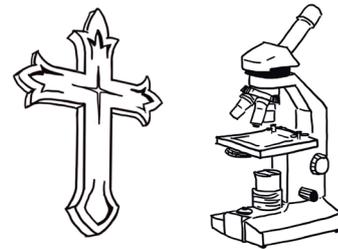


SCIENCE AND RELIGION – HUMANISM AND RELIGION

QUESTIONS FOR SCIENCE

In the past, there were many questions about the world that human beings were unable to answer without resorting to supernatural or religious explanations. Today we have scientific answers to many of these questions.



A PRE-SCIENTIFIC EXPLANATION

Thunderstorms are caused by the god Thor when he waves his hammer in anger.

Disease is caused by being placed under a curse by a witch.

Animals and plants appear so well designed for their environment because they were created by god.

A SCIENTIFIC EXPLANATION

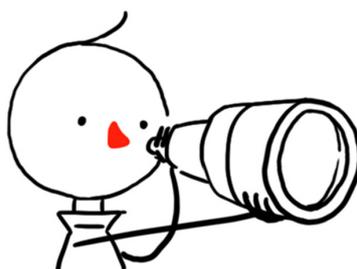
Thunderstorms are caused by the movement of water droplets in the atmosphere that build up electrical charge.

Disease is caused by harmful bacteria and viruses invading the body.

Animals and plants appear so well designed for their environment because they have evolved through the process of natural selection in a way that means those best suited to the environment survive.

The **scientific revolution** in the 16th and 17th centuries created tension between science and religion. Science began to shrink the need for religion to answer questions about the world. Some people are still drawn to non-scientific explanations. However, humanists, like many people today, place their trust in science to answer questions about how the world works.

Scientists sometimes make mistakes. Science does not give us certainty. But it is a process that keeps testing its results to see if they are true. It is self-correcting.



“Science is one of the very few human activities – perhaps the only one – in which errors are systematically criticised and fairly often, in time, corrected. That is why we can say that, in science, we often learn from our mistakes, and why we can speak clearly and sensibly about making progress there.”

KARL POPPER,
philosopher

Some religious beliefs can be tested by science. For example, whether prayer makes a difference or not can be scientifically tested.

QUESTIONS SCIENCE MIGHT ANSWER IN THE FUTURE

Science hasn't answered everything. However, a humanist approach is to keep looking for **natural explanations** rather than turn to religion or the supernatural for answers. Many questions for which we once relied on religious explanations have now been answered by science. This does not prove that there are no supernatural forces, but many humanists believe it gives us good reason to doubt them, and to keep looking for natural explanations for any events we don't yet understand. Some humanists will speak of the need for **rational patience** when it comes to questions we are currently unable to answer. It is possible that we may never answer some questions with science (we might simply not be intelligent enough), but that does not mean that they don't have scientific answers or that we must resort to non-scientific explanations.

QUESTIONS BEYOND THE REACH OF SCIENCE?

Some people claim that there are questions that science cannot answer. There might be **historical questions** (about what happened in the past), **moral or ethical questions** (about how we should live and treat other people), and **'ultimate' questions** (about meaning and purpose, and why things are the way they are). Does this mean that humanists need to accept that there is still a space for religion or the supernatural to answer questions about the world and our place in it?

Humanists believe that we do not need to turn to religion for answers to those questions science cannot answer. Instead we can turn to philosophy, literature, the arts, and history, for support. These can all support our understanding.

The division between religion and science can then perhaps be better framed as a choice between religion and humanism. Humanism applies the resources of both science and the humanities – of human thought and experience without the need for religion. It is an attempt to answer our questions and solve our problems relying on the resources of this world alone.

The humanist approach to knowledge =

science *and* philosophy, literature, the arts, history, and human experience

Although science can't answer ethical questions, we don't need to turn to religion for answers.

We can use our understanding of shared human values and needs, and our natural capacity for reason and empathy.

These can help us to work out what supports the welfare and happiness of human beings and other animals.

When it comes to questions about the truth of events found in holy books we should look for additional evidence, just as we would for any historical claim.

Some people ask 'Why does the universe exist?' looking for a purpose or intention. But the fact that people can ask the question doesn't mean that such a purpose exists. When looking at the natural world we should ask 'how' questions rather than 'why' questions. We can explain how mountains are formed. We don't need to also ask why and look for a further reason. People who believe in a benevolent god might ask 'Why do bad things happen?', but for someone who doesn't believe in a god, there is no reason beyond the scientific explanation of the way the world is. People often look for intention when there is none.



QUESTIONS

- Why do humanists believe we should always look for natural explanations?
- Do you think the human resources of this world (science, the humanities, and the arts) are enough to answer our questions or do we also need religion?