How do religions start?

I’m not talking about little cults and splinter sects. I’m talking about the world’s great religious traditions. You can agree or disagree with these traditions, but in either case all of them have a few things in common. All of these major traditions have a conception of a supreme spiritual reality of some kind. Some of them call it “God,” while others conceive of it more impersonally and call it by other names like “Brahman”, “Shunyata” or “Tao.” All of these traditions, in their better forms, foster art, music, and systems of ideas that have the feel of the transcendent, the poetic, and the sublime about them.

How do these great traditions start? Many causes, both noble and ignoble, contribute to their birth and growth. However, it’s clear that one cause consists of the transcendent experiences that people sometimes have. By transcendent experiences, I don’t mean superficial so-called “religious” experiences like hearing an odd noise and thinking it’s the voice of a devil, or seeing an alleged supernatural being in a visible physical form. These superficial experiences have simple psychological explanations and don’t have any real religious significance. What I am speaking of instead is real transcendent experience – the kind had by enraptured poets who feel the unity of everything, or who seem to find a supreme good behind all things. Experiences like these form the working material of spiritual contemplatives.

You can call these experiences whatever you like – poetic, mystical (a confusing word that
means different things to different people), or simply transcendent. Students of humanistic psychology might prefer to characterize them as “peak experiences.” By any name, these experiences are crucial to the formation of religious traditions.

Are these transcendent experiences reliable? Do they produce real knowledge? Do they really teach us anything? Later in this talk I’ll answer these questions. For now I’ll continue describing my view of how religions start.

The world’s great religions began because certain thinkers had transcendent experiences. Among these thinkers were the individuals later recognized as the founders of the religions – the prophets, Buddhas, and so forth.

I’m not ruling out the possibility that the founders might have had other, more dubious experiences too, like visions of angels with physical forms. The records suggest that they sometimes did have these experiences. On the other hand, perhaps they were just using those vivid pictorial forms to explain something abstract in a language people could understand. Who knows? However, even if they did have those other experiences, that doesn’t invalidate the real transcendent experiences that they also had – the abstract, qualitative experiences.

After having these transcendent experiences, these teachers tried to teach others what they had learned from the experiences. The teacher attracted disciples and followers, who in turn tried to spread the word to others. And thus a religion was born.

Why did these teachers attract so many followers? Not just because of irrational and stupid reasons, like the memetic phenomena or “natural dualism” that the New Atheists love to gas off about. These dumb reasons may have played a part in the spread of the teachings, but there also were smart reasons. One smart reason was that the followers also had transcendent experiences – or at least had feelings and impressions that were the beginnings of such experiences. People felt the stirrings of transcendent experience in themselves. They heard about a teaching that seemed to match those feelings – that seemed to be talking about the same things they were
feeling. This made it much easier for them to believe the teaching.

Even if we consider religions as sets of memes, there can be many different reasons why those memes take hold in people. One reason is that the religion speaks to important feelings that people find in themselves – including feelings of the transcendent, the poetical, and the sublime. The religion seems to make sense out of these feelings, to explain the feelings. This is one of the reasons the religion takes hold and spreads. There may be other, less noble reasons too, but this is at least part of the reason. The spread of memes is not always a pathetic mechanical process. Sometimes there can be good reasons to catch a meme.

What happens as the religion spreads? The followers of the original teacher inform others about the teaching. Some of those others become followers too. Then these new followers recruit other followers, who recruit still other followers, and so forth.

Unfortunately, these followers seldom have the same depth of transcendent experience as the original teacher. Some of them have stirrings of these experiences, but others may join up for reasons having nothing to do with transcendent experience. Unless most of the followers have the same or better experiences than the founder (and that is rare), a lot of error and distortion quickly gets into the mix. People add their own misunderstandings, guesses, and biases to the teaching. After the original teacher is gone, there is no effective way to correct the errors. Eventually, people start using the founder’s perceived “authority” to foist off all sorts of superstition and nonsense on the world.

Because they have lost touch with the original experiences, people begin to believe the teaching in its new, distorted, contaminated form, on the basis of the authority associated with the teacher’s reputation. In other words, they begin to believe the teaching on “faith.” The original experience has been lost. The ritual, art and ideas of the teaching may still contain strong hints of this experience – but those hints are not enough to let most people recover the original teaching.
At this point, faith has replaced experience as the basis of the religion. This is the point at which bad things start to happen in earnest. The original poetical experiences of Jesus and his disciples could not have led to the Inquisition. A corrupted version of Christianity, passed down through many generations without the support of real experience, did lead to the Inquisition.

Before going any further, I’d like to say a few words about faith. This is a controversial subject, so I’d like to make my position clear – at the risk of offending atheists and religious believers alike.

Can faith be a good thing? Is faith ever a reliable path to knowledge? In many cases, no – but in some cases, yes. It depends on what kind of faith you have in mind.

Faith can be blind faith, in which the believer accepts assumptions based on authority alone. (It would be more accurate to call this type of belief “authoritarian belief” instead of “faith.”) On the other hand, faith can be informed faith, which rejects beliefs that trespass against reason, science, or human kindness.

Also, faith can have different relationships to fact. Faith can involve accepting an assumption uncritically – taking the belief to be fact. On the other hand, faith can mean taking an assumption and deciding to live your life as if that assumption were true. Honest, self-aware believers, conscious of their own limitations, will recognize that they don’t have proof of their faith-based beliefs. These believers know that their beliefs aren’t “facts” in the normal sense of the word. That is, they aren’t proven facts. Instead, they are working assumptions.

