

Teaching guide: ethical issues (Christianity)

Our GCSE Religious Studies (8062, 8063) requires students to be aware of differences within and/or between religions and beliefs. We have created this guide to illustrate where ‘differing’ religious views of ethical issues might be found. It is not intended to be comprehensive and students will be rewarded for the appropriate application of all relevant knowledge.

Relationships and families

Contraception

- Many Christians think that contraception is acceptable in many circumstances, such as a couple unable to cope financially with having a child. They see this as a responsible use of the God-given autonomy that is part and parcel of being created in the image of God.
- Roman Catholic teaching states that artificial contraception goes against natural law. Every sexual act should be open to the possibility of creating life. This fulfils God’s command to be fruitful and multiply.

Sexual relationships before marriage

- Although he teaches that marriage is the appropriate context for sexual relationships, Pope Francis has stated that this is a matter for conscience rather than strict rules and recognised that financial and cultural issue might underlie cohabitation as opposed to marriage. In ‘The Joy of Love’ he said: ‘In such cases, respect also can be shown for those signs of love which in some way reflect God’s own love’.
- Many Christians believe that sex before marriage devalues the God-given gift of sexuality. It was intended by God to be enjoyed within the context of marriage. In the New Testament Paul said that those whose sexual urges were very strong should marry.

Homosexual relationships

- Some Christians believe that the biblical denunciation of these relationships was part of the ancient culture and was concerned with the promiscuous excesses of fertility religions. Monogamous homosexual relationships reflect the same self-giving love that is encouraged by situationists and live up to the same ideals of fidelity and commitment that are a part of Christian marriage vows.

- Fundamentalist Christians believe that the biblical texts denouncing homosexual relationships are the word of God and so are valid for all time. They regard it as a form of fornication and Paul said that fornicators would not inherit the kingdom of God.

Religion and life

Abortion

- In the Old Testament life is associated with breath, so before birth the embryo/foetus is a potential person. The embryo/foetus does not therefore have a right to life.
- Psalm 139 speaks of God seeing 'my unformed body', so from conception, the embryo is precious to God. Abortion is the wrongful destruction of a human being with potential.

Euthanasia

- The Bible tells Christians to clothe themselves with kindness and compassion, and ending a life of intolerable suffering may be the most compassionate thing to do. Scripture states that death is better than a miserable life.
- Hospices enable terminally ill people to experience dignity and quality of life right to the end. They give the dying the sense that their lives are still sacred, whereas euthanasia denies that. Whatever their situation, all humans are created in the image of God.

Animal experimentation

- The Catechism of the Catholic Church accepts this 'within reasonable limits' and providing there is no cruelty. Humans alone are created in the image of God and possess sanctity of life.
- The book of Proverbs teaches that a good man is kind to his animals. Some Christians believe that to inflict any suffering or discomfort on animals that is not in the animals' interests is not an act of kindness. It is exploiting animals' defencelessness for human benefit.

The existence of God and revelation

Visions

- The transformation in people's lives shows that religious visions are genuine. For instance, Paul's vision on the road to Damascus transformed him from a persecutor of Christians to a Christian evangelist who died for his faith.
- Because they are so personal, it cannot be proved that visions are genuine. It may be that some visions have a medical explanation, eg

Hildegard's descriptions of her experience sound like the symptoms of migraine.

Miracles

- The very thorough medical and Church investigations into the claims of cures at Lourdes are strong evidence for the genuineness of those declared to be miracles. They are signs of the love of God.
- Miracles are a psychological phenomenon, showing the power of mind over matter. People are sometimes cured because of their absolute conviction that they will be. Jesus said to many of those whom he cured, 'Your faith has cured you'.

Nature as general revelation

- The Old Testament says that the heavens declare the glory of God. His presence can be detected in the wonder of the world that he created. It shows his omnipotence.
- God reveals himself solely through the Bible, which is the infallible word of God. Nature was corrupted by the Fall, so it does not provide a reliable guide to the nature of God.

