

Atheism AO2 Handout

Part 1

New Atheism successfully shows the incompatibility of science and religion. Evaluate this view.

1. New Atheists seem to argue that scientific theories are based only on evidence, whilst religion runs away from evidence. The claim is that atheism is rational and scientific while religion is irrational and superstitious. Faith is not an element of science since evidence for a correct conviction compels us to accept its truth. As Dawkins says "Faith is a state of mind that leads people to believe something – it doesn't matter what – in the total absence of supporting evidence. If there were good supporting evidence, then faith would be superfluous..."

However, Alister McGrath points out that such a view "fails to make the critical distinction between the 'total absence of supporting evidence' and the 'absence of totally supporting evidence'." It is true that some facts about the world have been proved (e.g. the chemical formula for water) but the bigger scientific questions such as is there a Grand Unified Theory that explains everything rely on answers based on the best evidence available but they are not certainties. In future years they may well change as new evidence is considered. As Gauch concluded "Science rests on faith".

Dawkins in his book "The God Delusion" does argue that the existence of God is a testable hypothesis and concludes that the hypothesis is falsifiable. Therefore the hypothesis is open to the scientific method. So here is a New Atheist proponent arguing that the existence of God is a meaningful hypothesis. This implies that religion and science are compatible. This compatibility is reflected in the fact that scientists who are also Christians have debated against Dawkins. Possibly one of the most well-known debates was between Dawkins and John Lennox who is Emeritus Professor of Mathematics at Oxford.

2. Science answers the question "how" while religion answers the question "why". They deal with two very different areas. Religion involves faith while science is concerned with facts. But it is admitted that "science has no methods for deciding what is ethical." So that supports the view that science and religion are incompatible. However, some New Atheists argue that moral values are about promoting human wellbeing and since science tells about what promotes wellbeing "it can determine moral values".

It should also be noted that "God is not an inhabitant of the universe, he is the reason why there is a universe at all." Therefore, there is a difference between science and religion. Science works only on observable data and draws a conclusion or hypothesis from that data. Some people point out that "subatomic particles cannot strictly be observed, yet cannot be regarded as non-existent for this reason". The best scientific theories offer explanations of both observable and unobservable aspects of the world. Therefore, science is compatible with religion.

Part 2

TASK: Develop the basic argument below by using any relevant quotes/references to scholars that are listed. It should not be assumed that all are relevant or required. Then compare with other people in the class and discuss any differences assessing the justification given for those differences. Don't forget to also consider the different styles of evaluation examined in the A02 task based on topic of Miracles.

“New Atheism successfully shows that religious faith is infantile.”

New Atheism is quite clear that religious belief/faith is a childish delusion which should have disappeared a long time ago as humanity developed its maturity. Our thinking is now based on evidence which has enabled us to abandon childish beliefs. So why do people still hold on to religious belief. Clearly it is the indoctrination or brain washing as a child from our parents. Of course there is some truth in this. We are affected by the beliefs of our parents. But surely many adults turn to religion when they come from a non-religious background. So does that choice still stem from childhood?

The New Atheists complaint is that religious beliefs are clearly false beliefs held in the face of strong contradictory evidence. The religious believer is deluded and seems immune to any form of rational argument. Faith is basically irrational. But surely science has an element of faith. Science gives us theories that make best sense of the data we have. But they are only theories – best fit conclusions. It is a matter of faith whether those theories are the full story or even correct. Religious believers act in a similar way. They proportion their belief to the evidence. They conclude that the universe cannot be adequately explained in terms of the natural but the supernatural. The religious believer argues that their theory equally makes sense of all the data – concluding that there is a God. So, religious faith cannot be said to be infantile.

QUOTES / REFERENCES:

1. “Science rests on faith” - Gauch
2. “Subatomic particles cannot strictly be observed, yet cannot be regarded as non-existent for this reason” – Alister McGrath
3. “The soul is fully awake as regards God, but wholly asleep as regards things of this world.” (st Teresa Of Avila)
4. Dawkins in his book “The God Delusion” does argue that the existence of God is a testable hypothesis and concludes that the hypothesis is falsifiable. Therefore the hypothesis is open to the scientific method.
5. “In the New Atheist world-view...religion is about running away from the facts and seeking consolation in outdated, discredited, and immoral Bronze Age myths.” – Alister McGrath
6. “It is perverse to seek a sense of ethical purity when this is gained at the expense of the suffering of others.” (Tony Hope)
7. Dawkins argued that belief in God is just like believing in the Tooth Fairy or Santa Claus. However the analogy seems flawed since there are not many people who come

to believe in Santa Claus in adulthood, whereas they do with belief in God.

8. "It is by all means to be believed because it is absurd." (attributed to Tertullian)
9. Dawkins argues that the biological process of natural selection builds a child's brain with a tendency to believe whatever their parents tell them.
10. "The capacity of science to explain itself requires explanation." (Richard Swinburne)