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Supporting A-level Religious Studies. The St Mary's and St Giles' Centre

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Supporting Religious Studies at A-level and beyond

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The St Mary's and St Giles' Centre
Llys Onnen
Abergwyngregyn
Gwynedd
LL33 0LD
Telephone: 01248 680131
E-mail: smc.taniaapsion@gmail.com
http://www.st-marys-centre.org.uk

St Peter's Saltley Trust
Grays Court
3 Nursery Road
Edgbaston
Birmingham B15 3JX
Telephone 0121 427 6800
E- mail: director@saltleytrust.org.uk
Website: https://www.saltleytrust.org.uk

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Challenging Religious Issues
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What Questions Can We Ask about Jesus' Birth Narratives?

Jane Heath

People ask many questions about the birth narratives in the Gospels, but we should be cautious to try to focus on the questions that the narratives can answer. We cannot prove from them what actually happened or how exactly Jesus was conceived, but we can see how early Christians found meaning in the events that had taken place among them, and how that meaning communicated to them God's interaction with the world in the incarnation of his Son.

Specification links:
EDEXCEL Paper 3: New Testament Studies: Extract (1) Matthew 1:18–2:23. (Also Paper 4, option 4B: Christianity, Topic 2.2 Nature and role of Jesus; Topic 3.2 (a) Nativity: nature and role in Christian devotion?)
OCR 2c. Developments in Religious Thought (H573/03): 2. Foundations; The person of Jesus Christ, Jesus' relationship with God
WJEC / CBAC / EDUQAS: Unit 1: Option A: An Introduction to the Study of Christianity, Theme 1: Religious figures and sacred texts (part 1), Knowledge and understanding of religion and belief; A. Jesus – his birth: Consistency and credibility of the birth narratives (Matthew 1:18-2:23; Luke 1:26-2:40); harmonisation and redaction; interpretation and application of the birth narratives to the doctrine of the incarnation (substantial presence and the kenotic model)
SCOTTISH HIGHERS: World Religion, Christianity: beliefs about Jesus

Introduction

According to the fourth-century theologian, Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-c. 394), it was in his day impossible to go anywhere without people stopping to debate about Jesus' birth and begetting. In a humorous passage in one of his treatises, he quips that you could not even change a coin at the moneychanger's or ask the price of bread or enquire whether the bath is ready without getting an answer in terms of the theology of the Begotten and the Unbegotten, or the relation between the Father and the Son (*On the Divinity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,* GNO X/2, 120.14–121.14).[1] His near contemporary, Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306-373), wrote hymns and poetry that starkly warned people away from investigating that which

[1] This may in fact be a jibe at Gregory's opponents, casting them as riff-raff (Drecoll, & Berghaus, 2010, p. xii).

God has kept hidden. 'The begetting of the Son' is his foremost example:

> Quiet your mouths,
> silence your tongues,
> let stupor fall upon your lips,
> A wonder inhabit your souls.
> The senses and the limbs will quake
> at the Son's story.
> (*Hymns on faith*, 37.17, Wickes, 2015, p. 216)

Appropriate questioning

So, what questions should we ask today when we approach these narratives? In our wider social environment, we could go a long way without meeting anyone who was interested in discussing how the Son of God was begotten, but if someone did ask, they would probably be rather annoyed with us if we stopped the conversation by claiming that it is a divine mystery that is wholly ineffable. In the scholarly world, people often deliberately set out to investigate things that are difficult and that have the potential to disrupt existing structures of belief and power. This is because scholars are trying to build up the common good by pursuing our shared truth and allowing silenced voices to be heard. And yet, even in the modern academy, it is important to be cautious about what kinds of questions it is fitting to ask. To take a frivolous example, there is no point in studying a shopping list in order to learn about the philosophy of ideas, since that is not what a shopping list is designed to teach us.

Correspondingly, when we pose questions of ancient texts, including the infancy narratives, we need to be cautious that we are asking questions that are appropriate to the texts that are in front of us. What kinds of text are they, and what questions do they allow us to answer? Why were they written, and what is their idiom of communication?

Are these narratives plausible?

One question that some people have tried to ask is, 'Are the infancy narratives plausible?' This is not a question that Ephrem would have welcomed. In order to try to address it, scholars approach the narrative with tools of historical investigation and aim to get underneath the text to a story of 'what actually happened'. Sometimes this goes hand-in-hand with a 'hermeneutic of suspicion', where scholars assume that the miracles taught by the church are a cover-up for a darker true history. A classic example is *Virgin birth? The real story of Mary and her son Jesus* by Gerd Lüdemann (1946-2021), a Protestant theologian based in Tübingen in Germany. Lüdemann worked through the early sources exploring what the author was likely to have meant, what tradition he likely received, and the historical value of the tradition. He concluded that 'the statement that Jesus was engendered by the Spirit and born of a virgin is a falsification of the historical facts', which arose partly in response to those who thought that Mary conceived out of wedlock, and partly in order to endow Jesus with status among others whose birth was attributed to God (Lüdemann, 1998, pp. 140-141). In Lüdemann's opinion, Jesus was Joseph's child, but a bastard.

Jane Schaberg (2005), taking a feminist angle, also disbelieves the virgin birth, but she suggests that Mary was raped during her betrothal by someone other than Joseph. She recalls that the Deuteronomic law demands that a virgin in that position should be stoned if she could have called for help but did not, whereas she should be spared if it happened in a place where no help could come (Deuteronomy 22:23-27). In her view, this was the law that Joseph was

contemplating when he considered divorcing Mary, and Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14 to respond to this dilemma: the prophet promised that the virgin would conceive and her son would be called Emmanuel, meaning 'God with us'. Whereas the church has interpreted this as a reference to a miraculous virgin birth, Schaberg suggests that it is rather a redemption for this raped virgin from the punishment and stigma evoked in Deuteronomy 22. Mary was the 'virgin' and Jesus the bastard child of rape.

Not all modern scholars, however, read these texts with quite so much suspicion about the guidance of ecclesial tradition. Stories were told then, as now, in order to articulate meaning and make sense of the world, in ways that matter to those who tell them. Modern psychologists who seek to use narrative methods observe that narratives are not transparent to 'what actually happened', but are the way people articulate meaning in their own lives, through their own ways of thinking and those that they share with the culture around them. Narratives of the same events change over time as people rearticulate their story from a new perspective, or for a new context (Adler et al., 2017). Similarly, when we explore the birth narratives of Jesus as historians, we should consider how the authors are attempting to involve their audiences in a symbolic world that *interprets* the history of 'what actually happened', and finds meaning within it. What was the meaning that the authors found in these stories?

The Gospel stories

The New Testament contains four narratives of Jesus' life, each of which is told in a unique way. Only two of them include stories about his birth. Mark and John found other ways to establish Jesus' relationship to deity. In Mark, this is done at the start by the Isaianic prologue, where God appears to be speaking to Jesus in heaven, telling him that he is sending his messenger before him to prepare his way (Mark 1:1-3). In John, the prologue affirms that 'The Word was made flesh', but does not say how, just that this was how he 'revealed his glory' (John 1:14). In John's Gospel the mother of Jesus appears in narratives that mark the beginning and end of Jesus' public ministry (John 2:1-12; 19:25-27), but it is 'my father who sent me' who is constantly on Jesus' lips, pointing to the divine father whom he makes visible and knowable as Son (John 14:6) (Frey, 2011).

Matthew and Luke, on the other hand, find it meaningful to begin with Jesus' birth. Their narratives are rather different from each other in perspective and focus. Matthew focuses on Joseph, while Luke focuses on Mary. Matthew emphasises Joseph's fear of humiliation at the seeming scandal of Mary's pregnancy; Luke underscores Mary's and Elizabeth's joy. Matthew tells the story of the visit of the Magi and the rivalry with king Herod, Luke narrates the visit of the shepherds and the census of Augustus. Matthew writes about the fulfilment of scripture; Luke records the new poetry of Mary, Zechariah and the angels. However, these differences are not contradictory so much as complementary. Furthermore, the narratives are consistent on several points: most importantly, they both try to show that Jesus' birth is unusual, and that he is conceived of a virgin while she was still betrothed. They both connect this conception to his divine origin, and to the manifestation of God's messiah on earth. Both also celebrate the reversal of earthly world orders, in Matthew, by the counterpoint to King Herod; in Luke, by the woman's voice celebrating that 'he has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has exalted the humble and

meek.' It is possible, although uncertain, that one of the evangelists knew the other's narrative and simply tried to tell it differently, with different emphases (Watson, 2016, pp. 61-79).

But does either narrative actually tell us *how* Jesus was conceived? This is another question that Ephrem deterred us from asking, but that has not stopped scholars from trying to ask it. And yet, the answer is surely 'No'. On the contrary, they repeatedly draw our attention to the issue, and then stop short of actually coming up with an explanation. Matthew does this first by the genealogy, which traces a line all the way down to Joseph, but conspicuously avoids calling Joseph Jesus' father. Having listed everyone else with the phrase 'X begat Y', he ends with a completely different formula, 'Joseph, the husband of Mary, from whom Jesus was born ...' (Matthew 1:16). Joseph's own ignorance about how Mary came to be pregnant, and his intense emotional involvement in this situation, underscore how hidden it is in the eyes of the world, even in the eyes of Joseph who becomes the protector and husband of Mary, Jesus' mother. The appearance of the angel and the announcement that the scripture will be fulfilled show that this is from heaven, and that it somehow interprets this scripture in a new way, but Matthew does not explain how. The quotation from Isaiah describes the girl as *parthenos,* which is the Greek for 'virgin', and differs from the underlying Hebrew, *alma,* which meant only 'young woman', and it says the child would be called 'Emmanuel - God with us', but does not say in what sense. Herod's wrath and the Magi's reverence demonstrate that the event was momentous, and that Jesus' royalty was perceived as a counterpoint to Herod's, but in the story Jesus remains hidden, fleeing to Egypt.

Luke also does not explain Jesus' conception. When the angel pronounces that Mary will bear a son to sit on David's throne, she wonders how this can be because she does not 'know a man' (Luke 1:34). The angel gives a response in terms of the spirit and power of the Most High overshadowing her, but this is hardly a full explanation. Some modern scholars have wanted to discover more, and recent discussion has drawn on Greco-Roman theories of conception to interpret the portrayal of Jesus' conception in Luke: in Greco-Roman narratives, typically three agents are involved, *sperma, pneuma* and *dynamis,* or *seed, spirit* and *power.* Luke mentions two of these -- spirit (*pneuma*) and power (*dynamis*) -- but the *sperma* is conspicuously absent (Luke 1:35; Pope, 2019). Andrew Lincoln helpfully reminds us that the miracle of the virgin birth, as traditionally understood, was not that God miraculously added the male input so that Mary could bear Christ as God incarnate, but rather that God miraculously infused the divine so that the humanity contributed by Mary could be born as God-man. It is because Christ was born of Mary that he is human, it is because God is his father that he is divine (Lincoln, 2020, p. 272). *How* exactly that came about at the moment of conception is not finally answered by the birth narratives.

What we are left with above all is Mary's consent, 'Be it unto me according to thy word' (Luke 1:38), and her model of faith for all disciples (Luke 1:45). In fact, in both narratives, it is the act of *obedience* of the human to the divine will that stands out most clearly and explicitly in the midst of events that are momentous, divinely orchestrated, but not fully comprehended. Joseph 'did what the angel of the Lord told him' (Matt 1:24, cf. 2:13-14, 19-21), and so did Mary. Both

did so in humble circumstances; for Matthew's Joseph, this involved the humiliation of discovering his betrothed unexpectedly pregnant, and the fear of fleeing with her to Egypt; for Luke's Mary, it involved the joy that God had looked with favour upon her 'humility' (sometimes translated 'lowliness') as his servant (Luke 1:48), and nursing the babe in a manger, attended by shepherds. Both displayed loving fidelity to each other and to the child in the way they lived out their strange calling. This is consistent with the pre-medieval doctrine of *kenosis*, which focused on God's association with the humility of humanity through the Son, rather than a change in divine nature as such (Brown, 2011, p. 1).

The narratives are told with the intellectual humility of devout authors who find meaning in the stories without presuming to know or teach more than they are sure of. In approaching such stories, St Ephrem's caution about enquiring into what God has kept hidden may, after all, not be misplaced.

Glossary

hermeneutic of suspicion: an approach to interpretation that sets out to uncover harsh realities of injustice, immorality or power play that the interpreter assumes are being masked through what is actually presented.

kenosis: God's self-emptying in the incarnation. The noun *kenosis* has become common in modern theological discussion of the incarnation; it draws on Paul's language in Philippians 2:7 where he describes Christ Jesus as one who 'emptied himself', using the verb *kenoō* 'empty'.

Discussion points

1. What do you think Matthew and Luke are aiming to convey about Jesus in their birth narratives? Why?
2. What questions are appropriate to ask of these texts? When is it inappropriate to ask a particular question?
3. What is the value (if any) of exploring possible alternative readings that are consistent with the text but subvert the dominant narrative of the church?

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Jane Heath teaches and studies New Testament and Patristics at Durham University. She can be contacted at j.m.f.heath@durham.ac.uk.

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Studying the Gospels: A Situational Approach

James M. M. Francis

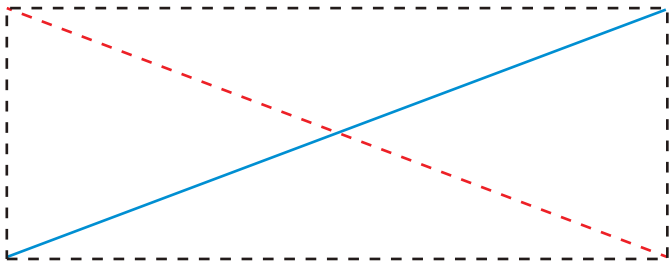
This article presents a framework for studying the Gospels informed by reflection on human identity, meaning and purpose. The framework is briefly described and then applied to each of the Four Gospels in the New Testament. Working with such a framework arguably contributes to what is sometimes described as doing theology from below.

Specification links:
As background study for
EDEXCEL Paper 3: New Testament Studies
OCR 2c. Developments in Christian thought (H573/03), 2 Foundations: Person of Jesus Christ
SCOTTISH HIGHERS Christianity; Beliefs, Practices.
WJEC/CBAC Unit 6, Themes 1 and 2

Introduction

When Jesus commanded his followers to look for and live by signs of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God, or (in Johannine language) to live out the truth of the Incarnation, that was not without attention to its setting in human life and experience (Jenkins, 1978). What might that situatedness look like?

I suggest it could be something like this:

<table>
<tr><td></td><td>Customs, traditions and worldviews that guide us</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Experiences that shape us (including learning and knowledge absorbed and put to use)</td><td>  </td><td>Issues that concern us</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>Contexts that address us</td><td></td></tr>
</table>

This chart might fairly represent, in a minimal way, something of the framework of human endeavour that can exist either at the macro or the micro level as we engage with our world.

