

*Scholarship*  
*Religious Studies*

*Revision Notes*

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# Moral Decisions

## What are they?

Moral decisions concern basic rights and wrongs. Whether or not to steal, whether or not to get into a fight with someone else, or whether or not to help a friend if he is in need are all moral questions. However, deciding between salad or cooked option at lunch, or whether or not to have seconds, aren't moral dilemmas (although they could become moral if you were deliberately depriving someone else of food on account of your own greed...).

## Two useful terms

- Absolute Morality concerns a basic principle that is always true regardless of culture, religion, age, etc. For example, "It is always wrong to kill".
- Relative Morality is when different moral courses of action might be needed in different situations. For example, "It is almost always wrong to kill, but it might be justifiable in certain situations".

## How do we make moral decisions?

The main way in which we decide what to do is by using our conscience. This is the voice inside our heads which tells us what is right and what is wrong. It is very difficult to act against what your conscience is telling you – although not all consciences will be "correct".

## Conscience needs to be formed

All humans have the mental capacity to tell the difference between right and wrong; everyone has a conscience. However, this must be "formed". Depending on your background and experiences your conscience will have formed differently; hence everyone has a different idea of right and wrong. For example, if someone grows up surrounded by crime and vandalism and they never learn that it is wrong, their conscience might tell them that such acts are acceptable. We would disagree, because our consciences have been formed to recognise them to be wrong.

## What influences one's conscience?

- Family
- Friends
- Teachers
- Books
- Newspapers
- The Law (which is the same for everyone)
- Television
- Past experiences (what you've done, and what you've seen others do)

## Is a Christian conscience any different?

As well as the above, Christians will draw on their Church's teachings in order to form their consciences. They will also be influenced by the Bible, especially by passages such as:

- The Ten Commandments
- Jesus' ethical teaching

## Situation Ethics

Joseph Fletcher formulated the idea of "Situation Ethics". He said that, when it comes to making a moral decision, you should always do the most loving thing – after all, Jesus' ethical teaching was based around love. The problem with this is that the most loving thing might not be what your conscience is telling you to do. Also, the most loving thing in the short term might not be the most loving thing to do in the long term.

# How do Christians Interpret The Bible?

## Fundamentalist Interpretation

- A fundamentalist believes that the Bible contains the actual words spoken by God, and must be obeyed as such. The two creation accounts are not contradictory as the second simply “zooms in” on day six, as mentioned in account one.
- However, many would argue that this makes the Bible out-of-date, with little contemporary relevance in the twenty first century.

## Traditionalist Interpretation

- A traditionalist believes that the Bible represents the word of God, but the Church is needed to interpret what it is saying in the twenty first century.
- However, how can you be sure that all Churches and all ministers interpret the scriptures in the same way?

## Conservative Interpretation

- A conservative would argue that the Bible was inspired by God, but doesn't contain his actual words, so doesn't have to be obeyed literally. It is a book about faith, not literal fact. It contains general themes, and can easily go hand-in-hand with modern-day scientific theories.
- However, if you don't have to obey the Bible literally, and can interpret it for yourself, how can you be sure that you are interpreting it in the right way?

## Liberal Interpretation

- A liberal would say that the Bible was inspired by God, but written by humans, and reflects the life and times of the writers thousands of years ago.
- If this is the case, can the Bible hold any contemporary relevance for today?

# Euthanasia

## What is it?

Euthanasia is a Greek word meaning “good death”. It is the premature ending of someone’s life, by medical means, for compassionate reasons – often because they have some kind of incurable disease. It is illegal in the UK, but not in the Netherlands.

## Voluntary Euthanasia

This is when a person requests that he/she should be allowed to die either with administration of drugs, or by withdrawal of medical support. This might be in order to end suffering, pain, depression, etc.

## Involuntary Euthanasia

This is when a person cannot make the decision whether or not to end their life for themselves for whatever reason (e.g. if they are in a coma), and their family or loved ones consider it the kindest thing to do. This may involve a life support machine being turned off.

