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Challenging Religious Issues

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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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Family Trees: Who Is Baby Jesus?

John Holdsworth

The early chapters of Matthew's Gospel are a stylised way of identifying Jesus, according to recognised traditions. This is particularly true of the neglected first chapter, the bulk of which is taken up with a genealogy. To appreciate the Gospel fully, we need to deconstruct this section, bearing in mind the Gospel's initial audience. Jesus is presented as son of Abraham, son of David and the Messiah, whose arrival at an auspicious time is about to set a new direction in religious history.

Specification links:
EDEXCEL Paper 3: New Testament Studies: Social, historical and religious context of the New Testament 1.1 Prophecy regarding the Messiah (1) (b) The significance of these expectations and their impact on New Testament texts, including Matthew's proof texts in the birth narratives and for understanding the Gospel texts
EDUQAS Component 1, Option A: A Study of Christianity Theme 1: Religious figures and sacred texts, Knowledge and understanding of religion and belief A. Jesus – his birth: . . . Issues for analysis and evaluation . . . such as: • The relative importance of redaction criticism for understanding the biblical birth narratives
OCR Developments in Christian thought (H573/03): 2. Foundations, The person of Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ's authority as the Son of God

In the West we are familiar with what might be called efficient conversation. If we meet someone in the street we might briefly ask how they are, in a purely ceremonial way (we don't want to hear an answer at length about how they really are), before proceeding to the real substance of the conversation. That is not so in the Middle East. A whole series of questions and answers has to be rehearsed before conversation can begin.

This is not peculiar to the Middle East. When I first used to walk around the small town in south Wales where my wife lived, I quickly became aware that a familiar greeting was 'Who can I say that

you are?' My answer would be one that might hopefully connect me to someone whose pedigree was known and trusted. I found that 'I'm Doug Thomas's elder daughter's husband' usually did the trick. That gave clues not only to the formal relationship, but also to the kind of person I might be. Further questions might follow, as to where we had met, what I did for a living, where I was from and did I speak Welsh. Only when all these things had been properly established could a conversation begin.

According to Matthew

The beginning of Matthew's Gospel is rather like that stylised series of answers to the question 'Who can I say that Jesus is?' Unlike Mark's Gospel, which plunges into Jesus' ministry in chapter 1 after the briefest of introductions, Matthew's Gospel begins the ministry proper at 4:17. All that goes before is, effectively, an answer to the reader's question, 'Who am I being introduced to?' So,

> by the time the reader comes to 4:17 he is well prepared to see this Jesus not just as a preacher of God's message but as the Messiah to whom the whole Old Testament revelation pointed forward, and even more than that, as the Son of God. (France, 1985, p. 74)

Those preceding chapters contain an extended account of the baptism of Jesus, taking up the whole of chapter 3, with a vituperative 'sermon' addressed to Pharisees and Sadducees (verses 7-12), which will be a feature of the Gospel. The early part of chapter 4 describes Jesus' vocational reflecting on his role, 'in the wilderness'. That leaves chapters 1 and 2. Most of chapter 2 is taken up with the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus. This article will be concerned with what chapter 1, a key chapter in any volume, has to say, in answer to the question about who Jesus is, and in particular, what the majority of that chapter, verses 1-17, might be trying to tell us. Nativity Plays normally only use chapter 2, and services of carols and lessons give the impression that the Gospel starts at 1:18, but those first 17 verses are 'saturated with [Matthew's] theological perspective' (Senior, 1998, p. 39). They set a context and interpretative framework for all that follows.

Who's asking?

It is worth remarking that answers to questions about who we are depend to an extent on who's asking. Most of us have several biographies. I have a family biography, an academic biography (aka a 'CV') and a church biography of the kind that one might find in a Diocesan Directory. I also have a more general biography as one might find on the dust cover of a book. There are situations in which 'I'm a Leeds United supporter' would be a key indicator of my true worth and identity. In Matthew's case, the question is answered as if those who ask it are his congregation. We pick up hints about them throughout the Gospel.

