

6

Science and religion

6.1

What is meant by truth?

The nature of truth

We all know what we mean when we say that something is true, but to define what we mean by 'truth' is difficult. When we say something is true, we mean that we think it is right and that there is **evidence** to support our opinion. This evidence may be objective evidence that it is based on fact and is not based on personal opinion, or it may be subjective evidence that is based on personal opinion. People use evidence as proof to establish a fact or the truth of a statement. The type of evidence that is used to prove something is true can be placed in categories, for example scientific, historical and religious.

Scientific truth

Many people will only accept the truth of something when it is proved true using scientific evidence. Scientists use observation, hypothesis (an idea based on known facts that are yet to be proved), experiment and repeated testing to prove something is true. Scientific truths are objective because they are not just one person's opinion. Scientific truth is constantly changing because observation and experiment may result in new evidence that proves earlier scientific **theories** untrue or inaccurate. For many people, scientific truths are the most trustworthy type of truth because of the painstaking evidence used to support them.



A Scientists use experiment and observation to prove a hypothesis

Objectives

Investigate what is meant by truth.

Key terms

Evidence: facts that can indicate whether something is true.

Theory: a hypothesis that explains facts that are widely accepted or well-tested.

links

Look back to pages 8–9 for a discussion on proof.

Discussion activity

- 1 With a partner, discuss whether or not there are things that can never be proved true or false. You must include specific examples in your discussion to support your points.

Historical truth

Historians use evidence from the time they are researching to discover the truth about an event or historical era. This evidence may consist of objects used or documents written by people living at the time or, more recently, sound recordings and film. Some historical facts can be supported by evidence that all historians can agree on. But a historian also has to explain *why* things happened, and different historians may use the same evidence but reach different conclusions about an event or the era. Because of this, historical truths are regarded as subjective; a historical truth cannot be proved in the same way as a scientific truth.

Activities

- 1 List the evidence that a scientist might use to prove that the dinosaurs died out before human life began.
- 2 List the evidence that a historian might use to prove that Germany was defeated in the Second World War.

Discussion activity

- 2 As a whole class, discuss why the truths that dinosaurs are extinct and Germany was defeated are objective, whereas a historian's reasons why Germany was defeated are subjective.

Religious truth

Religious truth is what believers claim to be true about the existence of God, the origin of the universe and the purpose of life. The evidence they use to support a particular religious truth involves experience, belief, trust and faith. When believers make claims about the truth of their religious beliefs, they offer evidence drawn from religious authority revealed through sacred writings, their conscience, religious experience, the history of the religion, and from observation of the natural world. However, the main source of evidence that believers use to support the truth of their religion is their faith.

Activities

- 3 'The moon is made of cream cheese.' How might scientists establish that this statement is not true?
- 4 'Charles I was beheaded.' How might historians establish the truth of this statement?
- 5 'God exists.' How might a religious believer establish the truth of this statement?

Summary

You should now be able to discuss what is meant by truth and be aware of different kinds of truth.



B Why did the dinosaurs die out?

links

Look back to page 23 to remind yourself of what is meant by conscience.

Study tip

It is useful to understand the differences between scientific, historical and religious evidence, but you will only be examined on scientific and religious truth.

6.8

Absolute truth versus evolving, changing truth

Science versus religion

The last section considered whether or not science and religion can ever agree. This depends very much on people agreeing that they are asking the same questions about the real nature of the world and/or universe – but in a different way. It depends on what people understand by ‘truth’. There are two types of truth that cause conflict between religion and science:

- 1 Absolute truth.
- 2 Evolving, changing truth.

Absolute truth

Absolute truth is when it is thought that what is believed to be true cannot be changed. The facts are unalterable because they are correct. For example, it is the absolute truth that there are no square circles or round triangles. Absolute truth is fixed and cannot be changed.

Fundamentalist Christians believe that the Bible contains the absolute truth.

Richard Dawkins argues that God does not exist because there is no evidence to support a belief in God. For Dawkins, this is an absolute truth.

links

Look back to page 88 to remind yourself about Richard Dawkins’ views.

Beliefs and teachings

Richard Dawkins supports science

Science offers us an explanation of how complexity (the difficult) arose out of simplicity (the easy). The hypothesis of God offers no worthwhile explanation for anything, for it simply postulates [states] what we are trying to explain. It postulates the difficult to explain, and leaves it at that.

Richard Dawkins – official website

Evolving, changing truth

Evolving, changing truth varies, depending on the knowledge and understanding at the time. As information and circumstances change, what is understood to be true may also change. An agnostic would be willing to accept that more evidence in the future could prove that God exists. For an agnostic, belief in God could be an evolving, changing truth.

Objectives

Investigate the issues of an evolving, changing truth versus an absolute truth.

Key terms

Absolute truth: fixed, unalterable facts. Something which is true for all times and in all cultures.

Authority: something or somebody accepted as having the power or right to expect obedience.

links

Look back to pages 118–119 to remind yourself about the different types of truth.



What is true about the world?

links

Look back to pages 120–121 to remind yourself about Fundamentalist Christian views.

Similarly, most scientists accept that they may not have discovered the absolute truth about the origin of the universe or life. This is why they often refer to discoveries as 'theories' – they are aware that new information may need people to change their understanding of theories such as the Big Bang or evolution.

