It is a common belief that science and religion are incompatible views on life that contradict each other and, on first thoughts this appears true; one appears to be based on fact, the other, as some may see it, on fiction. Nevertheless, many great scientists have been religious. Christianity was first adopted by the Greeks from Antioch who were the first non-Jews to take on the faith. These Greeks are said to be the founders of science and logic. Therefore, is there a hidden link between the two ways of thinking of which our society is ignorant and unknowing?

Science and religion are two different ways of interpreting life and the world that we live in. They answer different sets of profound questions. Science deals with the mechanisms of the world and how it works; religion is concerned more with the meaning of the world. This in particular is an example of an aspect of religion that is not dealt with by science. It is a matter of “how” and “why,” the subjective versus the objective. They, therefore, do not answer each other’s questions; scientific questions have scientific answers. However, some questions arise from science but take us beyond the realms of scientific knowledge and this is when faith endeavors to draw conclusions. For example, it is impossible to carry out experiments that could recreate the moments just before the Big Bang as it is not feasible to create the circumstances and fundamental elements as they are very rare, and so, it will always be speculation as to what happened “before.” In this case science is limited; hence, it may be seen as a “leap of faith” as to what one believes happened prior to and during this short time of unknown history.

It is a common belief that science only deals with objective truths whilst religion is an entirely subjective concept. However, this is not entirely true. Science can also be subjective and is often based on interpretation. Some may speculate that science is merely interpreted fact. Data from an experiment have little value until conclusions are drawn from them. Scientists, being human, do not possess absolute knowledge, so have to have faith in the results and in their understanding of the world to draw a final conclusion.[1] In addition, for science to be accepted...
as correct, society has to have belief and trust. If a paper is published in a respected scientific journal, it is deemed to be fairly reliable by the general public; however, it is questionable whether the faith society has in science is justifiable when there have been previous occasions of scientists tampering with their data to produce fake, “ground breaking” conclusions. If each individual does not prove the conclusion to be correct, then the belief in what a scientist says to be right is based on human trust only. Furthermore, the conclusions in the scientific report are based on the faith the scientist has in their results and in their own knowledge. Religion can also be seen as “interpreted fact” as there are various different accounts of the same events in the Bible, for example, Jesus’ miracles. Therefore, it could be said that there is little difference between the belief in God and trust in science.

Richard Dawkins is a prominent atheist and professor who thinks all belief should be based on evidence, and therefore science and religion are incompatible because of their completely opposing perspectives on life. He feels it is a tragedy to base life on something with no evidence. This links to his reasoning behind why people’s religions are very much linked to where they live in the world. He concludes that they are heavily influenced by family and other people in close contact because in the same way scientists have differing opinions due to a lack of experimental data, people have certain religions due to a lack of evidence to base their views on. However, it could be said that although you cannot prove religion exists, similarly, you cannot prove that a “God” or higher power does not exist. In my opinion, it is Dawkins’ mistake to assume that “God” is natural and is therefore within the capacity of science to experiment with and test; he cannot prove “God” and therefore assumes there is no “God”.

However, “God” cannot be part of nature. The idea of “God” is the explanation to why things are the way they are; it is the answer to existence, not existence itself. Furthermore, the limitations of science and scientific experiments must be remembered as some scientific theories, although based on evidence, are proved not to be true. A good scientific theory does not necessarily have to be entirely correct. That is to say, no scientific theory is ever secure; new data can always undermine a previous theory. There have been examples of false theories effectively guiding advances in science before new evidence was found and they gave way to more up-to-date theories. I therefore disagree with Dawkins and see evidence based on scientific theory not as the truth but as a guide to show the way for new research and put our knowledge together in an ordered manner.

Religion is often criticized for having self-contradictions and logical failings within it. For example, the world being created from nothing in 7 days can be regarded as simply illogical. However, the same could be said about science and the contradictions between quantum theory and general relativity. Neither science nor religion is complete, and both are therefore contradictory.

The biggest problem that faces religion in the modern world is suffering. Society questions its faith in religion when life gets difficult. John Polkinghorne, a particle physicist and priest, draws another link between science and religion as he says, “science can help us deal with this problem” by way of the evolutionary theory. This theory highlights the potential of nature. He claims that God could have created a readymade world, but instead He gave it lots of potential, so creatures could make themselves. I agree with him in this area and believe that death and disaster, although hard to deal with, are part of a life that cannot be perfect; a perfect world is not feasible. According to the Bible, even God has suffered, thus suggesting that no matter who the individual is, suffering is unavoidable and a fact of life. However, both science and religion can give us understanding and one can gain comfort from this understanding that helps us cope with the negative aspects of life that I feel are inevitable. Furthermore, similar to the belief of Polkinghorne, I feel that a higher power, not necessarily “God,” has granted us an independence and freedom to be. This is far more useful than a readymade perfect world. Self-determination is not necessarily better than suffering, but it helps us deal better with this unavoidable fact of life.

There was a study conducted in 1997 by Edward Larson at the University of Georgia in the USA, which attempted to repeat an older study carried out in 1916 by psychologist James Leuba. Both reported the percentage of scientists who believed in God. The studies proved that despite the advances in science, the same percentage of scientists believed in God. I feel that one of the reasons behind this is the fact that everything in life is very specific and finely tuned. For example, quantum physics is based on a very specific energy and resonance. Therefore, scientists experimenting with such accurate and
precise data are led to believe that as Polkinghorne has said, “some intelligence has monkeyed with the laws of nature.”[3] This shows that some people, like Richard Dawkins, see religion as a way of explaining a lack of knowledge, but others, like the majority of physicists, use it to explain why the world has so much potential and precision. Without this, the theories behind science would not work, and thus it is a very significant aspect of science.

Determinism is an intellectually stimulating idea that is also relevant to the link between science and religion. There is the intriguing question of whether a higher power has control of the mind and whether we have any choice over our thoughts and actions. If this were to be true, then a higher power is controlling all the scientific knowledge we know and are yet to know, but is also controlling that in which we believe. At the end of the day, both science and religion are concepts formed and understood in our minds, so both would be affected by this higher power.

In conclusion, I have, through studying evidence, decided that science and religion are not an oxymoron when put together. They are two things that complement each other. They both contribute to our knowledge of the world we live in through answering questions which are different, yet also inextricably linked. They differ because they emphasize different aspects of life. To really understand the world, one has to ask both “how” and “why” and these questions can be answered for the same event. In the words of Einstein, “science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.”

References


About the Author

At the time of writing Catherine Bruce was 17 years old and attended Bryanston School where she studied Maths, Chemistry, Biology and French. She is now currently studying medicine at Bristol University and is in her first year. She has an interest in journalism and media and hopes that in the future she will be able to use a medical background to do this. She enjoyed writing this essay due to its challenging questions as well as the fact that ethics is a subject that she finds thoroughly interesting and very relevant to her future career where ethical dilemmas are faced on an everyday basis.