



Challenges from Science

WJEC A level R.S. Unit 3A Christianity Theme 2B

Key Concepts:

- For Richard Dawkins, belief in God represents an attempt to explain natural phenomena and design; this attempt fails due to lack of evidence.
- Believers, says Dawkins, appeal to the 'God of the Gaps'; a tendency to invoke God as the explanation for things we do not understand. As scientific explanations fill the gaps, God recedes to the background.
- One such 'gap' used to be the existence of intricate design in the world. However, the theory of evolution explains design through **natural selection**.
- Furthermore, positing an intelligent and complex creator as the explanation for the world begs the question: who created God?
- Complexity arises from simpler causes. Natural variation combined with the survival of the fittest leads to intricate and complex forms of life.
- Religion appeals to baseless human authority and often reflects a violent **tribe mentality**, intolerant to the views of science.
- Dawkins believes that religion is a 'misfiring of the brain' in relation to two valuable survival mechanisms (i) the tendency to obey elders and (ii) the tendency to assign meaning and purpose to things.
- Each of these distance us from dangers, however (i) elders can pass on religious beliefs and (ii) we project meaning onto a **neutral universe**.
- Science replaces the roles traditionally given to religion: explaining morality and giving inspiration and **consolation** through natural grandeur.
- The McGraths (Alister and Joanna) think Dawkins **mischaracterises** Christianity and ignores evidence on the value of religion.
- First, most Christians do not believe in the 'God of the gaps'; they believe that God underlies, supports and permeates all of life.
- God is not appealed to as an explanation for natural phenomena but as the source of our intelligible and explainable universe - they use an argument by **Swinburne: Intelligibility** is best explained by an intelligent creator.
- If religion were really a 'misfiring', then one would expect to see less scientists who are also religious believers over time; this is not the case.
- The McGraths agree with Stephen Jay Gould's **NOMA**: science and religion are 'non-overlapping magisteria'; science deals with the empirical realm and religion with the realm of meaning; however, the McGraths believe they can interpenetrate each other - **POMA** (partially overlapping magisteria).
- Natural selection can be supported by religious believers as **theistic evolution**.
- There is much evidence for religion as a positive force: the prophetic stance for **social justice**, the inclusive ministry of Jesus, and contemporary peace efforts. In fact, an absence of religion (i.e. **Soviet regime**) can be associated with gross injustices.

Key arguments/debates:

Dawkins believes that atheism must go hand-in-hand with science. This is because religion has historically opposed science (tribalism, super-naturalistic doctrines, opposition to new cosmological theories).

Yet many eminent scientists are also believers (i.e. John Polkinghorne); there are also questions that science cannot answer (Why are we here? What is the point?). Are the religious beliefs of scientists the result of sociological pressures?

Science can be seen to have a negative impact on religious belief. For instance, the views of creationists and intelligent design theorists is widely discredited, and a religious, anti-evolutionary stance is viewed by many as 'backward'. The anthropic principle best explains our world: we happen to live on one of the few worlds capable of supporting life. Yet religious believers may be theistic evolutionists, appealing to NOMA and the fact of an intelligible universe. Thus, science reduces the role of God to an interpretation rather than a fact.

Key questions:

- Has religion always led to scientific repression? Does the absence of religion always entail violence and injustice?
- Was the term 'God' as used by Hawking/Einstein compatible with religious belief?
- Is there anything that science cannot explain?

Key quotes:

"I am against religion because it teaches us to be satisfied with not understanding the world."
(R. Dawkins)

"Christians do not worship gaps. What elicits our excitement, our sense of wonder, is the big picture."
(A. McGrath)

Key words:

God of the Gaps | natural selection | tribe mentality | misfiring | neutral universe | consolation | mischaracterises | Swinburne | intelligibility | NOMA | POMA | theistic evolution | social injustice | Soviet regime