## Christians Arguments in favour of Euthanasia

- God wants everyone to have a decent quality of life, and some people don’t – so they should be allowed to end their lives prematurely if they wish.
- God is loving, and stopping suffering is a loving thing to do. (Fletcher – Situation Ethics)
- God has given people free will to act as they wish.

## Christian Arguments against Euthanasia

- Sanctity of life – God gives life; he should decide when to end it.
- It is more compassionate to care for the dying than to speed up their death.
- God’s plan – we do not always understand what goes on in this world; maybe there is a purpose to someone’s suffering.

## Non-Religious Arguments in favour of Euthanasia

- Everyone should have free will to act as they wish.
- Some would argue that, under the Human Rights Act, everyone has a right to euthanasia.
- Medical resources could be saved for those who have a better chance of survival.

## Non-Religious Arguments against Euthanasia

- Euthanasia involves taking someone’s life, and that is murder.
- Humans often make snap decisions without thinking things through, and then change their minds – this is a decision you can’t go back on.
- In the Hippocratic Oath, taken by all doctors, they swear to “do everything possible to preserve and restore life, not to take it”.

## Material Quality of Life

For many, this means money, possessions, accommodation, family and friends – the day-to-day luxuries. Some people might want to end their lives if they don’t have a decent material quality of life, and do not find their lives satisfying or fulfilling.

### **Religious/Spiritual Quality of Life**

Christians (and many others) would say that there is a deeper more spiritual purpose to life. Many Christians may judge quality of life based on relationships with God and those around them, and a feeling of “inner rightness”. Hence someone might be ill and in great pain, but have a reasonable spiritual quality of life, and be at peace within themselves.

### **A Christian Alternative to Euthanasia**

The hospice movement represents one main Christian alternative to Euthanasia. The first hospices were founded by Cicely Saunders. These are homes where the terminally ill are cared for, and can live out their days in dignity, with medical support. In addition, hospices will often offer temporary care to those who are suffering from serious illnesses, and support to their families and carers – they aren’t just places where people go to die.

# Abortion

## What is it?

Abortion is the halting of a foetus' development prematurely so that the baby isn't born. It is performed by injecting the developing baby with chemicals, or flushing the womb with chemicals.

## When can it happen?

It can be performed up to the 24<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy. (However, the baby looks like a human from week 9, and could survive outside the mother's body with medical support from before week 23.) If there is a danger that the baby will be seriously disabled, or the life or physical health of the mother is at risk, then there is no time limit.

## Why?

Abortions can be performed if:

- (a) The mother's mental health is at risk. (24 weeks)
- (b) An existing family will suffer if the pregnancy continues. (24 weeks)
- (c) The life or physical health of the mother is at risk. (no limit)
- (d) There is a reasonable chance that the baby will be born seriously disabled (no limit)

Two doctors must agree to an abortion, and it must be carried out on a registered premises.

## For

Pro-choice

- Better to have legal abortions than illegal (often dangerous) ones, which would inevitably take place anyway if abortion was prohibited.
- It may be the most loving thing to do to allow a mother to have a safe abortion.
- The foetus isn't really "human" in the first few weeks of pregnancy.
- Women must have free will to decide what happens to their bodies.
- Relative Morality – there is no definite right and wrong, but there are different rules for different situations.

## Against

Pro-life

- Life is sacred – God created it, and he should be the one to decide when to end it.
- Abortion is murder, as it destroys human life – which is a gift from God.
- Life should be respected, not ended prematurely.
- Importance of the soul – life begins at conception.
- Absolute Morality – there is one rule for all situations.

# Who is God?

## Some Definitions

- Theist someone who believes in God.  
Atheist someone who does not believe in God.  
Agnostic someone who is unsure about the existence of God; they can see arguments on both sides.