Commentators often use the simple indicators 'Jew' and 'Gentile' to describe early Christian congregations, but these are really inadequate. As Acts chapter 2 tells us, Jews come from all over the place and speak several languages. 'Gentiles' simply tells us that people are not Jews. The addressees of Paul's letters give us some indication of how varied their locations and cultures might be. What we can certainly say about Matthew's congregation is that it was diverse. Much of the material peculiar to Matthew speaks of that diversity: the wheat and the tares, the sheep and the goats, the wise and the foolish virgins. It

certainly included people from a Jewish culture and background. But Matthew is very keen to dismiss any sense of entitlement such people might display within the congregation. He believes that the initial covenant that formed Israel has been institutionalised and subverted by a religious establishment out of all recognition, and that an initial society of the freed has turned into some kind of religious tyranny. His message to religious elites is uncompromising. His Gospel introduction has to make his position clear.

It may seem like a huge claim to make, that a list of names could be 'theologically saturated', like that, or that it could form an interpretative framework for what follows, but it is a claim I want to pursue. The very first words of the Gospel are (literally) 'a book of the genesis of Jesus Christ'. The same word, 'genesis', is used at 1:18, but the words are translated differently. There is a discussion about whether the 1:1 use of the word refers to what follows immediately, or more widely. However, the reference to genesis is surely suggestive of the first book of the Hebrew Bible, in the same way that John's Gospel begins with a phrase suggestive of the beginnings of the same religious tradition. The phrase 'book of the genesis', which gives the Old Testament book its name, in effect, is found at Genesis 2:4 where it refers to the beginning of 'the heavens and the earth' and at 5:1, where it refers to the origin of human beings. This is a new beginning. Hare believes that it could be compared with the title of a Hollywood movie along the lines of 'Genesis 2: A New Beginning with The Coming of the Christ' (Hare, 1993, p. 7).

Titles

In Matthew 1:1, Jesus is given three titles that speak of different kinds of biography. He is the son of Abraham, which gives him an ethnic identity; the son of David, which adds to that a royal identity; and the Christ or Messiah, which places him within religious expectation. Son of Abraham is, in context, an ironic title. Nationalist Judaism and its religious equivalent had as its proud boast 'We have Abraham for our father'. We see this reinterpreted at 3:9. Abraham can have many sons. There is no Jewish entitlement. The one person who truly represents the covenant made with Abraham is Jesus, and when he ratifies a new covenant in his blood (26:28) he signifies that it is 'for many' and not the few. Son of David is a claim that will also be evidenced in the list that follows, and makes the point that Jesus is in line to be a king. Case-Winters believes that this claim is clarified in chapter 2, and that the reader is meant to compare the kingship of Jesus with that of Herod. 'Herod has no royal blood. He is not even fully Jewish. He is just an opportunist military commander that the Romans have co-opted for their own political agenda' (Case Winters, 2015, p. 23). Jesus' kingship is ironically proclaimed at Matthew 27:11, 29, 37, 42. To proclaim him as Messiah is to locate him first, as God's anointed (the meaning in Hebrew of the word Messiah), his special son; but also to give a hint as to his role as the one who would inaugurate the kingdom, or kingly rule, of God. So that when we hear him do that, as the clarion call of his ministry in 4:17 and 4:23, it comes as no surprise.

Numbers

That sense of expectation about the kingdom belongs in a wider context that is generally referred to as 'eschatological.' That term refers to a theology of history which believes that just as God created the natural order, so

he 'created' human history and planned and designed it. Conveniently, that design involved a division into several ages. The key thing about the next age is that it would reverse the injustices and sufferings experienced in the present one, and so the idea of a new age with its concrete expression in a new kingdom, with a new anointed king like David, had a wide popular appeal. Those who claimed to have special knowledge of God's plan and took a special interest in it, believed that clues as to God's design could be found 'hidden' within some significant numbers. For example, the number of days in a week was seven, and so that clearly had significance. Seven was taken to be a number signifying completeness or perfection within God's plan (cf. Revelation 13:17, 18, where six represents that which pretends to be God but isn't). This was further complicated by the fact that, as with Roman numerals, Hebrew letters have a numeric value. So codes could be 'discovered' to provide further corroboration of God's intentions.

Such is the cultural background to Matthew's arrangement of his genealogy. It is presented as a series of three times fourteen. The name 'David' in Hebrew consists of just three letters (Hebrew has no vowels), 'DVD'. The value of D is four and that of V, six; so, the sum of David is also 14. To some Jewish ears this would constitute a scientific argument, and certainly a religious one. Three times 14 is six times seven. The seventh day is now about to dawn. The new beginning of God's completion is heralded in this birth.

This stylised presentation is continued throughout chapters 1 and 2 in a more narrative fashion. They consist of short staccato passages, culminating in an Old Testament 'proof text'. These show continuity with the Old Testament, certainly, but essentially they show that God's story about the world and society is one story, which is now reaching a climax.

