make in the quality of religion that exists in this world.

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