## Nature of God

- God is immanent – he is always nearby in the world, often in the form of a spirit. This is appealing to Christians because they can feel that God is always with them. However, that doesn't mean that he always does what people ask him to do.
- God is transcendent – he is heavenly, and from another world. He takes no active part in human life. This is appealing to Christians because they can feel that they are worshipping a divine being, who is perfect. However, does this make him beyond our reach?
- God is personal – in the form of Jesus, he is a real person, with experience of human life. This is appealing to Christians because they can feel that God understands human trials and temptations, and as a result is more approachable. Humans can have a personal relationship with him. However, does this really do justice to him?
- God is impersonal – he is different from normal people and is an all-seeing, all-knowing being. We don't know what he looks like. This is appealing to Christians because they want to worship a God who is all-powerful, and more important than anything in this world. However, can Christians really have a meaningful relationship with this kind of "force"?

## The Trinity – one God, three persons

The Father – the transcendent God who created the world and keeps it going.

The Son – the immanent and personal God who lived a human life.

The Spirit – immanent yet impersonal, inspiring Christians every day.

- The Father is wholly God, The Son is wholly God, The Spirit is wholly God; yet God is only one being.
- The three different persons of the Trinity complement each other to make up just one God.
- A poor analogy for this is three sides of a triangle. Although they all add together to make just one shape, one side on its own does not make a triangle.
- The best analogy for this is the mathematical concept of infinity.  $\text{Infinity} = \text{Infinity}$ . However,  $\text{Infinity} + \text{Infinity} + \text{Infinity} = \text{Infinity}$ .

## How God Reveals Himself

- General Revelation – impersonal and available to all (e.g. natural world, reason, conscience).
- Special Revelation – individual (e.g. dreams, visions, personal experience).
- Old Testament – sometimes a vengeful, warlike God. Forgiving, but still gave out punishments. Impersonal.
- New Testament – much more loving, approachable, personal, forgiving God
- Today, Christians might experience God through The Bible, prayers, the natural world, pilgrimage and going to Church.

# Crime and Punishment

## Some Definitions

<u>Crime</u>	an act which is against the law
<u>Sin</u>	an act which is against the will of God
	However, sins might not also be crimes, and crimes might not also be sins (e.g. committing adultery is regarded by Christians as a sin, but it isn't against the law)
<u>Justice</u>	the consequences of your actions. Punishment (or reward), given out in order to maintain what is right, and encourage others to behave properly. Trying to be as 'just' (fair) as possible.

## What are Laws for?

- Laws/consequences (justice) have always been an integral part of life. They protect people, give them a sense of security and form the basis of a safe society.
- The first written laws were the Ten Commandments.
- Everyone's consciences differ; however the law sets the same expectations for all and provides a universal benchmark against which to judge rights and wrongs.

## Just Laws

St Thomas Aquinas said that laws need to be "Just" – people needn't necessarily agree with all of them, but they must understand that they are both necessary and fair. He argued that having unjust rules would encourage people to break them or take the law into their own hands, feeling that they were doing the right thing according to their consciences.

## Christian attitudes towards Justice

- God is a God of justice.
- The Bible says that people should treat each other fairly and not cheat. Jesus reinforces this in his teaching, treating people honestly and with compassion.

## One type of Justice – Punishment. What is its purpose?

- Retribution/Punishment of the criminal – criminals should 'pay' for the crimes that they have committed and suffer for what they have done wrong. The punishment must 'fit' the crime.
- Reform of the criminal – Part of the punishment should be to reform criminals so that they have a better sense of right and wrong, they are sorry for what he did, and they won't commit more crimes in the future. Some would say this is the most important part of 'justice'.
- Deter others – By punishing criminals severely, this should deter others from committing the same crime in the future.
- Protect others – Many criminals are removed from general society as part of their punishment. This protects others in the community from potentially dangerous characters.

## Christian attitudes towards Punishment

- Some Christians feel that they should not judge others – that is God's job. After all, no one is perfect (original sin). As a result, justice should be used primarily to reform criminals so they see the errors of their ways. This means that something good can come out of something bad.
- Other Christians argue that punishments are an integral part of human society. We are using our free will and our sense of right and wrong in order to govern ourselves and maintain standards of behaviour. Without punishment, the law cannot be upheld. After all, Jesus threw the money changers out of the Temple – surely that was a punishment!