Some religious believers are willing to accept that their scriptures and teachings are open to interpretation, and that their understanding of the reality of things may have to evolve and change as science discovers more about the world.

The reliability of the source of authority

Whether or not something is accepted as the absolute truth depends very much on the reliability of what is accepted as the **authority**. If a religion teaches that God has spoken directly to people through the scriptures and revealed information about the reality of things, then for the believer that would be the absolute truth. If it is accepted that the scriptures may be interpreted, then what is considered to be the right interpretation may evolve through time. Science evolves as new discoveries are made. For example, in the Middle Ages, scientists believed that the earth was at the centre of the universe. Later, it was accepted that the earth revolved around the sun.

The main source of authority for people is themselves, what they personally believe to be true. This means that truth is subjective. What the followers of one religion believe is different from what the followers of a different religion believe. In the same way, one scientist may interpret the facts that have been discovered one way, whereas another scientist may come to a different conclusion.

Look at picture B. Do you see an old woman or a young girl? Your decision will depend on the way you interpret the image. The same is true of religion and science: it depends on what people believe to be true.

Activities

- 1 Explain what is meant by 'absolute truth'.
- 2 Explain what is meant by 'evolving, changing truth'.
- 3 'Science and religion can never agree as they see the truth of things differently.' 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 the issues related to absolute truth and evolving, changing truth in relation to science and religion.

Discussion activity

With a partner, discuss what sort of information might cause an atheist to start believing in God.



B Is this a picture of an old woman or a young girl?

Study tip

Make sure that you are able to explain the differences between absolute truth and scientific and religious truth.

6.9

Do science and religion answer the same questions?



A *Why am I here?*

What are the questions?

The last section discussed the difference between absolute truth and evolving, changing truth. It also looked at the ways in which religion and science have similar views on what is true when considering questions about reality. Another issue is whether or not science and religion are trying to find the answers to the same questions.

The answer is probably 'yes', but not in the same way. Both are asking questions about the origins and development of the universe and life, but science puts the emphasis on 'how' and religion puts the emphasis on 'why'. The questions science is trying to answer include:

- How did the universe begin?
- How did life begin?
- How did the universe develop?
- How did life on earth evolve?

The questions religion is trying to answer include:

- Why did the universe begin?
- Why did life begin?
- Why did the universe develop?
- Why did life on earth evolve?

What are the answers?

Science and religion ask the same questions but in different ways. For example, in questions about the origin of life, it is possible to see that science asks 'how' and religion asks 'why'.

Objectives

Investigate whether or not science and religion answer the same questions.

links

Look back to pages 130–131 to find more about whether or not religion and science can agree.

Study tip

Make sure that you are able to support your arguments with examples in the examination.

links

Look back to pages 118–119 to find more about the different ways in which religion and science seek to prove things true.

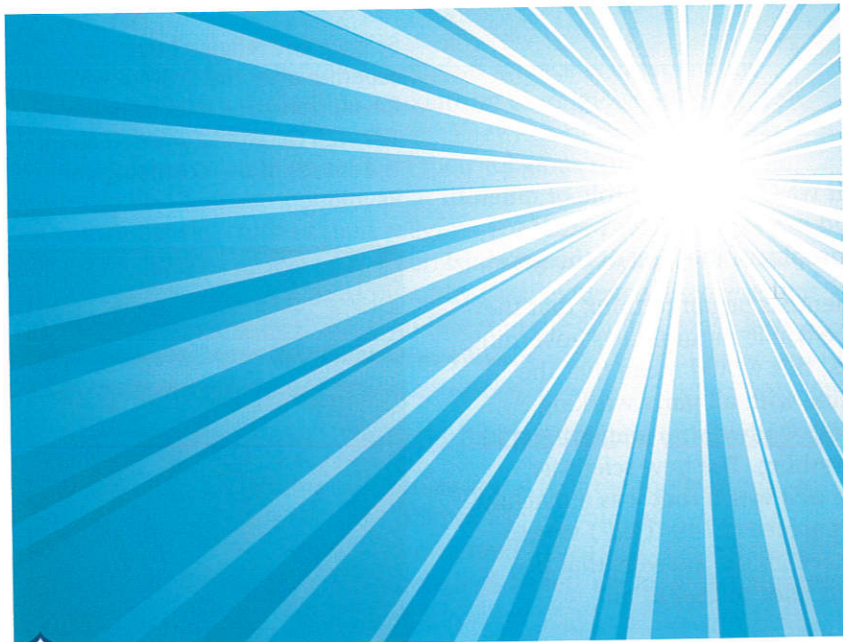
Science would ask how life began and seek scientific answers, such as the theory of evolution. Religion would ask why life began and seek religious answers, such as life began because God decided to create it.

However, it is possible for a scientist and a theist to accept each other's answers to the question. The scientist and the theist could both accept that evolution is the means by which God created life.

Discussion activity

Stephen Hawking concluded in his book, *A Brief History of Time*: 'If we do discover a complete theory, ... we shall all, philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason – for then we would know the mind of God.'

What do you and the rest of your class think Hawking meant by this statement?



C 'We would know the mind of God'

Activities

- 1 Explain the questions that religion and science try to answer.
- 2 'Religion and science ask the same questions.' What do you think? Explain your opinion.

Summary

You should now be able to discuss whether or not science and religion ask the same questions.



B Is it possible for a scientist and a theist to accept each other's answers to questions?