We all work, one way or another, with the contexts in which we find ourselves, with what we have inherited by way of traditions (including customs, worldviews and outlooks), with experiences of life (including learning and knowledge assimilated and employed), and with the issues and challenges that concern us. In reflecting on the interaction of these elements, we can arrange (as in the blue line) a segment that would embrace traditions and experiences over against (in a tensive balance) the arena of contexts and issues. In this fashion, who we are shaped by our past and our life experience will influence our understanding of context and issues. But equally if we set the balance along the (broken) red line, here we will recognise how life experiences and contexts interact closely with (and may possibly even challenge) the traditions we have received in relation to the issues we face.

Arguably, a perusal of the Gospels shows how the above underlying framework emerges in the Gospel narratives.

Since the Gospels were written not as instruments of evangelism but as Christ-shaped narrative exhortations to church communities in sustaining and renewing their faith, it may not be too much to suggest that some such human framework of traditions, experiences, contexts and issues will have helped to shape the Gospels as we have them today. That is to say, the relationship between Gospels and life is more one of inter-animation than of one-way application (Barton, 1992; Burridge, 1994; Houlden, 2002). It is this that to some extent explains the plurality of the church's affirmation of Christ in four Gospels rather than one, and the enduring significance of the Gospels themselves in their portraiture of Christ. Here we can only sketch some of the resonances.

If we were to take the square above and fill it with a central focus, then we might say:

- for Matthew it is Immanuel, God with us (Matthew 1:23);
- for Mark it is the Good News (Mark 1:1, 15);
- for Luke it is 'Following in the Way' (Luke 9:51ff; Acts 9:2); and
- for John it is 'The Witness to God's Glory' (John 1.14).

Each of these perspectives is shaped by and forms itself into a story through the four sides of the square.

Matthew

God with us'

***Context*:** this is a mixed congregation, with a need to grow in community and in light of external hostility from the synagogue, perhaps relating to questions of righteousness (cf. 5:17-20, prefaced by the Beatitudes, and the antitheses of chapter 5). For Matthew, the congregation of Jesus is righteous, but with more weight given to ethics than ritual observance (quoting Hosea 6:6 twice, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice', in the stories at 9:9-13 and 12:1-8, and noting Matthew's emphasis on fruits as evidence of faith at 3:7-10; 7:17, 20; 21:18-19, 41).

***Tradition*:** Matthew is pre-eminently noted for his gathering of Jesus' teaching and for his relating that teaching, as a new code, to the way in which it can address a mixed congregation of Jewish and Gentile Christians.

***Experience*:** Matthew's Jesus reminds the church of what they know. The law is

fulfilled, and the law is to be kept, but this is done primarily through love (19:19, in Matthew only; cf. 22:36, 38 also in Matthew only). Hence the warning about the waning of love in the last days (24:12). What the Jesus of Matthew presents is not a higher righteousness, a doing more than the Pharisees, but a focus on the attitude of the heart (as in the garment parable that has become embedded in the parable of the Wedding Feast, cf. 23:27).

***Issues*:** The commandment to love God and neighbour is in Matthew allied to forgiveness and reconciliation. The church faces particular issues of authority and leadership. In chapter 23 the followers of Jesus are to call no one 'father'. This is not a leaderless community, but leadership is expressed mutually in forgiveness as in the specific commandment to Peter (18:21ff), in care for little ones and in good works (25:23ff). The key metaphors are familial ones: household (19:29) and siblings (18:15ff). So, for Matthew there is a point made to everyone in the congregation at 7:21 that to belong to the church is not a matter of externals but of the heart. This is the key identity of the church (*ekklesia* 16:18; 18:17) based upon Jesus as God with us. So Jesus' promise is to be with his followers always, and thus he sends them out to extend his message and presence in all the world (28:20). At 28:17, where it says some doubted, this is not doubt over the Resurrection but whether they are up to the great commission. The only way is to enter into the discipleship that is outlined of faith marked by love, forgiveness, not being judgemental and inner righteousness proved in good works.

Mark

'The Good News'

***Context*:** if Matthew was about the response to God-with-us, Mark is about a response to the revelation of God in Jesus as true. This is fundamental, in that Mark's context is very likely one of persecution of the church in Rome. Whose power is greater – Caesar or God?

***Tradition*:** The habits and practices of Jesus are informed by his Jewish roots. This is very much a Jewish Jesus who offers prayer, is concerned for the purity of the Temple, goes to Jerusalem in obedience, acknowledges God as the sovereign Lord of all creation (10:6; 13:19), the only God (12:29). This God is also mystery – but made known in the paradox of Jesus' self-giving. The word 'tradition' comes up in Mark in the 'traditioning 'of Jesus (literally, 'handing over'). The word is used in Mark in the passive ('being handed over') at 1:14 about John the Baptizer; 9:31; 10:33; and no less than ten times in the Passion narrative of Jesus (and at 13:9, 11-12) of the followers of Jesus. So there is an enigma here (handing on/betrayal) woven into the course of history. However, if Christians are handed over, yet they should trust in God whose mystery is shown in Jesus. For Mark, the church is not so much the recipient of tradition but, as focused on Jesus, standing in it as in a stream.

***Experience*:** clearly Mark's Gospel is about a theme of suffering that engages the church in Rome. This is made dramatic in that, in the Passion narrative, Jesus speaks only three times. He dies with a cry that God has abandoned him – so Jesus is not spared the depths of feeling abandoned. The affirmation is made (by a Roman soldier, no less!) that he is a/the son of God, and he promises that his followers will see him again in Galilee (which for Mark is a metaphor of the world into which Jesus has gone – he is not back in Jerusalem, unlike in Luke).

But it is only the risk of faith that will prove this.

***Issues*:** Mark's Gospel addresses the key themes of faith and witness. The idea of way or path is a significant metaphor, especially after the hinge narrative of 8:31ff as the first announcement of the Passion and Peter's confession of Jesus as messiah. In fact, each of the Passion predictions is accompanied by the phrase 'on the way' (8:27; 9:33f; 10:32). This is allied to the phrase of 'going before', which as a path to the Passion also appears in the promise of resurrection (16:7 – 'he is going before you into Galilee; there you will see him'). The path of faith for Mark is not one that is exclusive to the disciples – they can fail to discern Jesus and outsiders can come in. So Mark is keen to emphasise that following Jesus is for everyone who responds in faith – neither his inner circle nor his family are privileged in that respect. But this means that bearing witness is open to controversy and conflict – as John announced the Way (1:2-3) he is executed by Herod (6:14-29), and as the disciples reproach a woman for anointing Jesus (a royal sign, but not in Jerusalem but in a leper's house 14:3ff) and for wasting money, Jesus rebukes them. Sacrificial offering is counter-cultural.

Luke

'Following in the Way'

***Context*:** Luke's Gospel is the first part of a two-volume work. He writes for the church from a particular perspective of being called to the universality of mission. The song of the angels in welcoming Jesus' birth reaches its climax at the end of Acts and the witness of Paul in Rome. For Luke, the end of the Gospel in the Ascension leads on to the birth of the church in Pentecost, just as Jesus' genealogy is traced back to Adam. So the context of the Gospel and the church is the wide world of humanity.

***Tradition*:** Luke emphasises the origins of the church as rooted in Jesus. Historically, it is important for him that the disciples of Jesus become the core of the emerging church. Nevertheless, historical continuity is not everything. It stands alongside and in partnership with the presence of the Spirit. For Luke, tradition and Spirit are not at variance, as they came to be at subsequent moments in the church; they are in a tensive dialogue. This, for Luke, is allied to the theme of prayer as a key aspect of his writings; to be faithful to the tradition is through prayer, which itself is a means by which tradition can cut across custom, where the latter may become a vehicle of prejudice and narrow-mindedness.

***Experience*:** a key feature of Luke is the note of joy (24% of New Testament occurrences of joy are in Luke-Acts). Another key feature is that of repentance and change, which bring new life. The Gospel is about making a difference, and the gospel can make a difference. The parables of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan (found only in Luke) make the point about the difference that faith makes, with warnings to the self-assured contained within them. This also suggests that, for Luke, conversion is a continuous process – a necessary ever-renewed reminder on the path of faith of what it can do and should be allowed to do.

***Issues*:** Luke demonstrates Jesus' concern for outsiders and the marginalised (including, in his day, women), and has a particular uncompromising sense of commitment to the poor. Faith is not only a matter of internal belief but of outward concern. Perhaps, then, Luke is mindful of the dangers of power and influence. He is also aware of the danger of apostasy, perhaps in light of competing allegiances

in wealth, business and family obligations. It is the poor (as promised in the Magnificat) who respond to the good news over against the mighty and powerful. Of course, Christian responsibility has its place in the world; ethics matters, but for Luke it is about ensuring where one's allegiance is placed in the focus of living. He is thereby affirmative of the public nature of faith; Christ is a light to the Gentiles and the glory of Israel (cf., similarly, Acts 9:15, Paul's calling) i.e., these are sight-related images; alms are to be given to the poor; Jesus preaching at Nazareth is a paradigm of public encounter. In this Jesus is the 'leader' (Acts 5:31) on the journey, that the church is to follow on the way, and to find him in unexpected encounters (Luke 24:13ff).

John

'The Witness to God's Glory'

***Context*:** the context of the church community is not entirely clear. On the one hand, the Gospel shows a conflict with Judaism (the threat to be put out of the synagogue is foretold three times: 9:22; 12:42; 16:2). Where the other Gospels use the word 'Jews' only a few times, John uses it around seventy times. Nevertheless, in the Gospel there are Jews who believe, just as Jesus and his disciples are Jews. For John, the unbelieving Jews are not stigmatised but become a metaphor for his reflection on the profound mystery of unbelief – even God's own people do not always believe. So this, in fact, moves from a context topic to an issues question very rapidly.

***Tradition*:** in John, context is bound up closely with tradition in ways in which the mystery of God's Presence in the flesh is modelled on an understanding of the Tabernacle (and thus themes of worship and Presence), and how John tells the story of Jesus against the background of the creation narrative. (At 1:14 the Greek for 'dwelt' reflects the Hebrew words for Tabernacle and Presence.) Thus, the being of Jesus is nothing less than the revelation of God's glory in creation.

***Experience*:** John tells his story through a series of person to person encounters. Everything has a depth meaning. The theme of revelation in John is both 'up and down' (heaven and earth) as it were, and also 'here and there' (the linking of the seen and the unseen). This ultimately is a revelation of love, which itself constitutes the community in witness both over against, but also to, the world. For John, God loves the world and yet the flesh avails nothing. Creation cannot save itself, but God's care is for creation. Thus it is that the incarnation is transformative. It is not just Presence, being there, but change. And change implies growth. Thus, the love within the community of Jesus' followers is not a possession but is found as the church is willing to grow. For John, this faith is corporate. Moreover, it is not an isolated individual thing, for all the pattern of encounters; but draws into and nurtures fellowship. A commentary from Paul about the fruit (note, in Paul not 'fruits' – it is a corporate singular) is apposite in the way in which faith, hope and (above all) love are hallmarks of discipleship, to be understood in a corporate sense: i.e., of what makes for community. The church is taken into the mutual indwelling of God and Jesus, and is called to live this out in the world as witness.

***Issues*:** the significant point for John is the assessment of who Jesus is, and the worthwhileness of faith (14:1 'You believe in God, believe also in me'). John makes a stark contrast between God and the world, but paradoxically it is not a flight from the world but for the sake of the world. In that sense, there could be nothing of more worldly significance than

faith. But the other point is that the indwelling of God in Christ to be made manifest in Jesus' followers as a reality is also a challenge. It can only be done through reliance on the Spirit whom Jesus sends as 'another paraclete' (himself being the first paraclete). But as Jesus had no honour in his own country, so his followers need not expect honour in the world – it has to be witnessed to, and can only be done as the church is reliant on Jesus' presence through the Spirit. The three-fold command to Peter in chapter 21 is not just a wiping out of his three-fold denial – it is the reminder of the costliness of human mistakes and divine redemption, which has to be proved in the life of the world and the mission of the church. The church is not perfect, and it does not even have a counsel of perfection to offer the world – it must itself believe in Christ (if not believe in itself), it is to bear witness in the world. This brings out an interesting point in John's Gospel, namely the ambiguity of people, e.g. Nicodemus, Thomas, Peter, Judas and Pilate. So we encounter in this Gospel most especially the ambiguity of the church. And it is thus, and not in spite of it, that God's glory is always shining through.

Conclusion

In summing up, from this *situational approach to studying the Gospels* three points are worth noting.

1. Discipleship and identity belong together. But this is as much about exploration as affirmation. Luke reminds us in his vision of the re-construction of God's people, that identity is not just saying the same things from one age to another, being faithful as a kind of identicality. Discipleship has to wrestle afresh in each moment and circumstance with what it is to find identity in Christ. It is a given, but it has also to be discovered. As Luke keeps making the point, succinctly and paradoxically, a new thing is not the opposite of continuity but an inherent ingredient of continuity.

2. There is the value found in doing theology from below and the interplay of faith and being human as suggested in the framework. To put it succinctly, religion may be about God, but God is about more than religion. For example, Luke's theology is not incarnational in the sense of John, but it speaks to the significance of history. History shapes us and we shape history. And thus we are embedded with all humanity in the historical nature of life. Thus, Luke willingly tells his Gospel by history. It is our God-given existence. More particularly, Luke's rather neglected theology of atonement arguably speaks more relevantly to our contemporary world than the predominant classic theories. If any idea of atonement rests on the assumption that Jesus' death was in some way initiated by God, it may be that with Luke we should explore the possibility that God's plan of salvation is most faithfully represented by the compassion and justice that Jesus modelled and embodied throughout his entire life. That is to say, Jesus' death is the final expression of an atoning life.

3. In a public lecture, Diarmaid MacCulloch (MacCulloch, 2012) reminds us that Christianity cannot be considered as a single entity. If anything characterises it, he says, it has been marked by diversity almost from the outset, as its faith shifted across time, culture and language. Luke's presentation, for example, in his historical record presents a developmental view ('from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth' Acts 1:8 cf. Romans 15:19, 24), in the

interplay between Spirit and structure. But there is always room for the discovery of, and the encounter with, what is new.

Discussion points

1. Arguably, a situational approach increases the appreciation of the Gospels as literature. Do you agree?
2. Do you find it helpful to do 'theology from below' in this way. If so, why? If not, why not?

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The Revd Dr James M.M. Francis was for many years senior lecturer in Biblical Studies: New Testament at Sunderland University, and latterly Principal of the Durham Diocese Ordained Local Ministry Course. His publications include the editorship of the book series, Religions and Discourse (Peter Lang), a book on childhood in the ancient world, a reader on self-supporting ministry and contributions to Bible dictionaries.

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Religion and History

William K. Kay

Religious history is a branch of general history, and the same types of evidence are used in both cases. Different types of information about the past must be blended into coherent narratives and these narratives will be driven by implicit philosophies of history. Some religions have a much stronger anchorage in historical events than others, but all religions have been influenced by the rise of science since the 17th century CE.