### Capital Punishment – the death penalty, suitable for murderers?

- This is the ultimate deterrent, the ultimate way to protect society, and some would argue it is fitting retribution against murderers – the punishment fits the crime.
- Others argue that it doesn't really deter others – you cannot eradicate crime whatever you do. There is a danger that terrorists may be seen as martyrs if they are executed (encouraging others), and if the courts convict the wrong person you cannot turn the clock back.
- Although some Christians would argue that Capital Punishment is the best way to prevent murder and keep order in society, it makes any kind of wish to reform the criminal impossible. As Jesus came to 'reform' sinners, many Christians today feel a responsibility to do likewise. They also feel that life is sacred – God created it, so he should be the one to decide when it ends.
- Does imposing the death penalty make you sink to the level of the murderer, by taking away yet another life?

### Dietrich Bonhoeffer – a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned for following his conscience.

#### Was he right?

Bonhoeffer was born in 1906. He was lecturer and chaplain at Berlin University, and became head of a German training college for student pastors. He was a pacifist, and told his students that the Nazis and Hitler were wrong. Bonhoeffer encouraged them to refuse to do military service for the Nazis, and oppose the Nazi persecution of the Jews, as these were in conflict with Christian principles. He spoke publicly about how Christians should not obey laws that contradicted their religious ideals. He was arrested in 1937 and imprisoned for a few weeks. After his release, he became involved in plots to assassinate Hitler. He was eventually executed at Flossenberg concentration camp in April 1945.

# The Problem of Evil

## Some Definitions

- Suffering Bad things that happen to human beings
- Moral Evil Humans doing something that is morally wrong, causing suffering for others.  
e.g. robbery or stabbing
- Natural Evil Events that cause suffering, but which are not controlled by humans.  
e.g. earthquakes or natural disasters

## God's attitude towards suffering

- Maybe God doesn't care about human suffering? Maybe he isn't all loving? Or maybe there is a loving purpose to suffering that we don't understand?
- Maybe God can't do anything about human suffering? Maybe he isn't all powerful? Or maybe he chooses to be powerless for reasons we don't understand?
- Maybe God doesn't know about human suffering? Maybe he isn't all knowing? Or maybe he knows so much that he can see the whole picture – which we can't?

## Why do people suffer?

- Test – perhaps suffering is a test, to see how people react.
- Punishment – maybe suffering is a punishment for what people have done wrong.
- Part of God's plan – perhaps suffering is part of a grand plan that humans cannot understand. There are some things which we are simply unable to comprehend.

(See the book of Job in the Bible for an example of an innocent person who is subjected to great suffering.)

## Why doesn't God prevent suffering?

- Humans have free will to act as they wish. They will often choose to do the wrong thing.
- There is a balance of nature in the world. One person's suffering might result in someone else's gain. For example, a flood might destroy and kill, but it will also water crops. An earthquake is caused by the same forces that created the land on which we live.
- Jesus suffered too – perhaps suffering is an intrinsic part of God's plan for mankind?

Free Will often results in humans choosing the wrong course of action. This might be because of:

- Original Sin – when Adam and Eve ate the fruit, they let sin into the world, and everyone ever since has been born with a tendency towards evil.
- Satan – some Christians would say that the devil is an ever-present force in the world, tempting people to do wrong.
- Absence of good – St Augustine (4<sup>th</sup> century AD) said that evil does not actually exist; it is simply the absence of people doing good. The more people do good, the more the influence of evil decreases.
- Damaged Minds – our consciences are influenced by many factors, not all of which are good. Perhaps, for some, a kind of 'psychological conditioning' leads them to do evil, as they believe it to be either right or acceptable.

# The Environment

The environment is the natural world around us, and most Christians agree that they have a duty to protect it for future generations.

