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### Religion and Science

Kurt Vonnegut was an American author from the early 1950's to the 2000's. He dropped out of Cornell University in 1943, and went on to publish fourteen novels, three collections of short stories, five plays, and five works of non-fiction. *Cat's Cradle*, published in 1963, is the fourth novel by Vonnegut.

The book focuses on science and religion while also bringing up important events in world history, one of the main events being the dropping of nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Throughout the novel, science and religion are constantly being brought up and argued about between the different characters. Though religion and science are often looked at as complete opposites, there are many similarities between the two.

Throughout history, religion has been one of the main causes of war and conflict between different groups of people. Some major wars caused by religion include the Thirty Years' War, the French Wars of Religion, the Second Sudanese Civil War, the Crusades, and the Lebanese Civil War. In *Cat's Cradle*, Kurt Vonnegut introduces us to the idea of a made-up religion called Bokononism. The main concept of Bokononism is foma, or completely harmless lies.

All through the book, the reader is introduced to many different terms found in the Books of Bokonon, and widely used by the people of San Lorenzo. Some of the common and most recurring ideas include the concept of a karass, or a group of people connected not through

superficiality, but through a deeper and more important manner, a grandfalloon, or an untrue karass made up of people who believe that they have a deeper connection when they really don't, a duprass, or a karass consisting of two people, a wampeter, or the main purpose of a karass, and boko-maru which appears to be the most common form of worship for Bokononists in which one touches the bare soles of their two feet together for a long period of time. In the very last chapter of the book, Jonah and the reader finally meet and have a conversation with Bokonon.

Jonah sees Bokonon, an old African American man, sitting on the side of the road, and asks him what he is thinking. Bokonon says, "I am thinking, young man, about the final sentence for *The Books of Bokonon*. The time for the final sentence has come." Jonah then asks him if he has had any luck, and Bokonon speaks about human stupidity, and how God is to blame, for he created humans, the stupidest beings on Earth.

Humans are stupid. Humans can't even learn to coexist on the same planet in peace and understanding that certain groups of people will have different beliefs than others. Instead of talking, humans kill. Instead of spending money on helping the less fortunate, humans use money to create murderous weapons. These statements are generalizations though, some humans do try, but unfortunately the number of humans who kill and the number of humans who don't do anything to stop war, outnumber those who do make an effort to make peace, but it seems completely impossible to fight science and technology in the making of guns and other weapons used in war.

Guns and other deadly weapons have been glorified in society for a long time, and as time has gone on, technology in these weapons has become more advanced and more money has gone into the industry. Another terrifying weapon used for mass destruction is the atomic bomb,

another big part of the novel. Felix Hoenikker who helped to create the atomic bomb is brought up frequently and is a large topic of conversation throughout the book. Felix Hoenikker is Vonnegut's representation of everything that is wrong with humanity.

Hoenikker and everyone who worked on the bomb were intelligent, but really quite stupid at the same time. While a person does have to be smart to put together a weapon of such power, one must also be extremely unintelligent to put so much time and effort into something used for murder and mass destruction. Felix Hoenikker's three kids are just about as removed as he was, and all have no idea what it's like to live in the real world. One might say that these three kids represent the government.

The idea of ice-nine in the book very possibly represents the bomb itself. Hoenikker trusted each of his kids with a piece of the ice-nine, quite similarly to the way that the government was trusted with the bomb. In the end, the ice-nine destroyed all life, and so could nuclear weaponry.

Religion and science aren't so different, of course it all depends on the religion. Both science and religion have a specific goal. People create weapons with an idea in mind of how they will be used. Humans often use religion as assurance that there will be something waiting for them after death, and many religions speak of a specific goal that they are trying to reach. For example, Buddhists speak of reaching nirvana. Both have also caused a lot of war to get really nasty. Both sometimes lack morals, there are many different areas of science that do no harm to anyone or anything, but there are also many ways in which science is harmful, such as the industry that creates nuclear weapons and weapons in general used for killing. There are also

many parts of religion that don't hurt anyone, but religion can also be very harmful in ways such as hate towards other religions and certain groups of people.

Someone in a certain religion might say that there is sin in creating nuclear weaponry, in fact, Newt writes in his letter to Jonah about a certain event that happened in the laboratory when a scientist turned to Felix Hoenikker and said, "science has now known sin." Hoenikker didn't know what sin was, he doesn't get religion, nor does he care about it, but many people would say that science had known sin for years before the atomic bomb. There were weapons before nuclear weaponry, they just weren't quite capable of the destruction that the bomb is capable of. This doesn't necessarily mean that the people who worked on the bomb sinned more than the people who first created guns, or the people who still make guns today, and the people that use these deadly weapons sin just as much as the people who made them, if not even more.

It is a wonder what people who work on these horrible weapons are like. Maybe Felix Hoenikker is our answer, not religious, possibly mental, maybe even a little depressed, but every person is different, and the different people who work in the industry may very well have completely different reasons for being there. Beating up on science and blaming all of life's problems on it is an unintelligent way of going about expressing anger, for science isn't completely good or bad. Neither is religion.

Science has brought us studies of marine biology and how to clean up the ocean, science has brought us advanced methods of long distance communication, science has brought us many great things. Not all technology is bad either, the main harmful part of science, and even more technically, technology, is the industry that makes guns, bombs, and other weapons used purely for the purpose of murder. Someone like Felix Hoenikker or any of his three children may

argue with that statement, and say that weaponry, specifically nuclear weaponry, is the only way of defense and the only way of getting what is necessary to survive, but the ice-nine is what killed everyone, the atheists, the agnostics, the Bokomonists, and the religious.

Angela Hoenikker, the oldest child of Felix Hoenikker, is constantly defending her father and trying to convince Jonah and others of what a great person he was, and the middle child, Frank, even went so far as to say he admired his father and wanted to go into the same industry, but even Newt says that up close, his father was the ugliest thing he had ever seen. Maybe Newt has more common sense than his siblings, or maybe the other two kids never got a close look at him in the same way that Newt did when his father held up the Cat's Cradle, all of the lies, and asked him, "See the cat's cradle?"

The event clearly scarred Newt, he says, "I dream about it all the time." Newt also says much later, possibly in an attempt to express the anger and pain and disgust and hurt he felt from that day, "no damn cat, and no damn cradle," as he holds up a Cat's Cradle himself. It was a lie. Vonnegut and many other people believe that religion is a lie, many people believe that people using weapons and saying it's okay is a lie. The government lies all the time, and life based on technology and science but with no ethics will destroy the world, just like the ice-nine did.

Science really is a great thing, as is technology, but none of it matters if there is no moral value to it. The animal testing industry has been one of the most controversial for awhile. Humans never stop to ask themselves if something is really worth it. Is killing and hurting animals really worth the knowledge that a product is safe? Especially when with the advanced technology people have today, humans could find a different humane way to test certain products. Is it worth the time energy and money to create something as horrific as the atomic

bomb and other weapons when all they will do is kill innocent people, and possibly eventually wipe out the entire human race? Is it really worth it?

There are endless arguments to be made about science and religion and what's wrong with them and how they can be improved. Kurt Vonnegut does an excellent job taking his readers through *Cat's Cradle* and explaining his views in a non forceful but clear way. He shows what he believes is wrong with humanity, and brings up so many key people and events in history. At one point, it may be suggested that he is comparing Jonah and Mona to Adam and Eve, or that he is comparing ice-nine to the atomic bomb, or the Hoenikker children to the government. Science and religion are not completely good or bad, and both have many similarities and many differences.