Specification links:
AQA 3.2. Component 2: Study of Religion and Dialogues. Knowledge and critical understanding of the influence of beliefs and teachings on individuals, communities and societies; approaches to the study of religion and belief, including the challenge of secularisation
EDEXCEL Paper 4: Study of Religion, 4. Historical and social developments: includes responses to secularisation; key movements, philosophy of history, God acting in history
OCR 2c: Developments in Religious Thought (H573). Significant social and historical developments in theology and religious thought in the face of the challenge of secularisation, responses to pluralism and diversity within traditions, etc.; views of religious history
WJEC/CBAC/EDUQAS Unit 3: A Study of Religion, Theme 2: Significant historical developments in religious thought; significance of the religions' view of history

Philosophy of history

Within the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) there is a philosophy of history that assumes events are moving in a linear fashion from creation to final judgement. We say 'linear' to indicate the idea of a straight line rather than a wheel or series of circles where events or eras repeat themselves, and where even individual lives are repeated through the process of reincarnation. Thus the Abrahamic religions begin at the start of time with the creation of the world from nothing and show how the shaping of events by one God can be traced in the course of Israel's history, or indeed the history of the church or through

Islamic understandings. In each religion there is blessing and judgement, divine approval and divine disapproval.

Within these two general schemes – linear and non-linear – there are markers or variations along the way. Where history is linear, there is the possibility of a series of divine-human agreements or covenants in a succession of stages. So, we might have a covenant with Noah which is then followed by a covenant with Abraham or a covenant with David. And then the supersession [supplanting] of these covenants with an entirely new one, which is associated with Christianity in the pages of the New Testament or new covenant.

This philosophy of history allows for two things: *prophecy* and *providence*. If history is moving in a predetermined direction towards the final judgement of the human race, then it is possible for prophets who hear the voice of God to speak of future events that will take place, and take place sometimes in different ways multiple times. But the point is that the prophet points the way to a future known by God and usually invites or commands human response to divine warnings or promises. Nevertheless, human morality is important because events, although they will inevitably reach the predetermined divine conclusion, can be facilitated or obstructed by human free will.

And providence, the divine shaping of events, can take place without human cooperation or knowledge. God is in the background bringing about divine purposes, sometimes by miraculous intervention and at other times by non-miraculous but apparently fortuitous conjunctions of circumstances. It is because of a belief in providence that Muslims can be consoled, even in the face of tragedy, by affirming, 'it is the will of Allah' and Christians can sing 'it is well with my soul'. Indeed, this is a theme of mystics of all religious faiths who can proclaim that, despite apparent chaos and meaninglessness, divine love is in control.

Within a non-linear philosophy of history, exemplified by Hinduism and Buddhism, the entire historical process in which the human race is caught up will eventually bring purification and a union with the divine, whether this occurs through the countless reiterations of life involved in reincarnation or through the attainment of nirvana by the noble eightfold path in Buddhism. The countless reiterations of life assume that soul-identity continues from one mode of embodiment to the next. Eventually, because all acts, all deeds, have a built-in moral value implicit in the process of *karma*, purification over many lifetimes takes place.

It is worth pointing out that these two philosophies of history can only function because of their different understandings of human life. For the Abrahamic religions, each person has one life and one life only. For the other religions many lives are possible, which then allows mistakes in one life to be erased in the next life. However, it is also worth pointing out that some forms of Christianity (notably medieval Roman Catholicism) accepted a belief in purgatory (different from heaven and hell) after death, and this belief makes room for the purging of the individual in the afterlife.

These two conceptions of history highlight the importance of the doctrine of resurrection. Where there is a resurrection, there is no reincarnation, and where there is reincarnation of the kind envisaged by Hinduism and Buddhism there is no resurrection. So, while the Abrahamic religions expect their adherents to believe in the resurrection of

the dead, other religions do not.

History of religion

In all their origins religions must have a starting point within history, that is, within the lives of human beings who lived a long time ago. But how do we know what happened in the distant past? And here the answer is found in the obvious record left to us by those who lived before us. This record will include information on statues, inscriptions and monuments, tombs, buildings, treaties, laws, letters, commercial documents, diaries, archaeological fragments of pottery, coins, early historical writings, poems, plays, oral traditions within ancient communities, records of political speeches and numerous other details some of which are put into the public domain and others of which are private and personal. Somehow the historian, whether religious or secular, has to bring all these items together and turn them into a coherent narrative taking account of human motivation and the values prevalent at the time.

Consequently, it is incorrect to say that we cannot know anything about the past although it is also true that there may be several interpretations of the same events and alternative reasons for eventual outcomes. Thus, to give one example, the ancient Egyptian historian, Manetho (Burrow, 2007, p. 150), stated that the people of Israel were expelled from Egypt because they were lepers, but the book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible makes clear that they were released by pharaoh because of the plagues invoked by Moses. The careful reader will have to examine the evidence to discover which explanation is more convincing.

Within the Abrahamic religions there has been a tradition of record-keeping accompanying literacy, the ability to write and preserve records and the personnel to carry out these functions. In other words, there needs to be an educated class of people who read and write documents. These documents might be commercial or legal as well as religious. It is evident there were such people in the court of King David (2 Samuel 8:16; also 2 Kings 18:18, 37; 2 Chronicles 34:8), or from treaties or covenants (as is found at the time of Moses, Exodus 24:7) or from prophecies or stories about religious or military leaders. To this end, priests used temples where they stored ancient scrolls (as in the discovery of the Book of the Law in 2 Kings 22:8-13). In short, for history to be possible over many generations there needs to be a cohort of people, like the scribes or recorders within Jewish culture or the Christian monks who copied manuscripts within the church, to keep ancient learning and memories of the past alive.

This principle applies to all religions to a greater or lesser extent. If the religion has a founder, then information about that person must be handed on and checked to ensure that elaborations or inaccuracies are removed. In Islam, a saying or action of the Prophet (a *matn*) could be accepted if it could be shown to have a credible line of transmission (*isnad*) from one person to another. In Christianity, the record of the resurrection of Jesus is presented in the four Gospels and evident within all the other books of the New Testament. Interestingly, the eyewitness accounts in the Gospels, many of which were written during the first generation of Christians, withstood the hostile scrutiny of Jewish opinion and Roman officials, and later the record is understood as a fulfilment of the Jewish Scriptures; so, there are at least two basic lines of support, the first contemporary and the second stretching back in time to prophetic writings.

In Buddhism, the life of the founder is

probably less historically important than the doctrines and practices which came to characterise the religion. Indeed, many of the historical claims are unverifiable: like those claims about the uncountable past lives of the Buddha prior to his attaining an enlightened state under the Bodhi tree in 589 BCE.

Hinduism is older than Buddhism and is, indeed, the cultural background and theological or philosophical context from which Buddhism emerged. Hinduism has no founder and therefore no single point of origin but is a varied complex religion that presumes the reality of reincarnation, the existence of the individual soul, an eternal reality, the need for ethical behaviour and charity and the continuity of identity from past lives to present and future lives. None of this is strictly speaking historically verifiable. All we can say is that there are scholars or holy men who hand on holy Hindu texts (e.g. the Upanishads and other Vedas) down the centuries.

The classical religions of ancient Greece had no centralised priesthood or temple but grew out of separate sanctuaries and cultic centres which produced a polytheism of local gods and goddesses with their own mythologies and dramatic stories. Mythology eventually postulated a chief God, Zeus, who tried to exert control over the other deities, some of whom were human beings promoted to divine status. There was no attempt to offer historical verification for the religious imaginations which produced these mythological (and often immoral) heroes whose deeds were recounted in poetic epics (e.g. the works of Homer), although it is possible to see the angry, vengeful and lusty Greek gods and goddesses as a projection of the complex forces within the human psyche, an interpretation implicit in the writings of the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (1856-1939).

Historical challenge and change

The rise of modern science may be dated to the 17th century CE and started in Europe. Science took its knowledge from tested experiments rather than old books, and the philosophers of following centuries, such as Kant (1724-1804), Voltaire (1694-1778) or David Hume (1711-1776), were sceptical about the religious writings of the past. Because Christianity and Judaism were native to Europe, they were most heavily criticised and, in a defensive response, Christianity, particularly in the centuries following the division of Christianity at the Reformation, from 1521 onwards, did two things. First, it developed a form of liberal Protestantism which sought to reduce the miraculous within religious texts and minimise the possibility of prophecy. As a result, Christianity became, in its liberal Protestant form, more a system of ethics than a religion about creation and redemption. And, second, it criticised the critics and re-examined its foundational texts and in some places reinforced their veracity by reference to biblical archaeology.

In its liberal Protestant mode (especially articulated in 19th century German universities), the divinity of Christ was questioned, as was his resurrection. These changes were also reflected in Judaism which split into three basic streams: reformed, conservative and orthodox which, roughly speaking, in ways reflecting their names, rejected to different extents many of the distinctive elements of Judaism like its food laws, traditions and philosophy of history.

Hinduism and Buddhism, however, with a weaker historical basis, could accommodate to the critique of the European Enlightenment much more easily since there was less that could be verified or challenged. Reincarnation is outside the scope of strictly scientific

examination. And Islam, which was not a European religion at the time, largely escaped the Enlightenment critique and so has remained a more conservative religion than would otherwise be the case. Its Hadith, or tradition, was not examined in European universities as stringently and academically as was the biblical text.

The rationality of the European Enlightenment eventually gave rise in the 20th century to Modernism and then, after about fifty years, to Postmodernism which placed less stress on human reason and therefore made room in Western culture for a resurgence of religious ideas and practices alongside ardent secularism. We could say that philosophical and historical forces since the 17th century have led to the broadening of most religious traditions allowing conservative and liberal positions to co-exist, as they have in Judaism.

Glossary

isnād, matn (from Arabic sanad, 'support'): in Islam, a list of authorities who have transmitted a report (*hadith*) of a statement, action or approbation of Muhammad, of one of his Companions (*Ṣaḥābah*), or of a later authority (*tabiʿī*); its reliability determines the validity of a hadith. The *isnād* precedes the actual text (*matn*) and takes the form, 'It has been related to me by A on the authority of B on the authority of C on the authority of D (usually a Companion of the Prophet) that Muhammad said …' (*www.Britannica.com).*

karma: conceived as a causative moral law whereby evil actions reap bad consequences either in this life or a future life. This also implies that bad experiences in this life are likely to be caused by evil actions in a past life.

Modernism: characterised in architecture, art and literature in the 1920s as stemming entirely from reason, rather than emotion or idealism. When reason was seen to lead to World Wars or political totalitarianism, it lost its widespread appeal.

mystics: (here) religious people who try in prayer to experience God directly. They tend to be less interested in religious doctrine and ritual but instead seek visions and revelations.

Postmodernism: the philosophical period or movement from the 1970s which claimed to reject any grand narrative (except the narrative of global climate change) while accepting the authenticity of many different viewpoints, which were often placed next to each other ironically or as contradictory truths.

Internet links

https://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html (The philosopher Immanuel Kant writing about the European Enlightenment)

https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001t2zf (The theologian Karl Barth's reaction against liberal Protestantism)

Discussion points

1. What qualities would you expect to see in good history writing?
2. Would you agree that religious doctrine is difficult to verify by historical methods?
3. Should we understand history as linear or non-linear?
4. Can you verify religious experience by historical methods?
5. How can an impersonal law like karma also be moral if the universe is not the creation of a personal and moral God?

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The Revd Dr William K. Kay was an RE teacher in comprehensive schools for ten years before becoming a university professor involved in the training of RE teachers. He has been awarded two PhDs (in Education and Theology) and has published widely, most recently on Pentecostalism and Pentecostal education, including the SCM Core Text on Pentecostalism, *2009.*

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Ethics and the Climate Crisis

Robert Song

This article explores some central issues in environmental ethics. It starts by thinking about what ethical questions we should ask in relation to the climate crisis, and then considers where the responsibility lies for it. Finally, it draws a distinction between optimism and hope, and provides some suggestions for how we might go about living more hopefully.

Specification links:
AQA Component 3.2.2 2B Christianity, Good conduct and key moral principles, Dominion and stewardship
EDEXCEL Paper 2: Religion and Ethics; Topic 1.1 Environmental issues
OCR 2c. Religion and ethics (H573/02), 3. Applied Ethics, Business ethics
SCOTTISH HIGHERS Question Paper 1: section 2, morality and belief, Part C — morality, environment and global issues

Introduction: Off our trollies?

Most of those who have been taught ethics will have come across the 'trolley problem'. This is a classic example of a thought experiment, designed to help us understand what our intuitions are about a particular philosophical issue. A modern version of the trolley problem has been posed in terms of how self-driving cars should be programmed (available at https://www.moralmachine.net). Here viewers are shown moral dilemmas where a self-driving car coming to a zebra crossing has to opt for one of two different outcomes, resulting in the deaths of, say, either two adult passengers or three old pedestrians and a dog.

These kinds of thought experiments can be very useful in helping us to learn about what we instinctively think, and then to puzzle out whether we have good reasons for those intuitions. But they can also be deeply misleading. If they surreptitiously beguile us into thinking that ethics is about making hard decisions in unlikely circumstances, they can lead us away from the proper place where ethics should be thought about, namely in the midst of our complex, everyday lives. When I ask students how many of them have been faced with situations remotely like these kinds of scenarios, almost invariably no one has. Framing ethics in terms of these

problems is in danger of making ethics interesting in a distant, intellectual sort of way, but for practical purposes completely irrelevant to real life.

After all, if we think for a moment what ethical issues are actually raised by autonomous cars, we might begin to ponder some rather different questions. For example, what fuel powers the car, and how does that make a difference to carbon emissions? What kinds of local air pollution might driving the car cause? What resources are consumed in its construction, and where are they extracted from? Should we all be travelling by car, or should we be encouraging people to take more active transport such as walking or cycling? Shouldn't we be looking to use public transport more? Who are the manufacturers, and what do they stand to gain from selling us these cars? How do they benefit from the ethical issues of autonomous cars being defined in terms of far-fetched dilemmas?

Ethics and the environment

In environmental ethics, as in every kind of moral thinking, it is important that we get the questions right. Historically, environmentalists have rightly been interested in a range of different issues, from the preservation of wilderness areas, to saving endangered animals such as whales or rhinos, to nature conservation, to recycling and green consumerism, as well as addressing the global concerns raised by climate change.

These are of course exceptionally important. But they can lead to some surprising blind spots. For example, many people's environmental concerns aren't necessarily big or at a planetary scale, but more local and immediate. If one's worry is about health issues caused by the air pollution from a nearby factory or the fumes emitted by a toxic waste dump in the neighbourhood, it can be dismissed by environmentalists as a public health problem rather than an environmental problem. And that may be because our culture is long used to categorising some kinds of problem as environmental, i.e., about Nature, and others as health-related, i.e., about Humanity. It may also be that environmentalists often come from slightly better-off backgrounds, and haven't ever had to live with the problems faced by people whose homes are sited in poorer areas.