## Problems

- The Greenhouse Effect – burning fossil fuels produces carbon dioxide which forms a layer in the atmosphere. Warmth from the sun can get in but not out. This gradually heats up the earth.
- Acid Rain – burning fossil fuels releases chemicals such as sulphuric acid which pollute the rain clouds. This makes the rain acidic, damaging buildings and wildlife.
- Deforestation – trees perform many vital functions, such as replacing carbon dioxide with oxygen. We are cutting them down at an alarming rate.
- Radioactive Pollution – nuclear waste from power stations could take millions of years to make safe. It is currently being buried; however any leaks may have disastrous effects on the environment.
- Natural Resources – oil, coal, iron, tin etc. are finite resources, and one day they will be used up which will have a major effect on people's lives.

## Action

- Government Action – In 1997, 55 countries signed the Kyoto Protocol, agreeing to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 5.2%.
- Science and Technology – New methods of generating electricity and running cars are being developed, for example hydro-electric and solar power (using renewable resources) and LPG fuel for cars.
- Alternative Lifestyles – for example using bicycles or public transport, recycling paper and other materials, and buying organic food can all help to preserve the environment.

## Non Christian Motives

- Non-Christians might be motivated to help the environment because this is a good and responsible thing to do. They want to leave the world in a better state than when they found it as this is a thoughtful and sensible way of leading one's life.

## Christian Stewardship

- Stewardship is taking care of something that is not yours so that it can be passed on to future generations. Christians would add that God created the world, so it is his. As a result they should be responsible members of the human race, preserving the earth for future generations. At the time of creation in Genesis, God gave humans power and responsibility over everything, so they should use this gift wisely. In addition, there will be a 'judgement day', and if Christians have helped to preserve God's creation then this will work in their favour. However, there needs to be a balance – shutting down a factory that causes pollution but also employs 1,000 people might not necessarily be the most morally responsible thing to do...

# War

Most Christians agree that war should be avoided. However, many understand that going to war is sometimes a necessity.

## Possible Causes of War

- Power
- Protection
- Assets
- Allegiance
- Election
- Vengeance
- Status

## Holy War

- A war on behalf of God.
- For example, The Crusades in the Middle Ages.
- Nowadays, Christian 'holy wars' are no longer fought.

## Just War

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Aquinas defined a Just War:

- It must be started by the ruler, or with the authority of the state.
- There must be a just cause, i.e. those who are attacked must deserve it.
- The war must be fought to promote good against evil. Peace and justice must subsequently be restored.

The following clauses were later added:

- War must be a last resort, having tried other possibilities.
- Undue force should not be used – only enough to ensure victory.
- The good from the victory must be proportionally greater than the original evil.

## No War

- Pacifists would argue against violence.
- Conscientious Objectors in the First World War refused to fight.

## Martin Luther King

- A good example of someone who used non violent protest to achieve his goals. See page 17 for short notes about him.

# The Welfare State

In 1942, Sir William Beveridge (a Liberal) produced a report that looked into caring for the poor, and ensuring that everyone in society had various basic entitlements. Remember – this was at the time of the Second World War, and the country was not in a strong position.

## Five Evil Giants

Beveridge highlighted “five evil giants” which he felt needed to be addressed. They were:

- Want – poverty, sickness, widows, the unemployed.
- Disease – no free medical treatment, had to pay for doctors, many couldn't afford this.
- Squalor – many people lived in slums.
- Idleness – over 10% of the workforce unemployed.
- Ignorance – secondary education had to be paid for. Most left school at 14.

## The First Changes

- School for everyone up to the age of 15.
- National Insurance.
- National Health Service.
- Council House buildings and new towns.
- Nationalised industries – railways, mines, steel.

## Today

- Free education up to the age of 18.
- Free doctors and hospitals.
- Additional help with glasses, dentistry and prescriptions.
- Disability payments.
- Social Security payments.
- Pensions for the elderly.
- Child benefit.
- Unemployment benefit.
- Housing benefit.
- Job centres and training centres.

## Why?

- Everyone has the right to a decent standard of living.
- We have a moral responsibility to help those less fortunate than ourselves (through paying our taxes, etc.).
- Treat others as you would like them to treat you – help them when/where you can.
- Christians would say that the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) outline their responsibilities both towards God and also towards other people.
- Jesus' teaching makes it clear that Christians have a duty to help others – Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:37-40). Christians have a duty to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, visit the sick and help those in prison.

