

Rejoinder to Mawson

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Abstract: In reply to Mawson, I accept that each and every religion includes the self-referential belief that it is true. I seek to show that this admission does not entail that the rest of the beliefs of religions track the truth or that they are not better explained through the religion-as-fiction hypothesis. If that hypothesis is well-grounded, it gives us good reason not to take arguments for religions' non-self-referential beliefs seriously.

Tim Mawson argues that showing that religion is not truth-oriented amounts to showing that it is false, contrary to my contention that 'saying that no religion exists *because* it is true does not entail that no religion is true'.¹ He goes on to infer, also contrary to what I claimed, that we don't have to discover whether religions are truth-oriented before going on to investigate specific claims about the supernatural. This is the argument he uses.

- (1) No religion exists because it is true.
- (2) Every religion asserts that it exists because it is true.
- (3) Therefore, no religion is true.

The argument is valid. I provisionally asserted the first premise. I see no reason to object to the second premise. Hence, I am committed to the conclusion that all religions are certainly false instead of the defeasible conclusion I wanted, namely, that all religions are probably false.

Fortunately, I can easily avoid the commitment by reforming my position. In the context, 'religion' means 'set of religious beliefs'. I can avoid the commitment by rephrasing my claim to exclude self-referential religious beliefs. The best argument Mawson could advance would then be as follows.

- (1) No set of religious beliefs that excludes self-referential religious beliefs is accepted because the members of the set are true.
- (2) Every set of religious beliefs includes the self-referential religious belief that the members of the set are accepted because they are true.

- (3) Therefore, no set of religious beliefs that excludes self-referential religious beliefs is true.

This argument is invalid. The undesirable commitment has vanished. I said that if religions are not truth-oriented, then they are all probably false – but could be true. I should have said that if religions are not truth-oriented, then non-self-referential religious beliefs are probably false but could be true, and at least one self-referential religious belief is certainly false.

My error is a peccadillo. I suppose I ought to have been more pedantic. Mawson has committed a more serious sin. If a religion *qua* set of religious beliefs were a conjunction, the false self-referential religious belief would be enough to prove false any non-truth-oriented religion that included it. It would be enough because the falsity of a single conjunct infects the entire conjunction. Surely, however, it is the *other* conjuncts that really interest us. The conjunction would be false even if *they* were all *true*. Hence, rather than addressing the important issues, Mawson diverts our attention from them.

Even if my position isn't reformed, it is still important whether religions are truth-oriented. It is still the case that the more evidence we have that religions are inventions rather than discoveries, the less seriously we have to take the arguments of their adherents. If religions are inventions, the pro-religious arguments of the religious are probably inventions as well. In fact, instead of undermining my unreformed position, Mawson may have strengthened it. After all, if religions are certainly false rather than merely probably false, we seem to have more reason to suspect that any pro-religious argument advanced by the religious is faulty. It is for this reason that no-one is intellectually obliged to take the religious seriously unless it is shown that they are trying to get at the truth. We can't run this *ad hominem* against non-believers who argue for positive conclusions about the supernatural but neither the hostile nor the indifferent are liable to come up with anything positive. Therefore, for all practical purposes, it must be shown that religion is truth-oriented before we are obliged to examine pro-religious arguments. Mawson has not undermined this conclusion.

Mawson takes me to be asserting the truth of what I call the religion-as-fiction hypothesis. In fact, all I claim is that it is a better explanation of religion than the religion-as-non-fiction hypothesis. Even this conclusion is tentative. A more thorough investigation of the characteristics of religion might lead us to conclude that it is, after all, truth-oriented. This means that if my conclusion is unpalatable, there is a rational way to respond to it.

Notes

1. Brian Zamulinski 'Religion and the pursuit of truth', *Religious Studies*, 39 (2003), 44.