A different example of needing to get the question right arises when we ask what the cost of petrol is. The natural answer is to say that the cost of petrol is whatever we have to pay on the garage forecourt. But if we think for a moment, we might remember that petrol has other costs, which are not paid for by the motorist when they fill up at the petrol station. For example, there are health costs from the nitrogen oxides, hydrocarbons and particulate matters that make up toxic exhaust emissions; these costs are felt by the individual in their ill health, and financially paid for by the NHS or by health insurance. Then there are the environmental costs to the climate from the carbon dioxide emitted; these will need to be met across the globe by spending on climate change mitigation and adaptation measures. And there are the costs of securing oil supplies in the first place: over many decades US foreign policy was heavily shaped by the need to ensure fuel security, such that on one estimate the trillions spent on the Iraq War was equivalent to adding about $100 to the price of every barrel of oil.

Each of these costs are examples of what economists call *externalities*, that is, costs of a product which are not included

within the price that one pays for that product. Clearly getting the question right in environmental ethics is going to require us to have a realistic understanding of what we are talking about, and that requires getting a fuller picture of what is going on.

An important part of that fuller picture involves asking who benefits from these externalities not being included in our everyday understanding of the cost of petrol. One obvious answer is the oil companies. Because many of the costs of burning fossil fuels are met by the NHS or the government, or by other companies or individuals, petrol is cheaper than it would otherwise be, and those who sell it inevitably make greater profits. And for a long time fossil fuel companies have consistently been amongst the largest and most profitable companies on the planet.

Fault finding

The culpability of the fossil fuel industry in the climate crisis is beyond dispute. They have funded programmes of disinformation, employed lobbyists to block legislation that goes against their interests, covered up research findings about the effects of burning fossil fuels that they have known about for decades, destroyed natural environments and indigenous communities across the globe, and in general behaved arrogantly, recklessly and cynically, all in the pursuit of financial return.

All of that is widely known and recognised. Yet the situation may not be as straightforward as we might like to think. We say that it is all the fault of the fossil fuel companies, and it is very easy to think that those who benefit are the cigar-smoking, pin-striped fat cats of the corporate world. But hold on a moment. Where do the profits that they make go to? To be sure, the senior executives in the oil majors earn big salaries. But most of the profits go to the shareholders. And who are the shareholders? Well, amongst them are the banks and insurance companies and the other giants of the investment world. Not least of these are the pension funds, many of which are devoted to supporting their beneficiaries in old age – in other words, everyone who is now, or one day will be, earning an income. So it turns out that amongst those who benefit from fossil fuel profits are none other than we ourselves.

Thinking about the ethics of climate change turns out to be rather more difficult than pointing a finger, since it turns out that finger is pointing at least in part in our own direction. More than that, by focusing on the companies that produce fossil fuels, we fail to think about companies that consume fossil fuels. It is not only the oil corporations whose business models depend on the burning of large amounts of hydrocarbons. So also do the business models of airlines, for example, which have as yet no seriously credible alternative to the burning of jet fuel. And many other sectors are also major users either of fossil fuels or of the electricity they produce: amongst these are shipping, steel, glass, concrete – and coming up fast, the developers of AI programmes. It is not at all clear why these should be any less the object of climate activism or consumer boycotts than the oil companies we rightly hold up to criticism. And we all use or depend on their products.

None of this, to repeat, lets the fossil fuel companies off the hook for a second. But to some extent we all face the danger of pushing responsibility onto others. On its side, BP popularised the idea of the carbon footprint, thus making individuals accountable for their emissions. It is hard not to see that as part of a corporation's

effort to evade its responsibilities. But on our own side, as individual consumers, we continue to use their products, and we are eager to blame them perhaps in part as a way of evading our own guilt and complicity.

Hope or despair?

One might think that this makes the situation more complicated and gives us even more reasons for despair. After all, if everyone has a vested interest in keeping the current system going, how can we ever escape? It looks as though we are caught in a vicious circle.

But actually the opposite might be the case. For if we place all responsibility on the corporations, then we end up rendering ourselves passive and incapable of making a difference, since they have all the power. If on the other hand we recognise that to some extent we have given them that power, not least by continuing to buy their products, then we begin to realise that we have power when we thought we were powerless. We do have agency; we only think we don't.

Recognising our own agency is crucial in tackling the climate crisis. When I teach my students, I first ask them to name three adjectives to describe how they feel when I say the words 'climate change'. Almost with exception, the responses are variations on the theme of 'despair: 'worried', 'depressed', 'anxious' and 'dread' are the kinds of words that keep cropping up. And this is echoed more widely. A recent survey from the Royal College of Psychiatrists reported that 57% of child or adolescent psychiatrists said they were dealing with young people distressed about the environmental crisis. People are quietly carrying a lot of climate grief, and yet we rarely talk about it directly.

Research also shows that a lot of climate despair is related to a sense of powerlessness. People feel unable to make a difference, whether because the situation is so complex and daunting, or because 'they' (the government, the corporations, the system, whoever it is that runs the world) aren't doing anything about it. And so individuals feel trapped and apathetic, impotent in the face of an alarming future.

Interestingly, working with my students I've also discovered some ways that they begin to be energised. Previously I used to think that giving them lots of positive facts about the environment would make them feel differently. So I would talk about good news stories for the climate: how rapidly the costs of solar panels and other renewables are coming down, how new technologies are being developed all the time, how the international community has reached powerful and effective global agreements in the past such as the one on ozone in the stratosphere, how the temperature projections for 2100 have improved dramatically as a result of the COP process; and so on.

Yet, important though these all are, they didn't quite give the impetus or sense of hope that I was looking for. Eventually I stumbled on a different tack. Instead of giving them slightly more hopeful facts, I started giving them small things they could do. So we started swapping ideas about great vegetarian and vegan cookery books; learning about local cafes that use food that would otherwise have been binned by supermarkets; advertising fairer and more sustainable mobile phones; recommending books of new nature writing; hearing about environmental startups that students who had been in the class in previous years had been involved in setting up. They are no doubt small steps, but the mood of excitement has been palpable.

What we've been learning is that hopeful action doesn't have to be

dependent on an optimistic sense that everything will turn out all right in the end. These are actions that are worth doing because they are the right thing to do. In a sense we've been learning the truth of what Vaclav Havel, the Czech dissident under Communism, wrote:

> Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism … It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. (Havel, 1990)

Certain ways of acting are right, regardless of whether they finally end up having the right consequences. If you like, they chime with the grain of the universe. For people of faith this suggests that hopeful action relates to trust in God. As Henri Nouwen, the Dutch theologian and writer on spirituality, wrote:

> Optimism is the expectation that things – the weather, the economy, the political situation, and so on – will get better. Hope is the trust that God will fulfil God's promises to us in a way that leads to true freedom. The optimist speaks about concrete changes in the future. The person of hope lives in the moment, with the knowledge and trust that all of life is in good hands. (Nouwen, 1997, entry for 16 January)

In conclusion

In the end, ethics is about an openness to every dimension of human existence, including our hopes and fears, our anxieties and our desires. Any ethics worth having must be able to help us address all of these, in the face of what will be some of the most pressing circumstances human beings have ever experienced.

It is a long way from trolley problems.

Internet links

Climate Action Tracker (https://climateactiontracker.org/) is a respected independent organisation that monitors countries' progress on meeting their climate targets.

The *Guardian* newspaper (https://www.theguardian.com/uk) is an excellent and reliable source of news on environmental issues.

Take the Jump (https://takethejump.org/) has practical ideas for everyday actions.

Discussion points

1. What ethical issues do you think are raised by the environmental crisis?
2. Do you agree that, as consumers, we share some of the responsibility for the climate crisis? Does that make it easier or more difficult to know how to respond?
3. Is there a difference between optimism and hope? What kinds of attitudes and actions might characterise someone who is hopeful?.

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Professor Robert Song is a professor in the Department of Theology and Religion of Durham University and Director of the Durham University Environmental Humanities Network. He is the author of many books and articles in Christian ethics and is currently writing a book on theology and environmental ethics.

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'In the Midst of Life we are in Death': Christian Perspectives on the Meaning of Death and Life in the Assisted Dying Debate

Sam Hole

This article lays out key aspects of the Christian understanding of death and dying, in order to cast new light on contested issues in the assisted dying debate.

Specification links:
AQA AS Component 1: Philosophy of Religion and Ethics, Section B: Ethics and religion
AQA A2 Component 1: Philosophy of Religion and Ethics, Section B: Ethics and religion
EDEXCEL Paper 2, Option 6: Medical Ethics, 1.b: Assisted dying, euthanasia, palliative care. Religious and secular contributions to all these issues, legal position, concepts of rights and responsibilities, personhood and human nature, options and choices
OCR, Section 3: Applied Ethics
SQA Component 1: Morality and Belief
WJEC Unit 2, Section A: An Introduction to Religion and Ethics

A house built on bones

In 2008, John Inge, his wife Denise and their two children moved into a house next to Worcester Cathedral. John had just been appointed the Church of England's Bishop of Worcester, and the property was set aside for the bishop to live in. The house, however, had one unusual feature: it was built on the foundations of a charnel house. During the medieval period, hundreds of people who had died were laid to rest there, with a priest living on site to pray for the souls of those around him. Fascinatingly, the medieval bones remained underneath the Inge's new house, accessible through a trapdoor (Inge, 2014a).

What would it be like, I found myself wondering when I heard this story, to live with such a physical reminder of death literally below your feet? This proximity to death is far from normal in our modern world: the recent growth in direct cremations (a cremation without a funeral service, which formed 20% of all funerals in 2023) brings many of us into even less regular physical contact with death.

Yet death remains an unavoidable reality, and one which touches on the entire question of how we are to live. Indeed, the Christian theologian Rowan Williams describes the overall task of the church as being twofold: to help people to pray and to help them to die. And, he continues, the two are deeply connected, since both concern how we learn to orient ourselves towards God and the world (Evans and Davison, 2014, p. 33). In other words, the work of dying well is a lifelong task.

Popular ethical discussion about death is currently focused on the question of the legalisation of assisted dying, with heartfelt contributions on both sides. In this article I raise some critical questions about the proposals for legalisation. To do so, however, I first take a step back and consider how mainstream Christian tradition has approached the subject of death more broadly. The widening of our focus to consider the significance of death more broadly helps to come from a different angle at some of the persistent points of controversy in the assisted dying debate. Finally, I briefly point to how this approach is in keeping with new methodological approaches being adopted in theological ethics, approaches that avoid some of the limitations of deontological and/or consequentialist frameworks. Overall, this way of thinking is well represented by the quotation in the title of this essay, itself a line from the historic Book of Common Prayer funeral service of the Church of England. Far from being morbid, such sentiments reflect the interconnectedness of life and death – of our own and of others – that are central to the well-lived life.

The historic Christian approach to death

A first aspect of the Christian approach to death has been to recognise that it is a moment that requires emotional, mental and spiritual preparation – not just for the dying person, but for the whole community. During the fifteenth century, *Ars moriendi* (that is ‘the art of dying’) literature offered text and simple images to instruct individuals on the behaviours to show and prayers to pray in their final hours. In modern times, the modern hospice movement, providing palliative care for the terminally ill, has sought to accomplish a similar goal. This movement was launched by Cicely Saunders in 1967 and animated by her Christian commitments. The first children’s hospice in the UK, Helen House in Oxford, was founded in 1982 by an Anglican religious order, the All Saints’ Sisters of the Poor. One striking aspect of hospice care is that while its professionals do seek to alleviate physical suffering, such as through skilled use of pain medication, they are also strongly oriented towards supporting the dying and their loved ones through the emotional and spiritual challenge of death – for example in saying goodbye, giving thanks for past joys and offering forgiveness for past hurts. (The secular writer and palliative care specialist Kathryn Mannix movingly describes her work as being a ‘death midwife’: it mirrors the physical and emotional support offered by a midwife to a woman in labour (Mannix, 2017, pp. 7-8).) The dying person needs to be helped through this process. But so too do the friends

and family of that individual, as they prepare for the forthcoming tear in their web of relationships.

Second, while recognising the significance of death as an ending, Christians have viewed the dead as remaining part of their community. While the Romans buried their dead outside the city walls, Christians placed the dead inside cities, immediately around their churches. They called those places ‘cemeteries’, from the Latin word *coemeterium*, meaning ‘sleeping place’ or ‘dormitory’. The dead were not ‘dead and gone’: they remained part of the community. Visit almost any country church today, and many older city churches, and you will see the same pattern: you cannot enter the church without passing through the graveyard. And this burial practice reflects the Christian belief that death is not the end. The Nicene Creed of 325CE, accepted by almost all churches as a definition of orthodox belief, ends by stating: ‘We believe in the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come’. Christ’s resurrection, in other words, is a mere foretaste of the new life with God that humanity will one day enjoy. Death is, in this view, not a failure (as seems the assumption in, for example, current Silicon Valley interest in ‘extreme longevity’ research that seeks medical advances to end aging). Rather, in the Christian view, death is an inevitable aspect of created human existence. And it is not the end of the story: rather, death is like the cliffhanger at the end of chapter one of a good book: we know the story will continue, though we struggle to say quite how.

Third, while holding to hope in the resurrection, Christians have affirmed both the pain and the importance of grief when facing death. When he came to the grave of his friend Lazarus, we are told that ‘Jesus wept’ (John 11:35). One popular reading at funerals today downplays the significance of death with the lines, ‘Death is nothing at all. It does not count. I have only slipped away into the next room.’ And yet this is precisely the opposite of what the original author of those lines intended to communicate. For these words come from the sermon given by Henry Scott Holland at the funeral of King Edward VII. Holland described that view only to depict how it fails to stand up to the pain and dislocation of death, the ‘king of terrors’, in the face of which we might view ‘all we do here as meaningless and empty’ (Holland, 1910). Even in 1910, at a time when Victorian wariness about undue emotion (a wariness that continues in portions of British society) was at its height, Holland could not but recognise the raw pain of grief. ‘Grief is the price we pay for love’, said Queen Elizabeth II to families of the 9/11 victims. Grief, in Christian thought, acknowledges the imperfection of the created order while trusting in the enduring love of God.

Dying well in modern culture

This represents a very brief laying out of a traditional Christian framework – a conjunction of belief and practice, of intellectual understanding and emotional response – for understanding death. It is centred, certainly, on moments of death – and yet its assumption is that death is something that people at all stages of life should keep in mind if they are to live well.

Such broad reflections on death and dying may seem somewhat distant from the more focused questions that surround the assisted dying debate. Yet encoded within the views of both proponents and opponents of assisted dying are particular beliefs about the meaning of death and life, and about the relationship of the individual and the community – and

consideration of the Christian tradition helps to set these other beliefs in sharper relief.

Debates over assisted dying often take the form of a competing rights-based appeal to the concept of ‘dignity’: does the dignity due to a dying person demand their ability to choose to end their life (the prominent campaign group ‘Dignity in Dying’ base their title on this position)? Or does (as the Vatican recently argued forcefully) every human being possess an ‘inalienable dignity’ which can never rightly be ended by human choice? (*Dignitas infinita*, 2024). The focus easily comes to lie on the decisions that might be made by the individual person. And yet the Christian understanding of personhood is that, as John Donne so memorably put it, ‘no man is an island’: we are bound in relationship to one another, both in the church as the ‘body of Christ’ and globally as a common humanity created by God. Many people facing old age and death express concern about being a ‘burden’ to loved ones: the Christian commitment to the gift of relationship, and of our inseparable connections, might well look to question the force of such a concern.

