Can religion and science cohabit? (KS2, KS3 and KS4)

Part 1

The key theme of **science and religion** regularly comes up in class, from upper primary years onwards (KS2 – KS4 especially); it is a fundamental part of any discussion of **worldviews** and so I hope to give some pointers here to help address some of the basic issues that need to be considered with a class so that the pupils learn to think clearly – a kind of critical thinking or 'epistemological' approach. My next resource piece will address the issue of how we might find out if Christianity is actually *true*.

My three issues are:

1. What are our underlying assumptions?
2. 'How?' and 'Why?' questions
3. What is the difference between evidence and proof?

1. Everyone has underlying assumptions about what they think reality, or the world/universe, actually is. Science takes it for granted (a) that this world is real, (b) that the methods of science are the correct ones for studying it, and (c) that science is progressing towards ultimately being able to explain everything. *Pupils need to consider what they take for granted about the reality and reliability of the natural world, and why they think this* – that's a fair discussion, and requires some preparation by the teacher: https://www.stem.org.uk/resources/physical/resource/202448/science-and-religion-schools-support-cd-rom-ages-11-19 is a website link to substantial resources, or you could devise your own.

It is important to consider this as a basic, because underlying Christian assumptions add to these ones: Christians accept the reality of the world but say that the scientific methods are not enough – they're good, but more methods are needed. Science has the right tools for scientific jobs, but to study morals, or spirituality, or God, you need other tools. A good comparison is to fishing: some nets catch some kinds of fish, but for lobsters you need pots…you need the right tools for the job! See further answer 2 below.

2. Religion asks '*why are we here?*' '*Why is there a universe at all?*' '*Why should we behave well?*' Science asks '*how did the universe evolve?*' *How does the brain work?*' '*How does gravity affect flight?*', and so on. Vital questions, but different ones. Something I have used with classes to show the difference between how and why questions is to ask a pupil 'How did you come to school today?' They answer maybe by car, on foot, etc. I then ask 'Why did you come to school today?' and I have got some fascinating answers! The why question is much more interesting than the how one, and the answers are totally different. 'How?' gives us a scientific or technological answer; 'Why?' gives a moral or *intentional* answer.

But….the answers do not contradict each other! They fit together: '*I came to school by car* (how), *because my mother thinks it's really important that I am educated* (why)'. It's just the same with religion and science: why we are here is far more important that how we got here. You need both science and religion or, to quote Einstein: '*science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind*'.

3. Briefly, pupils need to understand when they say, 'there's no proof' what it is they are asking for. This is hard and takes time to get across, but is excellent critical thinking practice. Imagine this: your pupils come into the classroom and find a dead person on the floor. One fact – a dead body; lots of theories: a medical emergency, a murder, a suicide….? Each theory needs evidence – a bloodied dagger, footprints, a broken window, finger prints, etc. The theory that has the most evidence (i.e. most facts) is the first one to pursue. However, none of this amounts to proof, at best it gives us not just possibilities but probabilities. In order to be certain we need to identify the culprit (if our theory is murder) and obtain a proper confession – *why* did they do this, what were the motive and the cause? Many, many crimes remain unsolved because we cannot get this last clinching piece, there is not enough evidence to amount to proof. Most importantly we can often be led astray by following the wrong theory, missing a vital clue, or not asking the right questions (e.g. 'who benefits most from this murder?').

So with science and religion: if we are looking for God, what kinds of evidence would we be looking for? What facts? Which theories should we dismiss for lack of evidence? We have to remember that God is not the kind of Being you can find with a telescope (the very first Russian cosmonaut joked that he had not seen God when he went up in a rocket into space!). *So what would your pupils accept as good evidence? And are they being reasonable?* Of course, whether any religion is true is another discussion altogether, for another time!

Part 2

As promised before, here is a common-sense way of discussing how we might know if Christianity is actually true. I'll start by highlighting some dangers:

- '**Nothing-Buttery**' – this is where someone might say that Christianity is 'nothing but' an adaptive response to a scary environment, or it is nothing but ignorance of the facts of science, or 'just' a way to manipulate others by fear of hell. Always avoid 'nothing but' explanations because they hopelessly over-simplify difficult problems.
- **Historical scepticism** – young people often think that the longer ago something happened, the less reliable accounts of it are, and so 'legend', 'myth', or, politely, 'aetiological tale' may be used. Granted all we know about fake news these days, it is good that historians these days know how to check the accuracy of past records and have a huge amount of scientific help (just think of TV history programmes).
- **A closed mind** – our emphasis on worldviews should ensure we encourage young people to move beyond what their limited experience of the world can tell them, and to be open to multi-faceted truths and variant understandings. A fingers-in-the-ears approach to anything novel, like miracles, is no help!
- **Bad religion** – there has been so much of this (in all Faiths) – tortures, massacres, abuses, superstition. Many people cannot see beyond this, but it is important to point out the far larger amount of good that has been done, often without publicity.

It can be interesting to test a class with 'would I lie to you?' type statements, and draw out from them whether, and why, they think they are true – before telling them the answer. https://www.johnlewis.com/would-i-lie-to-you-board-game-2019/p231601008 has a board game at £25 which could be a good investment.

There are three main ways that we can use to know if something is true, or at least highly likely:

a) Known facts – [Empiricism] this just means using testable, observable facts to construct a probable theory or explanation, avoiding the three dangers above. On this basis we can use contemporary accounts of Jesus from outside the Bible (there are a few); we can check the historical, geographical etc., references contained in the Gospels; and we can use resources like archaeology or classical literature to see if the story is corroborated. Archaeology has been a huge help here: published in 2018, 'The Bible and Archaeology' by Matthieu Richelle is very well informed, easy to read and cheap!

b) Reasoning – [Rationalism] this refers to thinking round the issues. We need to ask questions which are more imaginative but also profound: if there had been no Jesus, how and why did Christianity even start? If Jesus did not rise from the dead, where is his body now? Why is there no 'tomb of the Messiah' as there is, in Medina, the Tomb of the Prophet? Why would people deliberately die for a faith they knew was not true? If there were no Jesus, or no resurrection, why would anyone bother to invent such an amazing story and try to pass it off as true? These are valuable lessons in reasoning for class discussions.

c) Experience – this is the most difficult area. Most Christians would say they have experienced Jesus in their lives, and perhaps they would add that they have seen a miracle (miracles are a big discussion topic on exam specifications, so beware). A video resource like https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GILD6ddWPXg can lead to a great discussion. For some people the truth of Christianity is an intuition which they find hard to put into words. Pupils should be encouraged to realise that intuitions play a large part in our lives (whom should I marry?) so should not be disregarded.

There are plenty of books and video clips backing all this up, but, as we know, the internet is awash not just with fake claims, but also with highly biased, sometimes offensive, sometimes just plain naïve information. Please don't just set a 'research this' type homework without indicating the specific resources they must use.

This resource was written by Richard Coupe, one of RE:ONLINE's Email a Believer team. If your class would like to ask a Christian representative any questions about their beliefs, or to see answers to previously asked questions please visit http://pof.reonline.org.uk/people-of-faith/christianity/