



Religion	Humanism
Denomination	
Question answered:	Why might it matter that sacred texts are often open to interpretation? (KS3 Q2)
Key concepts, questions, and outcomes:	<p>How is interpretation made? Consider context, age, gender, culture, knowledge, scientific knowledge, society but at time of reading and at time of writing.</p> <p>Consider the role of the author/interpreter and the choice/use of words</p> <p>Interpretation can be subjective and change over time.</p> <p>What makes a text sacred/historical, etc.</p>
Key teaching points:	<p>Different religions/worldviews have different views on interpretation of Scripture.</p> <p>Within a worldview there can be different interpretations of text.</p> <p>The interpretation of sacred texts, along with how truth is viewed, determines how someone may live their life.</p> <p>Interpretation of sacred texts is complex and subject to many different factors, including who controls the interpretation</p>
Prior knowledge:	<p>General theories from Einstein, Darwin and Newton. Enlightenment, Reformation</p> <p>Basic understanding of Humanist beliefs</p>

Core Vocabulary:			
dogma	Anthropologist	Celebrant	Scientific belief
DNA	democratisation	trespasses	interpretation
empathy	Golden Rule	Sacred text	

Summary of answers:
<p>Humanism doesn't have any sacred texts the equivalent of the Bible or the Qur'an so Humanists are free to use any text, old or new, which may help to understand the word and work out how to live a good life. However, this freedom goes hand in hand with responsibility in what they believe and do to ensure their decisions do not harm anyone.</p> <p>The second speaker recognises that Humanists don't have the problems of interpretation that religions have with their sacred books written centuries ago. Religions have problems of trying to interpret texts written in quite different conditions to the modern day. Humanists do have important books such as Newton's 'Principia Mathematica' which show how mathematics could trace the movement of the planets and Darwin's 'Origin of the Species' which shows how evolution could take place, but these are not treated as dogma or incontestable truths. Einstein disproved some of Newton's work and the discovery of DNA has changed Darwin's theories. The way Humanists resolve moral issues is to use reason and empathetic attitudes and this has been taken up by wider society since the Second World War. This does not make moral issues any</p>



easier to resolve; just as for religions there are difficult questions and moral attitudes change over time. Humanists have the advantage as they do not have to interpret ancient dogma before coming to the right moral conclusions.

The third speaker says that Humanists rely on the totality of knowledge accumulated up to the present day. Humans have been continually observing, learning and inventing throughout history. The Humanist view is that sacred texts are important historical documents that record knowledge of reality at the time they were written but with the increase in cumulative human knowledge understanding has changed. Anthropologists and archaeologists have worked out the early origins of humans as a natural species by studying evidence such as bones. We know humans emerged about 2 million years ago in Africa. Language and the ability to communicate started about 100,000 years ago. Humans started farming and domesticating animals about 10,000 years ago when the first towns and cities appeared. This is the time when writing and early forms of a monetary system started. Most of today's major religions also appeared at this time based on ancient religious texts that were first written down 2-3,000 years ago. These early books recorded earlier oral traditions and ancient legends. They are important historical documents that contain the collective wisdom of humanity at that time. However, the change occurred with the invention of the printing press in the 15th century which democratised access to knowledge. The printing press led to the Reformation, democracy, modern economic, industrial revolution and scientific progress that has eventually led to the modern living standards of today. The emergence of the internet recently has further democratised access to knowledge and we all have the totality of human knowledge at our fingertips on our mobile telephones. Today's young generation are the first generation to have access to the world's libraries on their mobile telephones and this will lead inevitably to another explosion in human progress.

The interpretation of sacred texts is not a direct problem for Humanists, reaffirms the fourth speaker. No texts are regarded as sacred but there are books that Humanists respect and all of them are open to evidence and revision if new evidence becomes known.

Humanists respect authors whose ideas help understand the world or teach us how to behave: Darwin's 'Descent of Man', Einstein's papers on relativity discoveries and cosmology, quantum theory, biology and genetics all help in understanding the world, as do Jane Austin's novels. Humanists respect many teachers and moral philosophers including religious teachers, e.g. Jesus, Muhammad, Buddha, Confucius, all of whom taught the Golden Rule. Closer to modern humanism are atheist thinkers including early Indian, Greek and Roman philosophers, Enlightenment authors (Mary Wollstonecraft and David Hume).

There is concern over the accuracy of any sacred text, let alone the interpretation. The Bible was written over a period of 500 years and not in English. For another 1000 years, the main way of creating a copy was for monks to write out text by hand using pen and ink and candle light. Many monks chose to enhance the text with beautiful illuminations and annotations. The Latin itself was a translation from Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. Copying and translations always introduces errors. Many are unintentional (mistranslations or missing a bit out) but others are intentional and reflect the motives or the circumstances of the translator. An example is 'Forgive our trespasses'. William Tyndale (translated the Bible into English) chose this phrase. In the King James Bible and others, it is translated as 'Forgive our debts'. In some Bibles in Matthew it says 'debts' and in Luke, 'sins'. Early Greek Gospels use a word that means monetary debts and 'debts' was favoured by Protestant Christianity. The words chosen can also depend on who is authorising the text. This illustrates the dangers of treating any text as sacred, but it is other people's interpretations of their sacred texts that is an issue.

Fundamental religious views have become the law of the land and can have a massive effect on everybody, including Humanists. In England Christians legally burned other Christians who interpreted the Bible differently. For years, gay relationships were illegal in the UK and still are in



many countries. There are no legal Humanist wedding celebrants in the UK, but there are in Scotland. It is illegal in the UK for anyone (even a doctor) to help someone to end their own life: many people who are ill would like to die painlessly but must suffer months of daily agony. These injustices occur because a few people in power interpret sacred texts as prohibiting humane acts. They impose religious beliefs even dating from the Stone Age when people did not share their beliefs. In many countries anyone denying the state religion is liable to prosecution or even the death penalty. Governments and courts rarely enforce this but mobs of religious people have killed Humanists and atheists on this pretext. Even last month the President of Nigerian Humanist association, Mubarak Bala, was imprisoned for 24 years for posting on Facebook about not believing in God. All this happens because of some people's interpretation of sacred texts.

Next Steps:

Consider the positives and negatives of individual interpretation of sacred texts (or any text held up as being authoritative).

Should any text be interpreted or taken at face value? Consider different interpretations by different people.

Who decides what is important/authoritative?

Are sacred texts (or any text) important if they are 'allowed' to be interpreted?

How does globalisation affect the interpretation of sacred texts (or any text considered important)?

What important questions are raised by these speakers? Research one or more of the issues they raise and consider it from a wide range of religious perspectives.