What is more, recalling the Christian tradition of *Ars moriendi* may help us recall the importance of how we narrate our own death, and the stories we tell as a society about how to die. The Christian ethicist Michael Banner refers to these stories as the ‘scripts’ we have for death. And, he argues, many arguments for assisted dying seek to create a new script for those affected by conditions such as cancer, with a moment of death that can be (roughly) anticipated. Yet, he observes, only about 20% of deaths result from such conditions; about twice as many are tied up with the slow debility of conditions such as dementia and Alzheimer’s (Banner, 2014, p. 118). And it is surely these latter situations that many of us fear most for ourselves and our loved ones: we fear (with more or less knowledge) what it might be like to live with such a condition; we fear for its toll (emotional and otherwise) on those close to the patient; we live within a wider societal script that this is a period of mental and physical ‘dwindling’ from the truest self that this person was at the peak of adulthood (Banner, 2014, p. 108).

On a wider scale, the refusal of multiple governments to find a long-term solution to the cost of social care reflects a similar lack of a ‘script’ for the implications of this new reality for how many of us will spend a not-insignificant percentage of our lives, which impacts on the dominant narrative that economic productivity is the highest good.

Christian theology offered one framework for how to approach death with its particular combination of grief and hope; our modern secular society has struggled to agree on an alternative.

Contemplating death in order to live

Inspired by her experience of living above a charnel house, Denise Inge began to write a book on the subject. She visited numerous similar sites across Europe, writing a memoir which is at the same time a meditation on the meaning of life and death. However, as she completed the book, aged only 50, she was diagnosed with incurable cancer. The book was published after her death (Inge, 2014a). Her approach is summed up by her lines, shaped by her Christian faith, that ‘[c]ontemplating mortality is not about being prepared to die, it is about being prepared to live’ (Inge, 2014b). Her story is, to my mind, a living-out of the Christian commitment that true life is found in an appropriate awareness of death.

Ethical debates are sometimes

conducted according to familiar principles; most famously, in the way that deontological and consequentialist approaches come into tension with one another. And yet ethics is fundamentally concerned with enquiry into the shape of the good life. In some circumstances this may be better approached not through philosophical principles but through a ‘thick’ description of the whole situation – in Michael Banner’s case, for example, by an ethnographic enquiry into death and dying.

As with the example above of assisted dying, this approach rarely yields simple answers. Yet it recognises the situational nature and cultural-conditionedness of all ethical enquiry into human life, and it brings us back to the bigger questions that may have become neglected in our focus on a specific ethical issue.

Glossary

consequentialist ethics: the ethical approach – most famously represented by utilitarianism – that what is right is whatever makes the world best in the future.

deontological ethics: the ethical approach that judges whether actions are right or wrong according to a set of rules (*deon* is Greek for ‘duty’), as opposed to on the consequences of those actions.

Internet links

http://www.dignityindying.org.uk/ (Campaign for Dignity in Dying)

https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2024/19-april/features/features/the-bishop-s-house-built-on-bones (Pat Ashworth, ‘The Bishop’s house built on bones’, *Church Times*, 19 April 2024)

https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20240402_dignitas-infinita_en.html (The Roman Catholic Declaration, *Dignitas infinita*, ‘On Human Dignity’)

Discussion points

1. What meanings of death and life are encoded within your own cultural (national, local, familial) settings? At what points do these meanings come into tension with your own intuitions around assisted dying?
2. In what ways can consideration of broader traditions and behaviours help ethicists to respond to specific ethical conundrums?

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The Revd Dr Sam Hole is Chaplain and Solway Fellow of University College, Durham University. He previously taught history in secondary schools. He is the author of John of the Cross: Desire, Transformation and Selfhood*, Oxford University Press,* 2020.

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After Anselm: St Bonaventure and the Remaking of the Ontological Argument

William Crozier

This article explores the reception of Anselm's ontological argument within the thought of Thomas Aquinas' Franciscan colleague, Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, and his attempt to reconcile it with versions of the cosmological argument.

Specification links:
AQA Section 3.1.1 Section A: Philosophy of religion, arguments for the existence of God.
EDEXEL Paper 1: Philosophy of religion, 1. Philosophical issues and questions, 1.2-1.3, cosmological argument and ontological argument
OCR Philosophy of religion, 2: The existence of God
SCOTTISH HIGHERS Question paper 2: Religious and philosophical questions, part b – the existence of God
WJEC / CBAC / EDUQAS Unit 2: Section B – An Introduction to the philosophy of religion, theme 1: Arguments for the existence of God – inductive; theme 2: Arguments for the existence of God – deductive

Introduction

When it comes to medieval arguments for God's existence, two figures are nearly always cited in the available literature: St Anselm of Canterbury (1033/4-1109) and St Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274). Typically, Anselm and Aquinas are portrayed as offering two very different – and mutually exclusive – approaches towards how God's existence can be 'proved' by human reason. On the one hand, Anselm, in his *Proslogion* (1077-1078), articulates his famous (and much misunderstood) ontological argument. At the risk of oversimplification, this posits that God's existence is an *a priori* truth. It is, in other words, something which becomes self-evident (*per se notum*) to the mind by reflecting upon the definition of who and what God is – i.e, that God is 'something than which nothing greater can be thought' (Anselm, 1998, p. 89). On the other hand, Aquinas, influenced by his indebtedness to Aristotle (384-322 BCE), specifically the Greek philosopher's theories of motion and causality and his belief that the soul is a *tabula rasa* upon which nothing is written prior the act of sense experience, favoured a purely *a posteriori* approach towards proving God's existence. This is

seen most clearly in the so-called cosmological argument which Aquinas articulates in his famous *Summa theologiae* (1265-1273) and the slightly earlier *Summa contra gentiles* (1259-1265). For Aquinas, God's existence is neither immediately obvious to the mind nor can it be 'proved' by reflecting on the definition of God himself (see Aquinas, 1975, p. 81). Instead, it is something which can only be established by studying the causal chain of being – i.e, the relationship between cause and effect – which underpins the natural order (see Aquinas, 2006 pp. 13-17).

While there is certainly merit in categorising Anslem's and Aquinas' arguments as representing two different faces of the medieval tradition of seeking to 'prove' God's existence, it is important to note that their arguments do not exhaust the medieval philosophical genius in this field, nor do they define its parameters. Two points are key to understanding how and why this is so.

- First, for most medieval thinkers – including those who were direct contemporaries of Aquinas himself – the ontological and cosmological arguments were not mutually exclusive. Instead, they were seen as natural bedfellows, with thinkers often placing them next to one another in their writings.
- Second, many medieval thinkers were quite happy to rework Anselm's ontological argument and to give it a new twist. It is not uncommon, for example, to find medieval authors who seek to prove that God's existence is a truth *per se notum* by augmenting or reworking Anselm's famous definition of God as 'something than which nothing greater can be thought'.

An example of a medieval thinker who illustrates both these points in a particularly clear manner is the Franciscan theologian, St Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (1217-1274).

Bonaventure's approach towards proving God's existence

Although much less well-known than Aquinas, Bonaventure studied and taught in the Theology Faculty at the University of Paris at the same time as his more famous colleague. It is in his *Disputed questions on the mystery of the Trinity* (c. 1256, hereafter *DQMT*) that Bonaventure's most detailed attempt to prove God's existence is to be found. In sharp contrast to Aquinas, Bonaventure's starting premise is that God's existence is an 'indubitable truth' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 107) – that is to say, it is a truth which is so self-evident that no intelligent person can ever deny it. What is striking about Bonaventure's discussion of God's existence in the *DQMT* is the sheer number of arguments which he advances. He outlines nearly thirty arguments to show that God exists. At the outset, however, Bonaventure tells us that each of these arguments falls into one of three categories.

- First, there are those 'proofs' which proceed according to the universal nature of truth itself. These arguments posit that 'every truth that is impressed in all minds is an indubitable truth' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 107) and that God's existence is such a truth.
- Second, there are those types of argument that seek to prove God's existence by means of studying the natural world and the chain of causality underpinning it. At the risk of oversimplification, these arguments are versions of the classical cosmological argument.
- Third, there are those arguments which

follow the logic that 'every truth which, in itself, is most certain and evident is an indubitable truth' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 107). It is under this category, so Bonaventure notes, that Anselm's ontological argument – and the various colourations of it which have been advanced – fall.

Before we consider how Bonaventure employs Anselm's ontological argument and how he places it alongside variations of the cosmological 'proof', there are two points which ought to be noted here.

- The first is the obvious question of why, if Bonaventure believes that God's existence is an 'indubitable truth', he invests such a large amount of space to articulating such a complex collage of arguments to show that God exists. After all, if God's existence is a truth *per se notum*, then why bother formulating arguments to show that God exists? Key here is understanding what purpose 'proofs' for God's existence play within Bonaventure's thinking. For Bonaventure the numerous arguments which he outlines in the *DQMT* are not 'proofs' in the way that we today understand the term 'proof' – i.e., they are not designed to persuade us to accept as true something which previously we denied or remained ambivalent on. Rather, for Bonaventure, his 'proofs' are designed as 'exercises of the intellect' designed to show how rational demonstrations can be provided to support what the mind already knows to be true. 'Arguments of this sort', as Bonaventure puts it, 'are exercises of the intellect rather than proofs that provide evidence and make the truth manifest as proven' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 120).
- Second, Bonaventure's approach towards his 'proofs' is different from that of Aquinas. As Étienne Gilson notes, where, in the *Summa theologiae* and *Summa contra gentiles*, Aquinas is concerned to articulate a series of arguments which share a common basis and thus possess a clearly worked out inner philosophical unity, Bonaventure, by contrast, shows a certain 'unconcern' (Gilson, 1938, p. 124) for such unity. For Bonaventure, when it comes to his 'proofs' for God's existence 'the choice of a starting point … appears to be a matter of indifference' (Gilson, 1938, p. 124). To put it another way: in noted contrast to Aquinas, Bonaventure is not concerned whether his arguments fit together in terms of their philosophical foundations and internal logic: i.e., whether they proceed according to an *a priori* basis or an *a posteriori* one. Instead, for him, the 'unity' of his long list of 'proofs' derives from the fact that they all point towards the same conclusion: that God exists.

Remaking the ontological argument

When one reads Bonaventure's comments in *DQMT*, q. 1, art. 1, his engagement with Anselm's argument is easy to spot. Bonaventure repeatedly affirms that God is 'something than which nothing greater can be conceived' and that a careful consideration of this definition leads the mind to accept that it is logically impossible for God not to exist. He writes:

> But for the intellect which fully understands the meaning of the word God – thinking God to be that than which no greater can be conceived – not only is there no doubt that God exists, but the non-existence of God cannot even be thought. (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 117)

In turn, Bonaventure even defends Anselm's famous response to Gaunilo's argument concerning a perfect island. Like Anselm, Bonaventure notes that Gaunilo's objection falls short, because an island is a finite and mutable reality, and thus cannot exist *per se*; whereas God, by his very nature, is infinite and immutable and can thus be said to exist *per se* without fear of contradiction. Bonaventure writes: 'But when I speak of an island than which none better can be conceived, there is a repugnance between the subject and its implication' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 119). This is so 'because an island is a limited being, while the implication is proper to the most perfect being [*namely God*]' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 119).

On the surface, then, it would seem that Bonaventure offers a faithful rearticulation of Anselm's argument. When we dig a little deeper, however, we discover that Bonaventure adapts Anselm's argument in several important ways. One such way is his attempt to frame Anselm's argument using the language of the 'best'.

The 'best', Bonaventure notes, is by its very nature *the* 'best': 'the best is the best' (*optimum est optimum*) (Bonaventure, 1978, 113). Moreover, the 'best' must have *all* the perfections associated with being the 'best'. Existence, so Bonaventure argues, is clearly a perfection, for to exist is clearly better than not to exist. As such, if the 'best' is indeed the 'best', then it must – by its very nature and indeed by its very definition – exist. For if it did not exist, then it would not be the 'best'. However, if the 'best' is indeed the 'best', then only God is capable of being the 'best'. This is so because only God is truly the 'best' since, by his very definition, he is the most perfect being. As such, given God is the 'best', God must exist. Indeed, because to be the 'best' is part of the very definition of God himself, we can say, so Bonaventure judges, that if God is truly who he is – i.e., if God is God – then God must by necessity exist: 'If God is God, then God exists' (*Si Deus est Deus, Deus est*) (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 113).

While Bonaventure's logic here is hard to follow at times and comes close to something akin to a philosophical tongue twister, one can nonetheless detect the Anselmian framework and spirit which underpins his thinking. Bonaventure nests Anselm's argument within another argument which has a similar underlying set of philosophical steps and thematic assumptions: if 'a' is 'a', then 'a' by its very definition must exist, for if 'a' does not exist then it is not 'a', which is clearly impossible.

Synthesising the ontological argument with a cosmological approach

We noted earlier that Bonaventure does not just reappropriate and rework Anselm's ontological argument, but also places it alongside a plethora of arguments for God's existence resembling the cosmological 'proof' favoured by Aquinas.

What form do these arguments take? Broadly construed, they seek to show that the created, finite and contingent nature of temporal beings demands that there must be a 'first principle' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 110) whose existence is derived from nothing but itself. Thus, Bonaventure, in a manner not too dissimilar to Aquinas' 'second way', argues that God's existence can be established by the fact that if one 'being' – i.e., creature – is caused (Bonaventure uses the term 'exists') by another, since nothing in this world can 'bring itself from non-being to being' there must, by necessity, be at least one 'being' which does not 'exist' – or as Bonaventure puts

it is not 'educed' – from another being, and thus stands apart from the created order of being. After all, were this not the case, then there would be an infinite regress of created beings dependent upon one another for their existence, which is not only illogical but impossible (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 110). The 'uncreated being' from which all created being stems, so Bonaventure judges, must be God, since God alone is 'uncreated being' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 110).

In turn, Bonaventure goes on to argue that God's existence is proved by the dependency of posterior beings upon prior ones. 'If there is a posterior being', he writes, 'then there is a prior being' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 110). This is so 'because there is nothing posterior except it be from something prior' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 110). However, when we take stock of the fact that *all* created beings are posterior beings – for all created beings, so Bonaventure notes, regardless of how perfect they may be, derive their existence from something other than, and thus prior to, themselves – we see that the posterior nature of created being itself demands that there must be a 'first principle' that is prior to the totality of created being itself. Moreover, this 'first principle' cannot be posterior to any other being, for were this the case then it would not be the true 'first principle', but rather just another posterior being and, by consequence, a created being. The 'first principle' is thus *the* prior being antecedent to all posterior beings. Bonaventure writes: 'Therefore, if it is necessary to say that among creatures there is both posterior and prior, it is necessary that the sum total of creatures implies and cries out that it is necessary that there is a first principle' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 110).

