

6.10

Science versus religion in the modern world

The separation of science and religion

One of the reasons given for science being favoured over religion in the modern world is the fact that the world has become secular, that is, non-religious. Fewer people attend a place of worship on a regular basis, or bring their children up within a religious faith. In the Middle Ages, the reverse was true: religion dominated both society and science, and science had to adapt to religious teaching. The two gradually separated as a result of the Cosmological Revolution, when new scientific discoveries meant that people turned less and less to religion for answers to their questions.

Discussion activity

As a whole class, discuss why the work of scientists, such as Galileo and Newton, has resulted in the separation of science and religion in the modern world.

God of the gaps

As science explained more and more, it was felt that the role of religion was to fill in the gaps that science could not explain. This became known in the 19th century as the philosophy of the 'god of the gaps'.

After Newton's discovery of gravity, scientists began to think that they would be able to discover a set of unbreakable natural laws governing the whole universe. For many scientists, this would mean that the universe was the equivalent of a machine with all parts working together, rather than the creation of God. God was no longer regarded as immanent and the controller of everything. The new scientific world-view encouraged the acceptance of a world that was a machine that ran itself. A scientist called Pierre Laplace (1749–1827) was so convinced that science would shortly have all the answers that he thought there would soon be no need to refer to God at all.

A clockwork universe

Some people regarded the universe rather like a large clock that had been wound up and set going. A clockwork universe does not leave room for the spiritual soul. A belief developed (called Deism) that once God set things going, he moved on and didn't again intervene in his creation. Science deals with the everyday workings of the cosmic clock, and religion deals with God and the soul.

Objectives

Investigate why society seems to favour science over religion in the modern world.

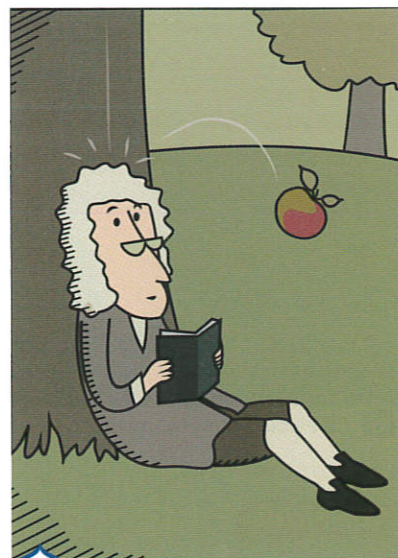
Investigate the impact of this for science and religion.

Study tip

Make sure that you are able to explain the influence of the Cosmological Revolution.

links

Science and religion began to separate after the Cosmological Revolution. Look back to pages 124–125 to remind yourself about the causes of the Cosmological Revolution.



A Newton's discovery of gravity led to the theory of 'god of the gaps' and to a view of God as a distant being, a creator taking no further part in his creation

Is there a place for religion in the modern world?

Laplace thought that when all the laws of nature were discovered, there would be no place for religion. However, the certainty Laplace and other scientists had that these laws would be found has been undermined by two recent scientific theories: Einstein's theory of relativity and the theory of quantum mechanics. These two theories have shaken the confidence of scientists in establishing facts about the reality of the world. This means that, once more, some scientists, such as John Polkinghorne, are turning to religion for answers to what cannot be otherwise explained, and therefore see religion as having a place in the modern world.

Extension activity

Using the internet and/or a library, find out more about the theories of relativity and quantum mechanics.

Religion has adapted to the scientific modern world

Many religious believers now accept that science is independent and cannot change its findings to conform to religious teaching. For many religions, this is not a problem. They accept that science has actually helped to support some of their religious truths. Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism consider that modern scientific thought does not contradict the truth of their religion. For these believers, science and religion complement each other. Islam has always taught that the seeking of knowledge is required by God: evidence discovered by science is further proof of the truth found in the Qur'an. Most Jews and Christians would also agree with this view.

The modern world needs both science and religion

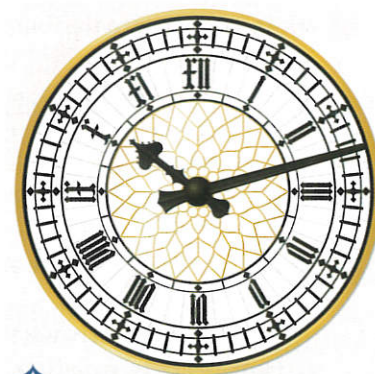
Many religious believers and scientists argue that the modern world needs both religion and science. Science can explain facts, but the spiritual needs of people have to be catered for as well. Recent research has shown that people who have religious beliefs are healthier and less likely to suffer from stress.

Activity

'Science is more important than religion.' Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have thought about more than one point of view.

Summary

You should now be able to discuss why modern society favours science over religion and the impact of this. You should understand how many religious believers respond to scientific theories.



B Do we live in a clockwork universe?