Jew and Gentile

So far, this seems to favour Jewish culture, but a close look at the names in the frames shows a more subversive intention. Unusually, the list includes five women. And even more unusually, four of them are either foreigners or have foreign connections. Tamar and Rahab were in all probability Canaanite; Ruth was a Moabite, and Bathsheba was married to a Hittite. The fifth is Mary. The four women mentioned have other things in common. Tamar pretended to be a prostitute, sleeping with her former father-in-law, in order to establish her claim for justice (the full story is in Genesis chapter 38). Rahab is named as a prostitute, but she was honoured because she had hidden Israelite spies who came to recce Jericho, and so spared their lives (story in Joshua chapter 2). Ruth, who generally has a good name because she refused to abandon her widowed mother-in-law, nevertheless seduced Boaz (story in Ruth chapter 3) and Bathsheba was the mistress of King David (story in 2 Samuel chapter 11).

Then we have Mary. This sequence could have several interpretations. It could be a way of explaining the fact that Mary is pregnant outside marriage, for God has worked through other fallen women. It could be a way of stressing the extraordinariness of the birth. It could be just that this story is told very much from Joseph's point of view. Or it could be a subversive reminder that even King David had foreign blood in his veins, and that God has acted through the quest for justice, the generosity, the loyalty and the sacrifice of women, and that Mary stands

in that glorious line. The last line of the genealogy is a real let-down or give-away; because there we see that this is not a genealogy in the normal sense. It is a genealogy of Joseph, who has no biological connection with Jesus. This is a 'legal' ancestry (France, 1985, p. 80).

And according to Luke?

Matthew's genealogy differs from Luke's in several ways that distinguish it. Luke places his genealogy immediately before the account of the temptations, in which Jesus finds out for himself who he is (Luke 3:23-38). Luke's genealogy works backwards from Jesus, without a stylised numerical structure. After David, he has 42 generations in comparison with Matthew's 27. He concludes not with Abraham, but with Adam, 'the son of God': making a point about universality as well as introducing this title. His genealogy includes no women; but it does have in common the names of David and Abraham, as well as the more recent and revered Zerubbabel.

Luke's genealogy is far less nuanced, then, but also makes allowance for a virgin birth by saying that Jesus was the son of Joseph 'as it was supposed' (Greek: *enomizeto*, imperfect passive).

Conclusion

If we make a list of things we learn or expect from the opening paragraphs of Matthew's Gospel, it is impressive. The time has come. The age is about to change. God's anointed is here to inaugurate it. He is God's Son (a theme taken up immediately in 2:15, 3:17), and in succession to King David, the last King to have a united Kingdom. His birth might be expected to be unusual, because that is the way God works. He stands in a Jewish cultural history but God's plan is more expansive, inclusive and surprising than that expectation commonly believes. As the Gospel develops so will these themes, reaching their dénouement in the passion narrative. Matthew does not leave his readers in suspense as to who baby Jesus is. 'Matthew has laid his theological cards on the table' (France, 1985, p. 74).

Discussion points

1. Do you think that we can really understand the birth narrative that follows, unless we have grasped the importance of the genealogy?
2. Comparing Matthew with Mark's Gospel, what do you think that an introduction to Jesus before he reaches adulthood adds to our understanding of him?
3. Comparing Matthew's introductory account with Luke's, they appear to have little in common. Is this, or should this be, a problem for Christians?
4. Do you think that Nativity plays that conflate Matthew and Luke's accounts confuse who Jesus is or make it clearer, to audiences today?

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Religion Goes Viral: Faith and Belief in a Pandemic

Martyn Percy

The article presents an overview of the history of pandemics – the toll they take on mortality rates and living conditions, and the subsequent desire for political and social re-ordering and the redistribution of power and wealth that they prompt – and how this intersects with theodicies. The article explores scriptural understandings of how pandemics shape faith and give rise to the idea of 'viral religion' and shows the humanitarianism of seeing beyond statistics.