Likewise, Bonaventure argues that God's existence can be demonstrated by the relationship between 'possible' – i.e., contingent – and 'necessary' being. 'If there is possible being', he argues, then 'there is a necessary being' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 110). This is so because possible being implies 'indifference' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 110) to existence. After all, a possible being can, by its very definition, either exist or not exist. Moreover, if it does exist, its existence is dependent on that of another being, which itself, so Bonaventure notes, is almost certainly another possible being. For example, I – as a possible being – only exist because of my parents. My parents, however, were also possible beings – for they did not have to exist – and they, in turn, existed only because of their parents, who likewise were possible beings, and so forth. According to Bonaventure, this chain of possible beings cannot regress *ad infinitum.* This is so because an infinite chain of possible beings is a logical impossibility, for a chain of possible beings, no matter how great it is, is insufficient to explain its existence without a foundational necessary terminus. Therefore, there must be a 'necessary being in which there is no possibility of non-existence' and this, Bonaventure argues, is 'none other than God' (Bonaventure, 1978, p. 110).

A final twist in the story – who invented the ontological argument?

So, Bonaventure endorsed Anslem's ontological argument, but also sought to rework it and place it alongside *a posteriori* proofs based on the finite and mutable nature of creation. Is that it? No. At this point a spanner can (potentially) be thrown into the works. Traditionally, scholars have argued that while Bonaventure may have refashioned Anselm's proof and placed it within a

novel context, he was nonetheless a faithful disciple of the Norman Archbishop of Canterbury's argument. Recent revisionist scholarship, however, has sought to challenge this position. According to some – most notably, Lydia Schumacher – the way in which we understand the relationship between Anselm's ontological argument and Bonaventure's defence and appropriation of it is all wrong. Put simply, Schumacher argues that we have misinterpreted Anselm's argument itself (see Schumacher, 2019, pp. 103-118). The ontological argument, as we currently understand it, Schumacher argues, was *not* invented by Anselm. Instead, it originated with Bonaventure and, more specifically, his Franciscan teachers (see Schumacher, 2019, p. 116).

According to Schumacher, the idea that God's existence is an *a priori* truth, which is confirmed simply by reflecting on the definition of who and what God is, is not in fact what Anselm posits in the *Proslogion.* Instead, what Anselm offers in his text is an argument which is not too dissimilar in spirit – if not in content – to the *a posteriori* approach Aquinas himself favours (Schumacher, 2011, p. 97). On this reading, therefore, what Aquinas is rejecting in his *Summa theologiae* and *Summa contra gentiles* when he attacks the idea that God's existence is *per se notum* is not Anselm's argument *per se*, but rather what he saw as the novel distortions of it presented by Bonaventure and his Franciscan teachers (See Schumacher, 2011, p. 97). Schumacher's argument is a new and highly controversial one. Only time and further research will tell if her reading of the relationship between Anselm, Aquinas and Bonaventure on how God's existence can be proved is correct.

Glossary

a priori: knowledge, judgements or propositional statements whose truth is not dependent on sense experience. Instead, their truth is known 'before' any act of sense experience or engagement with the material world, either because the truthfulness of the judgement or statement is contained within the judgement or statement itself, or because it is logically necessary because of the statement or truth. An example of an *a priori* truth is 1+1=2. I can know this truth simply by reflecting upon the statement itself and without having recourse to sense experience.

a posteriori: knowledge, judgements or propositional statements whose truth is dependent upon sense experience and is thus posterior to it. Thus, *a posteriori* truths are those truths which are discovered only by engaging with the world and observing it. For example, I do not know that fire is hot unless I experience its heat for myself or if someone else tells me that fire is hot.

I cannot know that fire is hot simply by reflecting on the word 'fire' itself.

cosmological argument: the argument for God's existence which argues that God's existence is proved by the chain of causality underpinning created being and its incapacity to explain itself without a first principle. For Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, this chain of causality is primarily expressed in terms of motion: all creatures are in motion, but the sum of creatures cannot explain why it is in motion. Therefore, there must be an eternal unmoved mover.

Franciscan: the religious order founded by St Francis of Assisi. Its male members were known as friars who took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The Franciscan spiritual vision places a great emphasis on the importance of recognising how God's beauty, wisdom and love are reflected in the natural world. This, in part, is why Bonaventure is so keen on showing how creatures affirm the existence of God.

ontological argument: the argument for God's existence usually associated with Anselm of Canterbury. Traditionally construed, the argument maintains that God's existence can be demonstrated by reflecting on the definition of God as 'something than which nothing greater can be thought'.

per se: by, in or of itself/themselves; intrinsically.

per se notum: literally 'known through itself'. A truth whose truthfulness is immediately obvious to the mind simply by reflecting on the nature of the statement made. For example, provided one grasps the nature of the concepts of 'whole' and 'part', then the statement 'the whole is greater than its parts' is a truth *per se notum*, because the very definitions of 'whole' and 'part' guarantee the truthfulness of the statement.

tabula rasa: literally, 'a blank slate'. According to Aristotle, the soul possesses no *a priori* knowledge of either God or the world. Instead, the soul is a blank slate upon which truths are written and retained through the process of sensory experience.

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William Crozier is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in the Department of Theology and Religion, University of Durham. His research primarily focuses on the thought of St Bonaventure and other early Franciscan thinkers like Bl John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham.

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Faithful Wives and Fierce Goddesses: Hindu Attitudes towards Women

Stephen Jacobs

This article addresses two seemingly contradictory representations of women. The first is the idea of the perfect wife who is subservient to her husband. This concept of womanhood is epitomised by the story of Sītā, in the epic tale the Rāmāyaṇa, who faithfully follows her husband into exile. However, in contrast, the fiercely independent and macabre goddess Kālī, who is represented as transgressing social norms, seems to be the antithesis of the submissive Sītā.

Specification links:
AQA: Component 2: Study of Religion and Dialogues. 2C Hinduism.
Hinduism, gender and sexuality. Historical and social factors that have influenced developments in Hindu thinking about these issues with particular reference to India. Developments in Hindu thought including feminist approaches
EDEXEL: Paper 4, Option 4C Hinduism. 3.1(a) Cosmic order giving norms to society as exemplified in life stages. Varna (birth); ashrama (stage in life); dharma (appropriate duty); an ideal social order. 6.2(b) Sexual equality, including significance within Saivism and brahmacarya and changing roles of men and women. 6.3(b) Feminist and liberationist approaches
EDUQAS: Component 1, A Study of Religion. Option E Hinduism. Theme 3 (F) The relationship between religion and society: religion, equality and discrimination. The changing roles of men and women in Hinduism (including different views within the religion)
OCR: H573/07 Content and Development in Religious Thought – Hinduism. Topic 3 Living, The concept of dharma. Topic 6 Challenges, the traditional roles of men and women in Hinduism

Introduction

There is a paradox at the heart of Hindu approaches to gender relations. On the one hand Hindu society is deeply patriarchal, and women are often regarded as secondary and subservient to men. On the other hand, goddesses are an important focus of Hindu devotional practices. Hindu goddesses are often regarded as aspects of one supreme Goddess and manifestations of a primordial female power known as *śakti.* Furthermore, it is believed that this sacred power is inherent in all women. This suggests that some aspects of the Hindu traditions are empowering for women.

Hindu goddesses are represented in diverse and contradictory ways. Goddesses are sometimes depicted as being totally dependent on their male consort. This is perhaps exemplified by Sītā, who is frequently envisioned as totally devoted and obedient to her husband Rāma. However, the goddess Kālī is not only characterised as fiercely independent but is also represented as dominant and standing on the inert body of the god Śiva.

The faithful wife

It is not possible to understand the nature of gender relations in the Hindu traditions without comprehending the concept of *dharma.* There is no direct translation of the term *dharma* in English, but it has connotations of law, justice, religion and righteousness. *Dharma* translates as 'what holds together'. It is therefore regarded as the key to social and moral order. *Dharma* can also signify 'duty.' Consequently, *strīdharma* is often translated as 'the duties of women' and it is suggested that if these duties are not maintained, family, society and the moral order will collapse.

The idea of *strīdharma* is particularly onerous for married women. Many of the ideas about the nature of women and the duties for married women can be found in a text commonly called *The Laws of Manu* (henceforth *Manu).*[1] This text was probably composed between the first century BCE and the second century CE. Although most Hindus have little direct knowledge of this text, it has come to define an orthodox understanding of gender and marriage. *Manu* suggests that women are inherently dependent on men and should dedicate their lives to the service of their husband.

> A girl, a young woman, or even an old woman should not do anything independent, even in (her own) house. (*Manu* 5:147 cited in Doniger, 1991, p. 115)
>
> A virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, freely indulges his lust, and is devoid of any good qualities. (*Manu* 5: 154, cited in Doniger, 1991, p. 115)

The dutiful wife is sometimes referred to as *pativratā* – 'one who takes vows for her husband', which indicates that a woman's role is solely to ensure the health and well-being of her spouse and family. This suggests that women can have no independent existence. This idea that women are inherently dependent upon men is particularly noticeable in attitudes towards widows. One of Susan Wadley's informants in her study of widows in rural north India indicated: '[The husband] is the main pillar of life. When he dies, then there is nothing for women' (cited in Wadley, 1995, p. 92). The death of the husband before the wife is sometimes represented as a failure of *dharma*.

Sītā: The archetypal good wife

Perhaps even more influential than *Manu* in shaping ideas about the dutiful wife is the narrative of Sītā found in the epic tale the *Rāmāyaṇa.* Although there are many different versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* (see Richman, 1994) the core narrative recounts how Rāma is banished to the forest for fourteen years. During this time his beautiful wife Sītā is kidnapped by the ten-headed demon (*asura*) Rāvaṇa. Much of this mythic tale recounts how Rāma sets off to rescue Sītā, and ultimately defeats Rāvaṇa in battle.

[1] Sometimes also called *Manusmṛti* or *Mānavadharmaśastra*.

When Rāma is banished, he suggests that Sītā, as a woman who has lived all her life in luxury, would not be accustomed to the hardships of living as an exile in the forest, and therefore should remain behind in the city. However, Sītā asserts that her duty is to stay with her husband:

> A wife alone follows the destiny of her consort. O Bull among Men; therefore, from now on my duty is clear. (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Valmiki* 2:27, cited in Kinsley, 1987, p. 71)

Later on, like Wadley's informant, Sītā declares: 'Deprived of her consort, a woman cannot live' (*The Rāmāyaṇa of Valmiki* 2:29, cited in Kinsley, 1987, p. 72). She consequently follows Rāma into exile.

Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty characterises the goddesses, like Sītā, who are depicted as subordinate to a male deity as 'goddesses of the breast'. These goddesses of the breast are 'auspicious, bountiful and fertile, linked to the life-cycle … provide role models for the wife' (Doniger O'Flaherty, 1980, pp. 90–91).

However, it is important to note that there are other versions and readings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* that do not necessarily represent Sītā as simply docile and subservient to Rāma. In the 16th century the female Bengali poet Chandrabati, wrote a version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* from Sītā's point of view. There are also many folk songs sung by women in villages across India that take Sītā's viewpoint. Chandrabati's retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the women's folk songs focus on the perceived mistreatment of Sīta after Rāma defeats Rāvaṇa and has rescued Sītā. Rāma questions whether Sītā had remained faithful as she had been staying, albeit under duress, in another man's house and demands that she prove her virtue by undergoing a trial by fire. She emerges from the fire unscathed and thereby proves her purity. Nonetheless, once Rāma has assumed the throne, there are rumours amongst the population about Sītā's fidelity. Bowing to public pressure Rāma banishes the now pregnant Sītā to the forest. These women's retellings of the epic tend to downplay the masculine heroics of the more traditional recensions of the narrative and are often highly critical of Rāma's treatment of Sītā. These versions told from Sītā's perspective reflect the suffering and injustice that many Hindu women experience. Nabaneeta Dev Sen argues: 'If patriarchy has used the Sita myth to silence women, the village women have picked up the Sita myth to give themselves a voice' (Sen, 2021).

Kālī: Fierce and independent

Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty contrasts goddesses of the breast with goddesses of the tooth, who are dangerous and defy the norms of femininity. These goddesses are represented as being independent or dominating their male consort. The most recognisable example of the fierce and independent goddess is Kālī. In both iconographic and narrative representations Kālī seems to be the antithesis of the *pativratā,* epitomised by Sītā. Kālī is often depicted as being naked, dark blue in colour, wearing a garland of severed heads and with a protruding tongue. She is described as sexually promiscuous and dwelling in cremation grounds. Kālī challenges social conventions and is associated with the margins of society.

Kālī is also represented as a fierce warrior, a traditionally male role. In the important text the *Devī Māhātmaya,* it is recounted that the demon (*asura*)

Mahiṣa, who was invincible to all male opponents, defeated the gods and evicted them from heaven. Consequently, the homeless gods collaborate, and the goddess Durgā emerges from their combined energy. However, the gods have neglected to inform Durgā that only a naked woman could defeat Mahiṣa and Kālī manifests out of her anger. This can be interpreted as the female rage against, rather than the calm acceptance of, the patriarchal norms of Hindu society. Female power achieved what male power was unable to do. David Kinsley suggests Kālī is a 'symbol of the "other" ways of being female that male-dominated mainstream society sees as dangerous' (Kinsley, 1998, p. 81).

Kālī is frequently represented as standing on the inert body of the god Śiva, which seems to suggest that the female dominates the male. Kālī represents *śakti,* the female animating power of creation. This is often interpreted as Śiva being *śava* – 'a corpse' without the vivifying force of *śakti.* However, there are also other ways of interpreting the representation of Kālī standing over the inert body of Śiva. This interpretation suggests that Kālī is so furious that she becomes totally out of control and in her rampage threatens to destroy the entire world. To halt her destruction, Śiva lies on the ground. On stepping on her consort, Kālī calms down. Usha Menon observes that many of her Hindu women informants suggest that at the moment she stepped on Śiva, Kālī 'realized her sense of duty as a wife and as a nurturing mother to the world' (Menon, 2002, p. 47). In this interpretation, Kālī's protruding tongue does not signify sexual promiscuity, but a sense of shame at her realisation that by standing on Śiva, societal norms have been transgressed.

Mahādevī and śakti

All goddesses are regarded as manifestations of *śakti*, which is believed to be the primordial power that creates and sustains the cosmos. Linked to the concept of *śakti,* as an inherently female power, is the idea of *Devī* – 'The Goddess', sometimes referred to as Mahādevī – 'The Great Goddess'. The numerous distinct goddesses are perceived as being different manifestations or aspects of this one supreme Goddess, who is regarded as being both immanent and transcendent. Mahādevī is equated with the supreme reality, the source of all being:

> By you this universe is borne, by you this world is created.
> By you it is protected, O Devī, and you always consume it at the end.
> O you who are [always] of the form of the whole world,
> At the time of creation you are of the form of the creative force,
> At the time of sustentation you are the form of the protective power,
> And at the time of the dissolution of the world, you are the form of the destructive power.
> (*Devīmāhātmya* 1:75–77, cited in Bose, 2023, p. 17)

In this verse, Devī is identified with the cycle of creation, maintenance and destruction of the cosmos, which is more commonly associated with the male deities Brahma, Viṣṇu and Śiva, respectively.[2] Sometimes it is suggested that, whilst these three gods are identified with creation, maintenance and destruction, they do so only because they are commanded to do so by Mahādevī. In other words, the male deities are

[2] These three gods are sometimes referred to collectively as the *trīmurti* – 'three forms'.

represented as dependent and subordinate to the goddess, rather than vice versa.

