

Religion and Falsifiability

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Falsifiability is not necessarily a popular word in religion or even in culture. The home of falsifiability is science. In science, in order for a proposition to be sustained, it must be open to scrutiny and critique. A scientific claim must be capable of being proven wrong even if and when it is right.

The definition of falsifiability is the capacity of a proposition, statement, or theory to be proven wrong. In science, if I say something that can't be proven wrong, then I'm not really saying anything. If I say there is a goblin living under my bed that only I can see, it's not really possible to test that claim. You can look under my bed and say that there is nothing there, but my persistent belief continues. My belief is not falsifiable; it's just a belief.

Santa Clause fits this description well. People believe in Santa Claus as the spirit of the season, but the power of belief in that spirit makes Santa unfalsifiable no matter how many times we say Santa Claus, or the Easter Bunny for that matter, does not exist.

Falsifiability comes from Karl Popper's book, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. He wrote the book in German in 1934 and it was translated and published in English in 1959. Not everyone agrees with Popper, and science also progresses on the principle of verification. But Popper's point is important: what we verify needs to be available to falsification. If there is no chance to prove something wrong, then there is no way to say that it's true. Even if we can't find a way to prove something wrong, it has to be open to the possibility.

Evolution is an example. In theory, evolution can be proven wrong. In practice, it has been impossible to come up with better ways to explain the natural history of our planet. Still, evolution remains a theory. It is a very powerful theory because it has survived about 150 years of attempted falsification. Relativity is another such theory that has past every attempt at falsification.

I am not a scientist. My only point is to stress why falsifiability is important in science. I want to underline that scientific truth claims are ironic in nature: they are credible provided they are falsifiable. Or, they are true provided they can be false.

Now comes the religion part. What about religion? Does falsifiability apply to religion? Philosophers of religion have loved this question, and have loved to answer this question with both a yes and a no. On the yes side are those who will say that evolution does indeed prove creation is false. Or, in another way, the theory of creation is falsifiable and has been

demonstrated to be false. We can verify that the earth is about 4.5 billion years old and this verification falsifies the claim that the earth was created about 6,000 years ago. We also have lots of proof about how things evolve over time. That also falsifies the claim that things were created as is. So, creation as a theory is falsifiable and has been proven false. Evolution is also falsifiable but has not been proven false.

There is, however, a problem with claiming that creation like evolution is falsifiable. The problem is that on this level creation and evolution are both accepted as science. So, philosophers of religion will also answer our question with a “no.” Creation is not subject to falsification because it is a myth that belongs to a religious belief system. In other words, creation-language is a separate language-game from scientific evolution. It’s not possible to apply the rules of science to a myth.

Here is where it gets complicated and somewhat confusing. If creation is presented as a scientific theory - like the State of Kansas occasionally does - then it does have to be subject to scientific rules. However, creation is a myth and cannot be falsified. That’s why it’s not science. It is an unfalsifiable belief. So, I might very well say with all evidence to the contrary that the earth is 6,000 years old, and I might claim that contrary evidence is an impression God planted in the creation 6,000 years ago. In this claim, which creationists amazingly make, we can see that the appeal is to the supernatural as a way to explain the natural. Once we start using the supernatural to explain the natural, we have left the realm of science and stepped off the field of falsifiability.

The only area where falsifiability applies to religion is where religion offers a natural explanation of something. When religion offers a supernatural explanation, it is no longer playing with the rules of science. Creation is a supernatural explanation, so it is wrong to pose creation as a theory to be considered with evolution. Creation is a myth, and the right way to look at it is as a story, asking what is the point not what’s the proof. On the other hand, the Q theory - the theory that the Gospel of Matthew and Luke have a common lost source - is a natural explanation about the composition of Christian gospels. That is a falsifiable theory; it has survived about 200 years of critique, and it does count as science.

Where does this get us? We are saying that the study of religion holds elements of science, such as critical theories about the origins and composition of religions, but religious claims are not science. Confusion results when the study of religion is equated with religious beliefs. To progress, we need to separate these two elements of religion.

First, we can indicate that several conclusions in the study of religion are falsifiable and have survived the process of falsifiability over a long haul. These conclusions are as close to

religious “facts” as we can get. There were written sources that predated the Torah, for example, and that were pulled together and edited to produce the Torah. Moses did not write the Torah. There was a Q Sayings Gospel from which Christian writers copied to compose the Christian gospels. There are alternative versions of the book of Isaiah; there are many more gospels than the four found in the Christian Bible. These claims are all based on natural research; they are all falsifiable; none makes any supernatural claim.

The second point is that falsifiable theories are not the value of religion. The value of religion is mythic, and in our technical world, it is hard to explain why and how a myth has value. However, we can talk about creation and mean that we ought to value the earth as a gift. This mythic language can help the cause of environmental concern and action against climate change. Mythic language gives life feeling; it gives a sense of compassion and vitality. We could say that we are all children of God. We don't have to believe in God to allow this mythic language help us feel the interconnection of all life. We can even celebrate Easter and know that this myth (whether it's the Bunny or Jesus) helps us invest hope in our lives and in the world. The value of religion is not that it's true; the value of religion is that it's myth.

Now, just like falsification has irony in science, myth has irony in religion. The irony is that even though myths talk about things that never happened, myths make a big difference in what does happen. Myths are how we value life. Myths teach us how to value things, how to act with respect, how to be in a community where we feel at home. Myths gone wrong are among the most dangerous things in the world. I would say that the United States myth has gone wrong, and equally the Russian myth has lost its way. The world is a more dangerous place because the myths that guide the acts of big nations have fallen into corrupt hands, that is, hands that fail to understand what the myth is. The American myth is the myth about being a light to the nations, being about equal opportunity, and being about peaceful co-existence within a melting pot of nations. True, it has never lived up to these mythic ideals, but presently it seems to have forgotten that these ideals even exist. When a myth goes wrong, it can be dangerous for a nation and for the world.

This leads to my final point. While the study of religion can benefit from falsification, religion itself is actually about reification. Reification means making something real; in the case of religion, it means making something real out of nothing. Myths like God or the risen Jesus Christ or the divine origin of the Torah and the Qur'an are all metaphysical beliefs. They are supernatural myths that do not describe reality. They do not exist. They are nothing. But religious traditions bring these myths into existence out of nothing. Religion reifies the nothingness of myth as a practice of life. In the earliest expressions of Christianity, the risen Christ was not a factual event. To say that Christ rose from the dead

was not to describe natural reality. It was rather to adopt a way of life. It was to live within the reality of Christ or to live in the spirit of Christ. That act was the reification of the resurrection. Being of the Christ nature is being Christian. Christianity is the reification of the Christ myth. Similar things can be said of other religious traditions. Judaism is the reification of the Torah myth as Islam is that of the Quranic myth. Buddhism often talks about the Buddha nature, which is the reification of the Buddha myth. Religion is about reification, and that is both its value and its danger.

What we have to worry about today is how religion is being reified. It can help to remember that religion is a myth; it is the creation of something out of nothing. This insight could make religion important, even today and possibly even more important than ever. It is possible to argue that the recovery of myth - the recovery of things that never happened - as the reification of value - the recovery of myth as myth - could change the world.