

Question for RLB 385

Some suggestions

Do not presume that you have to answer the question in exactly the form in which you find it. The person who asks the question may have a peculiar vantage point from which it is raised with which you disagree. You are then justified in “interrogating” the assumptions on which you think it is based and reformulate it in terms of assumptions you think have greater initial plausibility.

It is also possible that the question(s) may not be well-formed; that they are grammatically or otherwise ambiguous or vague. After explaining why you think it/they are poorly formulated, try reformulating the question more clearly and then proceed to answer it/them.

If more questions are presented than you are expected to answer, look over all of them to see whether they implicitly provide information as to how you might best answer the question you are interested in. (This is most useful in answering questions in an examination situation than “take home” assignments, but may nevertheless prove helpful).

Finally: choose questions that have the most significance for your work and think through them carefully. Don't hesitate to relate the question(s) you choose to other work you are engaged with in your study of religion(s) and don't hesitate to express your opinions/judgments if they differ from those of your teachers or authors you have read (always, of course, providing reason, and where relevant, evidence for your judgments).

You will notice that a number of these questions overlap or amount to slightly different perspectives on essentially the same issue or concern. Some of the questions relate, at least in part, to broader issues than those raised in the lectures. A sufficient number of questions will be available to choose from so that no one needs to answer this kind of question.

Feel free to discuss the questions with others, but each of you must provide your own answers. It will be difficult for me to accept answers that appear to have been shared.

Possible Term-End Questions

1. Do you think the fuss being made about the concepts “religion” and “science” as being essentially-contested concepts is a critical problem for the study of religion as a credible enterprise within the framework of the modern research university? Why/why not?
2. Do you have any sympathy for scholars who believe there is a strict continuity of cognitive development from chimpanzees to human beings? Does the epithet “nature's own scientists” make sense to you? How would you justify/criticize such claims?
3. Did the ancient Greek cosmologists really create modern science?

4. In what sense, if any, did the ancient Greek cosmologists provide a foundation for the eventual emergence of genuine scientific thought.
5. Is the language of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary modes of thought appropriate in accounting for philosophical developments in ancient Greece from Thales to Aristotle? Explain.
6. Does the fact that scientific thought emerged in a particular culture at a particular period of history indicate that scientific thought cannot produce “culture-transcending” knowledge of the world and its contents?
7. Some scholars see the scientific enterprise as capable of achieving “culture-transcending” knowledge of the world and its contents. Postmodernists, however, see that enterprise as an instrument of power and oppression. Is this dispute capable of rational resolution? Discuss.
8. What is the essential point being made in contrasting “religion” as natural with “science” as unnatural?
9. Should the modern research university concern itself with questions of value and the meaning of life, or does that go beyond the mandate for which that institution was created?
10. In your judgment, what is the import of the Scientific Revolution and Radical Enlightenment for the study of religious thought and behavior?
11. Do you think religious thought and behavior can be explained in the same fashion as, say, human economic or political behavior? Explain why/why not.
12. Even if we are not so foolish as to think that every human problem will yield to scientific analysis, is that sufficient indication to suggest that the modern research university should open its doors to other approaches to resolve them? Discuss.
13. In what sense do philosophers of science maintain that science is meaningless? Do you agree/disagree with this claim and why?
14. Is explaining religion explaining it away? Explain.
15. Is science itself in any fashion implicitly religious?
16. If the mission of the modern research university is primarily to gain objective knowledge about states of affairs in the world, should this also apply to the study of the humanities (including the study of religions) as much as to the natural sciences?
17. Does explaining religion thought and behavior amount to explaining it away? Or does understanding religion require a kind of “religious understanding”? Do we even have a clear idea of what it is the scientific study of religion is really after?

18. Why do you think modern research universities have departments for the study of religions but not for the study of magic? Since historians, psychologists, and other social scientists attempt to account for magic in a scientific way, should religious thought and practice be studied in that same “distributed” fashion?