It is suggested that women have the power of *śakti,* whereas men do not. For example, one text claims: 'Every woman, O Goddess, is your form, your body concealed in the universe' (*Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* 10.80,1, cited in Bose, 2023, p. 76). Consequently, it is often believed that only women can be channels for the sacred power of the Goddess. In her fascinating study of goddess possession, Kathleen M. Erndl describes several women who gain respect within their community by being particularly apt at channelling the goddess. Erndl observes that 'a transformation takes place through repeated possession, and as a result the woman becomes more and more "goddess like"' (Erndl, 2007, p. 152). This identification of a particular woman as especially capable of being possessed by the goddess can be empowering for the individual. These women are often referred to by the honorific *mataji, '*respected mother', which is also utilised as an epithet for the Goddess. In some instances, women are regarded as gurus, 'spiritual preceptors', a role normally reserved for men.

Erndl makes a wider point. She suggests that it is predominantly women who seek out these *matajis* for advice and blessing from the goddess. Erndl observes that '"hanging out" time before and after the actual trance session … creates a space and opportunity for women of different castes and backgrounds to come together'. She describes these spaces for women as 'cracks in the patriarchal system … which provide sites for women's creativity and interconnection' (Erndl, 2007, pp. 156–157).

Conclusion

Hindu discourses about gender relationships are complex and often appear contradictory. There is no doubt that many women's lives are constrained by the apparent patriarchal nature of Hindu beliefs and practices. In particular, the concept of *dharma* has an impact on the lives of Hindu women. *Strīdharma* suggests that it is the duty of women to serve their husbands, and the *dharma* texts, like *Manu,* frequently suggest that women are inherently inferior to men. However, an important tradition within Hinduism also represents the sacred as intrinsically female. In particular the concept of *śakti* is a resource for women to challenge the dominant patriarchal norms of Hindu beliefs and practices.

Glossary

asura: often translated as 'demon', these are the traditional foes of the gods (*devas)*. However, it is best to understand the *asuras* as forces of *adharma* (chaos), as opposed to the *devas* who are the forces of *dharma* (harmony).

Devī: literally 'shining', refers to the idea of one supreme Goddess, who is regarded as both immanent and transcendent. Devī, sometimes also referred to as Mahādevī – 'the Great Goddess', is concomitant with the concept of *śakti,* the feminine power of creation, maintenance and destruction of the cosmos.

Devī Māhātmaya: 'Glorification of the Goddess' is an important text from

the 6th century CE that identifies the goddess as the supreme sacred power. Many of the goddess myths, such as Durgā's slaying of the demon Mahiṣā, can be found in this text.

dharma: literally 'what holds together', *dharma* is the principle that maintains social stability. It has connotations of law, duty, harmony, religion and morality. The concept of *strīdharma* – 'the duty of women' – outlined in *dharma* texts such as *Manu,* details the correct comportment of women.

pativratā: literally 'one who performs vows for her husband'. Most commonly associated with the duties of the wife to maintain the health and well-being of her husband and to produce sons.

patriarchy: the concept that all aspects of society, including the family, are systemically dominated by men. This suggests that there are distinct gender roles which marginalise and subordinate women.

Rāmāyaṇa: the epic narrative that tells the story of how Rāma, who is regarded as the seventh *avatāra* (incarnation) of Viṣṇu, rescues Sītā from the *asura* Rāvaṇa. There are two main recensions of this narrative – the Sanskrit version attributed to Vālmīki, probably composed somewhere between 500 BCE and 300 BCE, and the Hindi version composed by Tulsīdās in the 16th century CE.

śakti: literally 'power, energy', *śakti* is considered to be the primordial power of the cosmos. It is primarily envisaged as feminine and is associated not only with all the various goddesses and Mahādevī, but by extension all women.

Internet links

https://www.manushi.in (*Manushi* is a feminist journal that has been in publication since 1978. It predominately has articles written by women. While it mostly deals with women's issue it is also concerned with social justice more widely.)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmVlnOXBFb4 (A short video from the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies in which the renowned scholar Jessica Frazier outlines the relationship between Hinduism and feminism.)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Vr-IS6cjLA (Trailer for *The Forgotten Woman* a documentary about widows in India by the controversial director Deepa Mehta. See also her 2005 film, *Water.*)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AU3eXB33OHs (A fascinating glimpse into the significance of feminine power and goddesses, particularly Kālī, by the curator of the 2020 exhibition on Tantra at the British Museum.)

Discussion points

1. Is Hinduism inherently patriarchal?
2. How does the concept of *dharma* impact the lives of Hindu women?
3. To what extent does the belief in the goddess empower Hindu women?
4. In what ways might Sītā's narrative challenge patriarchal norms, and how might representations of Kālī sustain the subordination of women?

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Dr Stephen Jacobs is a Research Fellow in Religion and Culture at the University of Wolverhampton. He is the author of Hinduism Today *(Continuum, 2010) and* The Art of Living Foundation: Spirituality and Wellbeing in the Global Context *(Ashgate, 2015).*

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Is Buddhism Pessimistic?

Phra Nicholas Thanissaro

Early Western scholars equated Buddhism with pessimism mostly owing to its inclusion of 'suffering' amongst the 'noble' truths. What Buddhists actually mean by suffering is indicated by its categorisation of dukkha – which includes physical suffering, mental suffering arising from the changing nature of existence and suffering inherent in the building-blocks of human existence. Although Buddhism portrays suffering as dire, it is defended against the charge of pessimism by accentuation of positive features of human existence, and the emphasis in Four Noble Truths on the end of suffering and the path to this.

Specification links:
AQA 7061 2A Buddhism: The meaning and relevance of Buddha's teaching about Dukkha, including the debate about whether Buddhism is pessimistic
OCR Developments in Buddhist thought (H573/06): The Three Marks of Existence – the nature of Dukkha, categories of suffering, unavoidable suffering
Also:
EDUQAS Component 1: A Study of Religion: Option D: A Study of Buddhism, Theme 2: Religious concepts and religious life, the Four Noble Truths
SCOTTISH HIGHERS (RMPS): Component 2: question paper 1 Section 1. Part A. Buddhism, Beliefs, the Three Marks of Existence, Dukkha

Buddhism as doom and gloom

Early Western scholars of Buddhism like Oldenberg (1882, pp. 212, 220) and Schopenhauer (2007) portrayed the main message of Buddhism as world-weariness – citing dour teachings such as 'existence being a curse', 'beings swimming around in a vast ocean of suffering' and 'human life as misery' (Nyanaponika, 1994, p. 232).

Not surprisingly, such scholars came to equate Buddhism with pessimism. Historically, this assessment has been exploited by colonial missionaries seeking to promote more cheerfully-disposed competing religions. Of course, it depends on a person's definition of pessimism whether they consider this categorisation to devalue Buddhism. Generally pessimism is defined as 'seeing the worst in things, believing the worst will happen and thinking we live in the worst possible of worlds' (Treanor, 2021, p. 139) – implying that being a pessimist is *un*desirable, stereotypically

a dejected person with a one-sided view of the world that encourages hopelessness and inaction, with parallels to Zeno of Citium's Stoicism.

The trouble with this characterisation of Buddhism, to use Cantwell-Smith's (1981, p. 97) criterion, is that Buddhists would not recognise themselves in the description. Although some Buddhist authors have sought to 'bright-side' Buddhist ethics with book titles such as *Always maintain a joyful mind*, *101 moments of joy and inspiration* (Gindin, 2018), by translating *dukkha* as 'stress' (e.g. Thanissaro, 1993) or glibly depicting life as merely 'less than ideal' or 'not fully satisfactory' (Gowans, 2003, pp. 32, 121), most, like Walpola Rahula (1978, p. 17), defend Buddhism by concluding it is neither pessimistic nor optimistic, but *realistic*.

What is suffering?

Since most justifications for characterising Buddhism as pessimistic seem to originate from inclusion of suffering as a 'Noble' Truth in the very first discourse[1] given by the Buddha after his enlightenment, it is perhaps relevant to clarify how the Buddha explained suffering. By saying suffering is a 'truth' doesn't mean it is the *ultimate* truth – but its importance lies in its *undeniability* as a 'wake-up call' for people to seek something better. The Buddhist version of suffering is somewhat more serious than an absence of pleasure, friendship and beauty. The ancient word *dukkha* (in Pali, *duḥka* in Sanskrit)[2] literally means 'awkwardness' or 'discomfort' of body which at its simplest can be subdivided into physical [*kāyika-dukkha*] and mental [*cetasika-dukkha*] components.[3] The Sanskrit scholar Monier-Williams (1899, p. 483) proposed that the etymology of the word '*dukkha*' comes from the same root as an 'off-centre' axle hole, alluding to what it feels like riding on a cart where the wheels are crooked – a metaphor that evokes the existential angst inflicted by '*dukkha*'.

The Buddha reflected that every living being experiences suffering. Although poor people suffer in one way, the rich suffer in another – but none can avoid suffering *completely*. The Buddha delineated twelve[4] major categories of suffering – which (other places in) the scriptures divide into suffering under three broad subcategories.[5]

- The first category is physical or painful experience [*dukkha-dukkhatā*].
- The second category, mentally-experienced suffering, is attributed to the changeable nature of existence [*vipariṇāma-dukkhatā*] and is responsible for an unbearable sense of malaise or 'nausea' concerning life.
- Finally, there is an inherent sense of suffering built into the very fabric of the human being, the building blocks of life [*saṅkhāra-dukkhatā*] – three categories which I will now further elaborate.

For those who have spent a lifetime trying to downplay physical suffering or painful experience, it comes as an unwelcome shock when old-age, sickness or death catch up with them. For those who have achieved some degree of enlightenment, or who have (at least) heard teachings from the Buddha, the inevitability of such suffering comes as

[1] Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta S.v.420.
[2] There is a subtle difference between suffering [*dukkha*] (the term used in the Four Noble Truths) and 'being in a state of suffering' [*dukkhatā*] (the word used in the Three Universal Characteristics) – but most scholars treat them as synonymous.
[3] Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta D.ii.306, Vibhaṅga Sutta S.v.209.
[4] As footnote 1.
[5] Vism.499, Saṅgīti Sutta D.iii.216, Dukkha Sutta S.iv.259, Dukkhatā Sutta S.v.56, Nett.12.

less of a surprise. Faced by pain, the wise reflect that they are *not* being unfairly singled out for suffering, since all are equal in the face of suffering. The first sort of physical suffering is birth [*jāta*]. In contrast to most religions that consider birth to be a blessing, the Buddha claimed birth is a form of suffering – especially (the process of) birth – not least for the baby being born. The second form of physical suffering is aging [*jarā*] which, although clearly seen from the outward signs of grey hair and wrinkles in seniors, also includes the inbuilt deterioration of the body, inherent from the moment of birth. A third form of physical suffering is death [*maraṇa*], which despite the hero's bravado, *is* a form of suffering that all beings must undergo as they leave one existence for the next. Also belonging to this sub-category is physical pain [*dukkha-dukkha*] perhaps originating from illness, corporal punishment or incarceration – especially if endured without the support of friends or relatives. The Buddha argued that the only way to escape physical suffering completely is to avoid being reborn – namely, by attaining Nirvana.

In contrast to physical pain, mental suffering originating from the 'changing nature of existence' *can* be reduced considerably by change of attitude – by wise reflection and mental training – where 'forewarned is forearmed'. A first form of mental suffering is sorrow [*soka*] – which is characterised as 'dry-minded' suffering and might be experienced by a mother who must leave her newborn baby in daycare despite her better instincts. A second form of mental suffering is lamentation [*parideva*] which is sorrow that drives a person to tears – such as the suffering experienced when attending the funeral of a loved one. A third form of mental suffering is feeling slighted [*domanassa*] where a person is aggressively sensitive about their own shortcomings or bears a grudge. A fourth form of mental suffering is despair or 'bemoaning' [*upāyāssa*] where a person abandons any former hope of success. A fifth form of mental suffering is unavoidable exposure to hateful things [*apiyehi sampayoga*] – a mind clouded by melancholy. A sixth form of mental suffering is unavoidable separation from loved ones and treasured things [*piyehi vipayoga*] such as heartbreak or unrequited romance. A seventh form of mental suffering is disappointment [*alābha*] which is where a person's plans fail to work out. The Sallatha Sutta[6] explains that noble disciples have gained such control of their minds, that the only suffering they experience is physical, rather than mental – although in practice seasoned meditators can (to some extent) elevate their pain threshold.

Lastly comes the inherent suffering in the fabric of the human being, conditioned by the 'formations' of the process of dependent origination – clinging to the five aggregates [*pañcupādānakkhanda dukkha*]. The 'aggregates' comprise the psycho-physical constituents that Buddhists explain as the building blocks of body and mind. The alternative to this 'organic' suffering is to reach toward transcendental aggregates [*dhammakhanda*][7] which become increasingly accessible as a result of meditational attainment. Although aggregates are described as a *worldly* phenomenon, a person who is enlightened breaks away from this phenomenon, and either overcomes 'the world' or remains unsullied by it.[8] Buddhists consider attachment to worldly

[6] S.iv.207.
[7] D.iii.279, A.iii.134, A.ii.140.
[8] Puppa Sutta S.iii.137.

aggregates problematic because mistaking their body and mentality for self, instead of seeing them 'as they are', ultimately leads to sorrow (van Gorkom, 2022, p. 16).

If suffering referred merely to 'less than ideal' or 'unsatisfactory' aspects of life, the Buddha would not have used words such as 'release' [*vimokkha*] or 'liberation' [*vimutti*] to characterise escape from it. These metaphors put suffering more on a par with a repressive political regime or a jail. The seriousness with which humanity is embroiled by suffering has been compared in Buddhist scriptures to a leper desperately scratching at their sores intending to get temporary relief, but only exacerbating their wounds,[9] or a chained-up dog in a frenzy to escape but only able to run in circles.[10] Buddhists thus aspire to transcend miserable worldly life 'that contains not even the lowest degree of true happiness or moral worth' by taking refuge in the Triple Gem, which is transcendental in nature (Nyanaponika, 1994, p. 232).