# The Red Cross

- The Red Cross (and Red Crescent) movement is the world's largest humanitarian organisation.
- It is neither a political nor a religious organisation.
- It helps people in crisis situations, wherever and whenever they are.
- It was founded in 1863 with the purpose of providing essential aid wherever it was needed. There are now Red Cross societies in many countries throughout the world.
- Seven universal principles:
  - Humanity Everyone is entitled to basic human rights.
  - Impartiality The Red Cross is un-biased – they will help wherever this is needed, without any form of discrimination.
  - Neutrality They will not take sides in a conflict situation.
  - Independence The Red Cross is independent of government.
  - Voluntary Service Much work is done by unpaid volunteers, and the charity does not exist in order to make a profit for itself.
  - Unity The Red Cross believes in working together, aiming for a common goal; there is only one Red Cross Society in any country, and it is open to all.
  - Universality The Red Cross is a worldwide organisation, and will provide aid wherever it is needed.
- In 2005, The Red Cross raised £116 million.
- What The Red Cross does in the UK:
  - Responds to emergencies such as floods, fires, evacuations.
  - Trains more than 150,000 first aiders every year.
  - Provides assistance to refugees and asylum seekers.
- What The Red Cross does overseas:
  - Immediately responds with essential aid at the time of natural disasters (for example earthquakes, tsunamis).
  - Helps innocent victims caught up in conflict, for example in Darfur.
  - Provides health care and health education in some of the poorest countries.

[www.redcross.org.uk](http://www.redcross.org.uk)

## Christian Aid

- Christian Aid is an agency of churches in the UK and Ireland working wherever the need is greatest, irrespective of religion or race.
- It works on the fundamental principle that all life is sacred.
- It aims to eradicate poverty and injustice in the world. It is also concerned with climate change, HIV/Aids, and promoting Fair Trade products.
- Christian Aid helps people to help themselves, investing in things that multiply (e.g. chickens, that lay eggs). Education an important part of this, too.
- Christian Aid also provides short-term micro loans.
- The charity offers support in over 60 of the world's poorest countries (e.g. Africa)

[www.christian-aid.org.uk](http://www.christian-aid.org.uk)

# Famous People

## Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) – also see notes on page 9

- Stood up for his beliefs and was a pacifist.
- Academic & head of a German training college for pastors (founding member of *The Confessing Church*).
- Encouraged people to refuse to do Nazi military service.
- Publicly opposed persecution of Jews – said that this was against Christian principles.
- Helped Jews to escape.
- Involved in the resistance movement, and plots to assassinate Hitler.
- Imprisoned and executed at Flossenberg concentration camp on 9<sup>th</sup> April 1945.

## Martin Luther King (1929-1968)

- American civil rights leader.
- Stood up for his beliefs and was a pacifist.
- Baptist minister.
- Problems black people faced included:
  - having to go to special schools.
  - having to shop in special shops
  - having to sit at the back of buses.
  - having difficulty in voting.
  - being paid half of a white person's salary.
- 1955 – Montgomery bus boycott. Rosa Parks. The next year, the law was changed.
- 1963 – organised a peaceful march of schoolchildren in Birmingham, Alabama. Police response included dogs and high-pressure water hoses. Many children injured.
- 1964 – Nobel Peace Prize.
- 1965 – peaceful march to encourage equal voting rights for blacks. Police used tear gas and batons. Before long, the law was changed.
- Pictures of police aggression were broadcast on television around the world; Martin Luther-King, his cause and his non-violent protests gained worldwide support.
- 1968 – assassinated by James Earl Ray.

## Mother Teresa (1910-1997)

- Followed her conscience even though this wasn't straightforward.
- Helped others without any thought of reward for herself.
- Worked in the slums of Calcutta.
- Started a new order of nuns called *The Missionaries of Charity*.
  - She opened a home for the destitute dying – regardless of their beliefs. No one turned away.
  - She started schools for the poor.
  - She set up a special town for lepers.
  - Won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.