Faith that is informed, in the above sense, and that is taken as a working assumption, cannot lead anyone to evil behavior. Faith of this sort cannot override normal morality and cannot conflict with science or reason. (If you don’t know why, review the previous two paragraphs.) It doesn’t pretend to be entirely rational, but it isn’t anti-rational either. It doesn’t even claim to be on a par with ordinary facts, because the believer knows it isn’t proven. All the standard atheist arguments against faith don’t apply to this kind of faith.
There are other kinds of “faith” that don't really involve beliefs at all – like having faith in yourself, or in another person, such as your spouse. In this case, “faith” is a kind of personal confidence; it is not the same as holding an assumption or believing a proposition. We can ask whether the great religious teachers who supposedly advocated “faith” might actually have been talking about this kind of faith, not belief in doctrines. This kind of faith, whether justified or not, is a separate topic. In the rest of this talk I'll discuss the kind of faith that involves believing, or living by, beliefs or assumptions.

Some forms of faith are positive and beneficent, but a religion based on faith alone still isn’t the best possible form of religion. Faith, even in its best and most noble forms, is at most a stand-in for personal transcendent experiences. Ideally, religion would be based on experiences of this kind, interpreted with the help of philosophic reason. Religion today, on the whole, is not like this.

Religion is not living up to its potential. What can we do about this?

First of all, we must not throw out religion. Despite all its faults, religion still contains great truths. For many people, the art, ritual, and idealism of religion provide them with their only glimpse of the transcendent. We must not cut them off from this by eliminating religion.

However, we must purify religion. This means all the religions of the world – not just other people’s religions, but especially your own.

We – that means believers and unbelievers alike – must discard beliefs that contradict science or reason, and try to reinterpret the remaining religious teachings properly. In a way, a religious teaching is a system of placeholders. It contains words and puzzling ideas that meant something to the original teachers, but that we don’t understand today. We should try to figure out what they might have meant. For example, is there anything in reality that answers to Jesus’ description of “God”? Maybe it will be different from the God image that Christians hold today.
– but if it could have been what Jesus was talking about, then it is a possible meaning of the term “God.” (This is the case even if the fit with Jesus’ teachings isn’t perfect, but just covers the essential points. After all, we don’t know how much trouble Jesus might have had in describing what he experienced.)

In this way, we can attempt to make rational interpretations of religious words, ideas, and doctrines, and see how much of a religion might have some truth to it. This is one way to try to recover the original insights of the founders, along with any correct insights added by later thinkers, and thereby make religion back into what it should be, instead of leaving it as the outdated cesspool of superstition that it sometimes becomes.

I have been speaking of transcendent experiences. The big question is, do transcendent experiences produce real knowledge?

The answer to this question is “yes – sometimes.” We have to be very careful in deciding what these experiences tell us. First, to be useful, the experiences must be real transcendent experiences of the sort I described above. They must not be just hallucinations or mistakes, like the “experiences” of a devilish noise or a visible spirit. Instead, they must be experiences that tell us about the abstract and qualitative aspects of things. I’ve argued elsewhere, for example in my book *God: the Next Version*, that some experiences of this sort yield real knowledge of certain kinds. Such qualitative experiences don’t reveal the existence of new concrete things, like supposed angels with visible forms. However, these experiences do reveal features of the real world that we don’t ordinarily notice. They can reveal whole new ways of looking at the world.

One of the features that these experiences can disclose is a basic unity and interconnectedness of all things. Many poets and contemplatives have reported back on this. They come back from their experiences with the definite awareness that “all is one.” This doesn’t mean that everything is the same as everything else. It means that there is an underlying unity among things.
Another feature that these experiences can disclose is the “emptiness” of all things – their transience and dependence, not mere nonexistence.

Still another feature is an essential goodness or beauty in things, which, once experienced, can inspire feelings of supreme love – of having beheld perfection.

Normally we don’t notice these features of the world. Even if we think about them, we don’t notice and feel them personally. To borrow a metaphor from the contemplatives, we are “asleep” to these features of the world. During transcendent experience, we “wake up” to these features. We perceive the world in a much more comprehensive way than we usually do.

What do these transcendent experiences really show? They reveal new aspects of the world around us. They might not reveal new objects or substances, but they do reveal what philosophers call “abstract entities” – that is, properties and attributes of things, and relationships among things. Not new, supernatural things, but features of the world, arguably natural (though perhaps not detectable by strictly scientific means).

Could these experiences reveal more than abstract features? Could they reveal items that are more concrete, like beings that can actively influence our lives? Perhaps we can’t rule it out – but there’s no good reason to think they do. A being that could causally influence us – cause events in our lives, or even place thoughts in our brains – probably would, in principle, be subject to scientific confirmation. We could not verify the reality of such a being through inner experiences alone. However, abstract items are a different matter. We already know that we can become aware of abstract entities without the abstract entities “doing” anything to us. Take mathematics as an example. In mathematics, we become aware of abstract entities like numbers, geometric spaces, and sets – but not because those items stimulate our senses or reach in and ping our brains! Instead, our brains form representations of the abstract items, and our knowledge of those items comes from information processing in our own brains. Concrete physical objects are knowable because they can stimulate our senses (either directly or through...
instruments). Abstract entities are knowable because our brains can represent them. We don’t dismiss mathematical knowledge just because it isn’t sensory knowledge.

I’m not trying to draw any sweeping analogies between transcendental experiences and mathematics. Clearly they are different. However, they have one feature in common: both of them reveal abstract entities to us, and both of them do it without any causal interaction between the abstract entities and our brains.

It’s difficult to see how the spiritual realities revealed by transcendent experiences could be anything other than abstract. If it is something you can “know in your heart” – in other words, by information processing within your own mind instead of through sensory knowledge – then what else could it be besides an abstract entity, a feature of the world instead of a concrete thing?

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