Religion as Poetic Truth

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

How much truth is there in the religions of the world? How many of their beliefs are true?

Before trying to answer that question, I’d like to mention an example that shows how intricate the question of truth can sometimes be.

Think about poetry. The poet Carl Sandburg once wrote a poem titled “Fog,” in which he used these lines:

The fog comes  
on little cat feet.

Now, is Sandburg’s statement true or not? When you think about the fog coming in over a coastline, as in Sandburg’s poem, do you find those lines true? The answer to that question could be “no,” because there are no cat feet on the fog – no matter how hard you look under the fog, you won’t find cat feet. Or the answer could be “yes,” because those lines describe exquisitely a certain experience of what it feels like when you’re in a place where the fog is coming in. You know what I mean, if you’ve ever been there – that strange hushing, that strange softness that your surroundings develop. It’s a subjective experience, but it’s a real part of your awareness.

So, are Sandburg’s lines true? The answer is yes or no, depending on whether what you mean is
literal truth – truth of the kind that a scientist would consider true – or poetic truth. If you mean literal truth, then the lines are not true (of course). But if you think of the lines as possibly describing an experience, as being poetically true in that sense, then they are true. Those lines do describe something real – a real subjective feature of your awareness and of your surroundings – even though there really aren’t any feet under the fog.

I’d like to propose that we think of most of the beliefs of the major religions of the world in this way. These beliefs might not be literally true, but at least in some cases – at least for the central beliefs shared by most religions – they might be true in some other way. They might point to a significant truth, even though they aren’t literally true.

The prime belief of this sort would be belief in God. Now, some people think of God as a being who created the universe and who created everything in the universe, including living species, by supernatural means, by just bringing them into being (boom! there they are), instead of natural causes creating the things in the universe. If this is exactly how you define God, then there is no God. Why? Because things have natural causes. Many things have been found to have natural causes, and biological species, as one prime example, have been found to have natural causes through evolution. So if that’s what you mean by “God,” then there is no God. But the answer is different if what you mean by “God” is a divine presence in the world, some entity or feature of reality that can be regarded as divine – which means, at a minimum, that it’s worthy of our highest admiration and love, and somehow represents and embodies all that is good. If that’s what you mean by God, then there could well be a God. I’ve argued in some of my writings that there is a being like that. It’s what philosophers would call an “abstract entity” – not a ghostly spiritual substance, but an entity that can be known to us as a feature of the world and of things in the world. This entity is a suitable focus for our highest love, because it is shown or manifested in all that is beautiful and good, including the people we love. It is not just some force or some object devoid of spiritual qualities. Instead, it has enough mindlike features that we can regard it as a “someone” instead of a mere “something.” However, it is not what we usually think of as a “person.” I know I’m being rather vague and sketchy here, but I’ve spelled it all out before, in my writings on the subject of God.
There also are other conceptions of God that rational philosophers have come up with over the centuries. Some of these concepts of God can’t be ruled out scientifically, because they don’t lead to any testable predictions at all. For that matter, we can’t rule them in by scientific means either. But even without scientific reasons, there may well be other rational reasons for accepting some of them.

The bottom line is this: if you just look at the belief that there is a God, a supreme being that’s worthy of our highest love and that embodies all that’s good, that belief could well be true – provided that you don’t adopt a mental picture of that being that makes it too literalistic or simplistic. When you say “being,” it might not mean what you might habitually picture, which is a humanoid being. When somebody says that there’s a supreme being, it’s easy to start picturing some sort of a humanoid, personal being. Belief in God conceived of that way – which unfortunately is the way that a lot of religious believers conceive it – probably isn’t true. But belief in a more refined kind of supreme being might be true.

The mental picture of God that most religions promote should be regarded in the same way as a line of poetry that expresses a significant truth even though it isn’t literally true. When they say “there is a God, and God is all-powerful and all-knowing and created us all, and God is a person,” those beliefs could be perfectly correct in some poetical way, even if some of them aren’t literally true. And after understanding how we can read them poetically, we may come to understand that there is such a thing as God, but that God doesn’t fit the God-image of conventional religions. For example, consider the belief that God is a person. There might not actually be a supreme person. But what there could be is a supreme presence, or feature of the world of some kind, that sometimes becomes apparent to us as if it were a person – that seems like a person sometimes; that comes close to being a person. So the idea that there is a supreme being who is a person could be regarded as a metaphorical, poetical, or image-filled way of saying that there is this supreme divine or sublime presence in the universe. And the idea that God created the universe – God made the world. What becomes of that? Well, if it means that God is the cause of the universe instead of natural causes, then it’s not literally true as far as I
know. We don’t know what caused the universe. We don’t know where the universe came from. Most likely it wasn’t someone fashioning it with their hands, or with whatever they have instead of hands. That’s very probably not the way it happened. But even if it didn’t happen that way, the natural processes that brought the universe into existence still could be a reflection or instance of the greatest possible good – because those processes are responsible for all the good there is. Without those unknown processes that created the universe, there would be nothing good. So the source of the universe is an exemplar or showing of the supreme good. Whatever caused the world, even if it’s just something dumb and inanimate, is the source of all good. Of course, it’s also the source of everything else, including things that are neutral or bad – but if you’re in a mood where you can perceive it as the source of all good, then you can perceive the divine in it. So in a way, the processes that started the universe can be thought of as instances or manifestations of the divine. I don’t mean some sort of a literal, physical outpouring of God. What I mean is that the cause of the universe could be regarded as a kind of reflector of the divineness that exists in the universe. The abstract entity that represents all goodness is also found in the processes that created physical existence itself, whatever those processes might be. So in a broad poetical way, it’s true that God made the universe – even if no one “made” the universe, literally speaking.