Nobility of Buddhist Truths

In effect, the Buddha didn't describe the truths he taught as 'optimistic', 'pessimistic' or 'realistic'– but selected the adjective 'noble' [*ariya*].[11] The reason the Buddha called the truths 'noble' is because they are noble in themselves (since they allow a person to transcend the mundane). They were also discovered by someone who was noble (who had attained the stages of enlightenment) and knowing about them will make the attainer noble. Nonetheless, to 'see' the Noble Truths is not the work of a single day. They are difficult to appreciate because a person's relationship to them (especially suffering) is like a fish's relationship to water; people are so mixed up in suffering that they fail get any real perspective. However, if practitioners *can* break free, the state of extinguishing suffering is acknowledged as the 'ultimate happiness' of Nirvana.[12]

Conclusion

Considering Buddhism as pessimistic assumes the Noble Truths are merely therapeutic injunctions for better living or anxiety relief. Given that Buddhism does not seem to take suffering lightly, possible ripostes to the charge of pessimism would include the way Buddhism appears to accentuate positive features of everyday life while emphasising *escape* from suffering.

Buddhism's first line of defence against the label of pessimism is that there are plenty of redeeming features that Buddhism finds in everyday existence. Even the plethora of defilements described in Buddhist scriptures, rather than painting a misanthropic human portrait, cannot be considered pessimistic in as far as they do not originate from the emotion of despair. Admittedly, Buddhist estimation of worldly[13] life is bleak – comparable to walking a tightrope without a safety net or licking honey from a razor blade. Nonetheless, the difficulties are always presented together with solutions for improving spiritual well-being. Moreover, many Buddhists engage directly with social problems in an attempt to make 'heaven on earth'.[14] In this respect the Buddha characterised human birth as a great and valuable opportunity.[15]

A second line of defence against the accusation of pessimism is that in the Four Noble Truths the Buddha always

[9] Māgaṇḍiya Sutta M.i.501.
[10] Gaddulabaddha Sutta S.iii.149.
[11] As footnote 1.
[12] Dhp. verse 57.
[13] non-monastic [*lokiya*].
[14] e.g. socially-engaged Buddhism or the Humanistic Buddhism approach of Master Hsing-Yun.
[15] cf. '*kiccho manussapaṭilābho* proverb Dhp. verse 182.

emphasises the *cessation* of suffering and the *Path* to the end of suffering – in other words, the Buddha always focused on *solving* the problem of suffering (Dhammananda, 1973, p. 125). Although the existence of suffering is not denied, it is actually the Path to the *end* of suffering which is Buddhism's *raison d'être*. Even though those who can enter Nirvana may seem like a negligible minority in the present day, and although enlightenment may demand a lot of exertion, possibly over the course of many lifetimes, it should be pointed out that each small advance along the path of meditational practice *does* incrementally decrease the level of suffering experienced by a Buddhist practitioner. Buddhists reflect thankfully that the Buddha has already accomplished the hard part of overcoming suffering, which was rediscovering the technique to overcome suffering in the first place. Furthermore, the Buddha could not be accused of pessimism if he declared *everyone* has the potential to become enlightened and liberated, any more than a doctor who continues to offer patients hope of recovery.

If for philosophical reasons it remains an issue whether Buddhism is considered pessimistic, closest to the truth would probably be to say that Buddhism is not *unduly* pessimistic – where a pessimist would shut the door on hope, the Buddhist take on suffering may feel instead like hearing a wistful love song, where the listener comes away feeling 'sadder but wiser'.

Glossary

aggregates: psycho-physical constituents.

dukkha-dukkhatā: painfulness as suffering, physical suffering.

saṅkhāra-dukkhatā: suffering due to formations, inherent liability to suffering.

Stoicism: an ancient Greek school of philosophy founded at Athens by Zeno of Citium that taught it is a virtue to endure pain or hardship without complaint.

vipariṇāma-dukkhatā: suffering triggered by change, mental suffering.

References to Buddhist texts are to the following:

A	Aṅguttara Nikāya (Numerical Discourses)
D	Digha Nikāya (Long Discourses)
Dhp	Dhammapada (Path of the Dhamma)
M	Majjima Nikāya (Middle-length Discourses)
Nett	Nettipakaraṇa (Book of Guidance)
S	Samyutta Nikāya (Connected Discourses)
Vism	Visuddhimagga (The Path of Purification)

Internet links

https://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp/article/view/4913 David Cooper's 2021 article entitled '*Buddhism as Pessimism'*, which concludes that Buddhism is pessimistic, but that pessimism is not necessarily a bad thing.

https://thefailedbuddhist.wordpress.com/2018/12/22/buddhism-pessimism-before-it-was-cool/ Chaim Wigder's 2018 blog *Buddhism: Pessimism before it was cool* from his blog *The Failed Buddhist.*

Discussion points

1. a) How might a rich person experience suffering differently from a poor person? b) In which ways might they both experience the same sorts of suffering?
2. Could the Buddha's belief that people can be their own saviours in fact be considered optimistic? Why?
3. Is making heaven on earth (as engaged Buddhists try to do) a misunderstanding of the *dukkha* inherent in worldly matters? Explain.

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Phra Dr Nicholas Thanissaro has been a Buddhist monk for 27 years. With 38 years of meditation experience, he is a UK Complementary Medical Association qualified teacher of meditation. Affiliated with the Dhammakaya Foundation, he is also qualified as a schoolteacher and MBTI practitioner. During his time as Associate Fellow at the University of Warwick, as a scholar-practitioner, he published widely in peer-reviewed journals on the formation of Buddhist identity in teenagers and continues to research the appeal of meditation in the West. He currently lectures in 'Living Buddhism' and 'Religious Individualization' at Claremont School of Theology, California and is a senior fellow at Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln. His latest academic book is The Intuitive Buddhist *(Peter Lang, 2020).*

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Gender Equality in Islam: Possibilities and Limitations

Shama Ajoubi and Fariza Bisaeva

Already a heated topic, the subject of gender equality becomes even more so when it comes to Islam. Some believe Muslim gender equality an oxymoron because of Islam's irrevocably patriarchal nature. Others believe that Islam has already given all the rights there are for women and thus is not in need of any 'modern projects' like gender equality. Both extreme positions share a view of Islam as static and unchangeable. This article sets out to introduce a third perspective, which aims to focus on the spirit of Islam when it comes to gender equality and asks the question how the realisation of this spirit could look today.

Specification links:
OCR (H573/04): Developments in Islamic Thought, Gender Equality
EDUQAS Component 1: A Study of Religion: Option B: A Study of Islam, Theme 3: Significant social and historical developments in religious thought. Whether or not women are equal to men in Islam
EDEXCEL Paper 4D Islam: 6.2 Gender and Islam

Reform movements of Islam

In order to understand the spirit of Islam it is first important to look at the changes Islam had brought for the 7th century Arabian Peninsula. Some reforms Islam tried to introduce could surely – at least for that specific time – be considered as revolutionary. Starting with the notion that all men and women are equal, direct and independent subjects in the eyes of God, which is also confirmed in the Qur'an where the creation of all human beings from the same entity is discussed[1] – this notion becomes the basis for gender equality in Islam (Mohagheghi, 2007, p.423). Since women in pre-Islamic Arabia were viewed as mere objects, Islam had to intervene to overthrow some societal structures of that time, which

[1] O MANKIND! Be conscious of your Sustainer, who has created you out of one living entity, and out of it created its mate, and out of the two spread abroad a multitude of men and women. And remain conscious of God, in whose name you demand [your rights] from one another, and of these ties of kinship. Verily, God is ever watchful over you! (Q 4:1)

were clearly androcentric and misogynistic. Prophet Muhammad ensured that women were granted certain rights, which included property ownership and inheritance, having the freedom to choose their future partner, but also to leave a marriage. Additionally, women were given the right to educate themselves and to testify in judicial cases (Omari et al., 2020, p. 34). While these changes can definitely be seen as accomplishments and steps towards gender equality, it would still be wrong to ascribe a universal character to them, since, viewed from today's perspective for example:

- female inheritors still received a smaller share of the inheritance compared to male family members;
- while Muslim men could engage in polygyny as well as marry Christian and Jewish women, Muslim women were not allowed to marry outside their faith or partake in polyandrous relationships;
- although women were granted the status of legal entities, allowing them to be legitimate witnesses, their testimony was not considered equal to male testimony.

In view of these deficits in Islam's pursuit of gender equality, the question becomes how the Qur'an can make itself relevant to gender equality *today*, while accommodating the stipulations of an audience living in 7th century Arabia? The answer to this question can be found in one of the important principles of Islamic Jurisprudence, namely the adaptation of religious regulations to the existing circumstances [*taghayyur al-fatwā bi-taghayyur al-zamān wa-l-makān*]: something that allows a degree of flexibility in Islamic Law (Khan et al., 2019). A similar idea is also expressed by the modernist Muslim philosopher Fazlur Rahman Malik (1919-1988) through his interpretative theory, according to which more importance needs to be given to achieving all-encompassing moral objects, rather than conserving contextual framework and stipulations from the time of the revelation. In other words, it should be about the spirit rather than the letter of the law (Omari et al., 2020, p. 19).

Testimony of Muslim women

Female legal testimony is one example (amongst many) that helps to elaborate how the spirit of the law can relate to Islamic reforms. Testimonies are a substantial part of judicial procedures and are sufficiently powerful to determine the outcome of legal proceedings. To ensure a fair verdict, testimonies have to be scrutinised, which is why witnesses have to meet a number of criteria. In the Muslim world, this list of criteria not only including maturity, integrity and good health, but also masculinity. Women could only testify if no man were available, but even then her testimony was worthless which is why the testimony of two women was equivalent to the testimony of a man – to justify this stance, Muslim scholars would refer to the Dayn-Verse[2] in the Qur'an, instructing that in the selection of witnesses in the judgement of an unpaid debt, the judiciary must:

> … call upon two of your men to act as witnesses; and if two men are not available, then a man and two women from among such as are acceptable to you as witnesses, so that if one of them should make a mistake, the other could remind her. (Q 2:282)

[2] The Verse of Debt.

Some Muslim scholars like Ibn Kathīr explain the disparity between male and female testimony on the basis of a Hadith according to which Prophet Muhammad might have said that women have religious deficiencies, because they are not allowed to pray during their menstrual cycles, and intellectual deficiencies, which justified the Prophet referencing the Dayn-Verse, explaining that two women are needed so both can make up for each other's shortcomings (Ibn Kathīr and Mubārakfūrī, 2003, p. 690). These sorts of misogynistic interpretation of the Qur'an and Hadith lead to the exclusion of women from almost all kinds of testimonial procedures, because women were perceived as ontologically deficient beings, and therefore unreliable. However, an attentive reading of the verse mentioned reveals that it deals with a matter of *civil* law,[3] which also means that the testimonial stipulations discussed in this verse specifically refer to financial matters *only* and should not be applied to *all* forms of testimonies, contrary to the unfortunate stance of traditional Muslim scholars – influenced by the strong patriarchal structures of that time (Badawy, 2009, p. 293).

To correct this traditional view some modernist Muslim scholars started to re-evaluate and reinterpret this verse, in order to uphold gender equality. In this regard, Muhammad Asad, a Muslim thinker of the 20th century, explains that the 'two women-one man rule' was established in the Qur'an because the economic sector at that time was male-dominated, which is why women were more prone to making mistakes. This, he argued, had little to do with female intellect, but more with a lack of required skills (Asad, 2011, p. 102): in other words, the Qur'an actually encouraged women – through mentioning them in this specific context – to partake in a male-dominated field and additionally to get involved in economic affairs (Lakhvi and Fatima, 2015, p. 9). Others criticise the traditional stance by explaining that some women, like the wife of the Prophet Muhammad, 'Aisha bint Abu Bakr, were distinguished transmitters of Hadith, which is a status only attainable by those with good memory and sharp intellect. If women really had intellectual shortcomings, they would not be considered reliable sources of Prophetic transmissions (Khan et al., 2019, p. 23). This criticism of the traditional interpretation was also shared by the Egyptian and American Fatwa Councils as well as the Turkish Diyanet (Egypt's Dar Al Iftaa, 2023; Al 'Alwani, 1996, p. 174; Cavis, 2016, p. 155). These influential Muslim organisations, by taking Islam's spirit of gender equality seriously, made it possible for Muslim women to engage in all kinds of testimonial procedures, from which they had been excluded for decades.

This brief discussion shows how a constant re-evaluation and reinterpretation of the Qur'an helps to adapt its regulations to existing societal values, like human rights or gender equality. Historically, traditional Muslim scholars used the Qur'an to legitimate their misogynistic stance on female testimony. More recently, the academic mainstream generally, and feminist-Muslim theologists in particular, have sought to interpret the Qur'an in accordance with the *spirit* of the law, which, in this case is gender equality that was established in the verse 4:1 (Omari, 2020, 60f). The present authors would argue that re-interpretation in accordance with the spirit of the law should not be restricted merely to the example of

[3] Namely an economical or financial matter, as distinct from criminal law.

testimony discussed here. Other areas where traditional Muslim scholarship failed to uphold gender quality can and should be dealt with in the same way, to make the world a fairer place for all human beings.

Conclusion

To bring about a lasting and sustainable change in the Muslim world, more Muslim women scholars need to invest effort to continue Islam's spirit of equality in general and gender equality in particular, because, in the words of Omari et al.:

> women's interpretation would be different from those of men — not because of an innate, biological determined absolute (sex) difference but rather because their positions in patriarchal and other systems of power have produced different life experiences that do and should inform both intellectual production and work to change the world. (2020, p. 13)

However, this kind of re-interpretation is perceived by many Muslims as a threat to the sanctity of the Qur'an. Overcoming the fear of change requires the realisation that the timelessness of the Qur'an manifests itself through the possibility to re-interpret its content. If this possibility was not given, we would not need the Qur'an today. Apart from that, a re-evaluation of the Qur'an's content does not mean looking down on it, or detracting from its importance, but rather shows the effort of Muslim scholars to contribute to its relevance today and in the future.

Glossary

fatwa: a legal ruling from an Islamic jurist given to a question asked for in an individual case. In modern times the establishments of Fatwa Councils came into being, where Islamic scholars, together with scholars of other fields relevant to the topic, answer questions as a collective.

hadith: a Prophetic saying that captures the words and actions of the Prophet Mohammed and are considered, next to the Qur'an, as the second most important source for Islam.

Discussion points

1. What are the two extreme positions when it comes to Islam and gender equality and what do they both have in common?
2. What rights were given in Islam supporting gender equality?
3. How does re-evaluating stipulations based on the spirit and not the letter of the law look like in the given example about witnesses? How would it look applied to other examples?
4. Why is it important to have more women scholars if men and women have the same intellectual capacities?

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Shama Ajoubi is a young researcher and Arabic Tutor from Austria with Afghan roots. She is a double Master's candidate in Islamic Religious Pedagogy (University of Vienna) and in Islamic Theological Studies (University of Innsbruck).

Fariza Bisaeva is a young researcher from Vienna with roots in Chechnya, a dedicated scholar currently pursuing a Master's in Islamic Religious Education. She is actively engaged with issues of religious pedagogy in Islam, a member of the 'Abraham', the Abrahamitic Trialogue of Dialog. She also holds workshops in schools regarding extremism of all kinds. Her research interests extend to topics such as integration, intersectionality and gender within various discourses.