Religion, peace and conflict

Violence

- Violence may be justified as a last resort. It may be the only way to get rid of a corrupt regime and restore justice. In protest at the misuse of the Temple, Jesus overturned the merchants' tables
- Jesus taught that violence is counter-productive. Violence encourages retaliation and so makes the situation worse. At his arrest he said to his disciples, 'Put away your swords. Those who live by the sword die by the sword.'

Weapons of mass destruction

- The possession of nuclear weapons is justified on the grounds of deterrence and protection. Governments have a duty to keep their citizens safe. Protection of the vulnerable is a key biblical teaching
- The potential for indiscriminate killing and injury to thousands of innocent people, eg at Hiroshima, can never be justified on any grounds. These weapons create terrible long-term misery and their use does not show 'love of neighbour'.

Pacifism

- Martin Luther King taught that hatred could only be driven out by the force of love. He achieved civil rights for black Americans without ever responding to violence with violence. This refusal to use force fulfilled Jesus' command to turn the other cheek.
- 'Blessed are the peacemakers' does not always prohibit some use of force and a war that follows the rules of the Just War theory may result in lasting peace. Bonhoeffer accepted that sometimes regimes are so evil that only the use of violence will overthrow them and restore justice.

Religion, crime and punishment

Corporal punishment

- Some fundamentalist Christians might accept it on the basis of Old Testament teaching such as: 'spare the rod and spoil the child'. They might think corporal punishment has a deterrent value. Providing it is not unduly harsh, such punishment might actually benefit the offender in the long term.
- Most Christians think that harsh treatment of others is shows a lack of love. It does not encourage the offender to think in terms of being forgiven and having a second chance. Moreover, Jesus' teaching that those who live by the sword die by the sword highlights its negative consequences.

Death penalty

- Some Christians think it is the only just penalty for some acts of murder. They interpret 'an eye for an eye, a life for a life' as sanctioning strict retribution. It means that the family of the victim will feel able to move on.
- Many denominations, eg the Anglican Church, oppose it as contrary to New Testament teaching to leave vengeance to God. Jesus rejected the 'eye for an eye' law with the words: If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the left also.

Forgiveness

- In the Lord's Prayer, Christians say 'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us'. When Peter asked Jesus whether it was sufficient to forgive someone seven times, Jesus replied, 'Not seven times but seventy times seven'; there should be no limits.
- Some Christians think that forgiveness can only be offered to those who are sorry for what they have done. Without repentance, forgiveness is

meaningless. Jesus said, 'If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him'.

Religion, human rights and social justice

Status of women in religion

- Some fundamentalist Christians take literally Paul's statement that women were not to speak in church, but if they had any questions, they should ask their husbands when back home. In their churches, women play no leading role in worship. They believe that Paul's teaching is valid for all ages and all situations.
- In many churches today, women play a leading role in worship. They are believed to have equal status with men as both are created in God's image. Paul told the Christians in Rome to support Phoebe who was a woman deacon.

The uses of wealth

- A few Christians interpret the saying in Proverbs 10 ('the blessing of the Lord brings wealth') to mean that having wealth is a sign of God's blessing. It is a reward and so the wealthy individual may spend it as he wishes, even if entirely on himself/herself.
- Most Christians believe that they have the duty of stewardship. That means using what they possess responsibly, sharing their wealth with those who are less fortunate as instructed in the New Testament. Jesus told a rich man to sell all his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor.

Freedom of religious expression

- Some Christians think that there should be some restrictions on freedom of religious expression in order to avoid hurt or offence. Only in this way is love of neighbour shown. Paul said that all things were permissible, but not all were beneficial.
- Some Christians think that all should be free to express freely their views on religion and to follow their religious practices etc. This is essential if respect for others is to be shown. Paul urged Christians to be tolerant of those who followed different food laws or who held worship on a different day.