I could analyze and unwrap a lot of other religious beliefs in this way. I have done that to some extent already in my writings. But the point that I’m making right now is that you don’t have to say that the religions of the world are false and are baloney and should be rejected, just because many of their beliefs aren’t literally true. There are other ways for a belief to point to truth besides being literally true. In the poetry example that I gave earlier, the statement that the poet made isn’t literally true. It isn’t necessary for someone to go and look under the fog to see if the statement is true – because we know the statement isn’t literally true. We’ve had enough experience with fog to know that that statement isn’t true, if it is taken literally like a normal scientific proposition. But the poem is quite true if it is taken as a psychological – or maybe I should use the philosophers’ term, “phenomenological” – proposition, describing the experience of what it’s like to be there when the fog comes in – the experience of what it’s like for us. And of course that experience is based in part on the physical characteristics of the fog, which a
scientist, a meteorologist or a physicist, could study. So the poet was describing something quite real, even though it was a psychological experience he was describing. A psychological experience like this is a happening in the human brain. The brain certainly is real, and if there’s a fact that the brain perceives things a certain way, then that’s a real fact. So when the poet described a subjective experience, he was describing reality – but he was not describing it literally. I would suggest that we consider taking most religious beliefs in this way. The poetical meaning of a religious belief probably is what that belief originally meant! When the poetically inspired people who founded the religions made statements like “there is a God who fashioned the world,” they created magnificent images that became part of the world’s religions. I would suggest that the people who created the original teachings of the great religions of the world were basically poets – they were poetically inspired. And by that I don’t mean “inspired” in the usual theological sense. People talk about being “inspired” by God, as if God were tapping you on the shoulder and talking in your ear. But maybe that doesn’t happen either. That’s one of the things that probably can’t be taken literally. I mean “inspired” in the sense that we speak of a poet or artist being “inspired.” Or an inventor being “inspired” when an idea bubbles up from the subconscious mind and changes the world.

I would suggest that the people who founded the great religions of the world, whether they were definite known founders or whether they were mythical founders who actually represented a current of thought that already existed, were doing something akin to art and poetry. Religion is not like science – it’s more like poetry. And poetry is not just fantasy or decoration. As the Roman poet Ovid said, “poetry speaks truth on earth” – and we should remember this when trying to understand the world's religions. We can take religion to be true, but not literally true.

You can analyze other religious beliefs along the lines that I used to analyze the God belief just now. I won’t go into a whole lot of detail here; I’ve done so elsewhere to some extent. My point now is just that we don’t have to choose between religion being literally true or being baloney that has to be discarded. We can embrace religion, love it, believe it, and accept it, and at the same time realize that the statements of belief don’t mean what they at first seem to mean. The statement that there is a God doesn’t have to mean that there’s a personal, humanoid being
who fashioned the world in a simplistic way. It can mean that there’s a supreme being of a much loftier kind. And other beliefs don’t have to have their simplistic, obvious meanings either. They could mean something much deeper and more poetical.

What fanatical religious believers and most atheists have in common is that they interpret religion literalistically. The atheists seem to be literalists just as much as the extreme fundamentalists are. People usually think of fundamentalists as being the religious literalists. Well, the atheists are religious literalists too. They take belief in God in the most simplistic and literalistic possible way, and then they say “you can’t possibly believe that, har har har.” They try to prove that there’s something irrational about the belief. Well, there is something irrational about it, because they’re taking it too literally. They are saying, in effect, that the poem is worthless unless there really are feet under the fog.

I recommend that we drop that literalistic approach, realize that we don’t necessarily understand what the main religious beliefs of the world are telling us, admit the possibility that we have to understand them in a way deeper than literal truth, and then go from there. If we can re-understand religion in this way, we’re not just watering it down. Instead, we are getting back to the original intent of the teachings that made up the religions. The people who started these traditions probably based them on poetical experiences. They may have made statements that were poetical statements to begin with. Then their followers eventually took the statements too literally. (Maybe some of the founders themselves even started to take their own pronouncements too literally after poetic inspiration faded. Who knows?) The greatest teachings of the great religions of the world must be understood in a way that’s more sophisticated than just a literal interpretation. If we understand them in that sophisticated way, we’re not being dishonest or wiggling out of the teachings. We’re not running away from the teachings. Instead, we’re running toward them! We’re getting back closer to the original poetic experiences and meanings that gave rise to the teachings in the first place. What’s more, if we make this move toward a more poetic interpretation, we also probably will be able to resolve the endless dispute between believers and atheists. The believers will find out that what they believe is deeper and even more inspiring than the mental picture they held all along. The
atheists will realize that they have been knocking down a straw man instead of understanding the real essence of religion. This change will lead to kinder and more humane types of religion that are closer to the good itself, however you wish to conceive that good.

The real essence of religion is not against reason or science. It's compatible with science, compatible with rationality, and rationally demonstrable to some extent through philosophical reasoning. By getting back to the core poetical meanings of the religions of the world, we should be able to end the seemingly endless dispute between believers and unbelievers, and come to a common ground that represents a truly constructive and rational form of belief – without losing the essential poetic impulse that has caused people over the ages to search for something higher.

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