Specification links:
AQA Component 1: Philosophy of religion and ethics, Section A: Philosophy of religion . . . Evil and suffering; Section B: Ethics and religion, . . . Issues of human life and death; Component 2: Study of religion and dialogues, Section A: Study of religion – [all faith options] . . . Religion and secularisation
EDEXCEL Paper 1: Philosophy of Religion (9RS0/01) . . . Problems of evil and suffering; Paper 4: Study of Religion (9RS0/4A-4F), all Options . . . beliefs about death, the afterlife, the self, and the meaning and purpose of life; responses to suffering, challenge of secularisation
EDUQAS Component 1: A Study of Religion [all options]: . . . beliefs about the self, death and afterlife, beliefs about the meaning and purpose of life; challenges from secularisation; Component 2: Philosophy of Religion Theme 2: Challenges to religious belief - the problem of evil and suffering
OCR Philosophy of religion (H573/01): The problem of evil and suffering; Developments in religious thought (H573/03-07): beliefs about the self, death and afterlife; beliefs about the meaning and purpose of life beliefs about meaning and purpose of life; secularisation

Plagues and pandemics

On 15 August 1665, the weekly statistics on deaths in London were published. *Bills of mortality* had been continuously published since 1603 by the Worshipful Company of Parish Clerks. By 1665, London had 130 parishes and these *Bills of mortality* provide a fascinating insight into how people viewed health, safety and mortality. On 15 August 1665 it records that eight people died of 'excessive wynde', one person from 'lethargie', one from being 'frighted' (more were recorded in previous weeks), another from 'meagrome', over one hundred from 'teeth', just fifteen from 'wormes', six from 'thrush' – and over six-

and-a-half thousand from something termed ‘plague’. The register adds that in that same week there were one hundred and sixty-eight christenings.

London’s plague of 1665-6 recorded almost 70,000 deaths, although the true figure is probably over 100,000. To say that the plague of London – ‘the Great Plague,’ as it became known – was devastating, is to understate the matter. In just eighteen months almost a quarter of Londoners died from bubonic plague. We have tended to view this tragic pandemic of seventeenth-century London through rather rose-tinted spectacles. Our present political leaders have, to a large extent, paid little attention to similarities in the dynamics that made London a no-go area in 1665-6, and those related to Covid-19 today.

Frank Snowden’s *Epidemics and society: From the Black Death to the present* (2019) highlights how the massive increase in urbanisation and intercontinental travel has exposed us, globally, to new pandemics. The warning signs were already here: HIV/AIDS, ‘Avian flu,’ Zika, Sars, Ebola – to name but a few. We had rather assumed that our highly-developed societies gave us immunity to relatively recent afflictions such as polio, tuberculosis and ‘Spanish flu’. In fact, some of the older diseases and pandemics – typhus, cholera, smallpox, consumption – have been surfacing again in the twenty-first century. Poverty, and cramped, poor, unhealthy social conditions, act as breeding grounds for new viruses and bacteria. Malaria always thrives in environments where there is polluted, still water. It still kills five million children a year under the age of two.

The thrust of Snowden’s book argues that pandemics have always re-ordered society. They invariably result in a ‘new normal’ emerging. Out of the hysteria, superstition, tragedy and loss comes a realism that re-boots Society, which in turn prompts some fundamental political impetus for its re-ordering.

Snowden’s book confirms what we know from other more popular studies of medieval England’s health. Jack Hartnell (*Medieval bodies: Life, death and art in the Middle Ages*, 2018), John Hatcher (*The Black Death*, 2008) and Ian Mortimer (*The time traveller’s guide to medieval England*, 2009) all give interesting insights into how the plague-pandemic of the time re-ordered medieval society – politically, financially and socially. For example, people born to serfdom might suddenly find that they were beneficiaries and heirs. Pandemics redistributed power and money; they challenged authorities and prevailing social constructions of reality; they promoted new consciousness, and re-ordered priorities. The common denominator across these studies is that there is not much one can do to escape pandemics and their social and economic consequences. Plagues come and go. We are seldom ready for them. When confronted by their reality, we often go into denial. The numbers that are published now on Covid-19 have as much impact as the *Bills of mortality* did in 1665. On the inside, most people say to themselves, as they have done in previous centuries, ‘it won’t happen to me’. Maybe.

Theodicies and suffering

It might surprise many readers to learn that the relationship between religion and viruses is as old as the hills. Most religious traditions have adopted positions on the origins of evil, misfortune and illness – positions that we usually term ‘theodicies’. Most sacred texts include stories, parables, instructive fables or doctrines that attempt to

address the relationship between God (or the gods), health, wholeness, disease and death. Whilst ancient religions were obviously unable to distinguish between genetic, bacterial or viral illness, the causes and effect of illness and disability were the focus of much speculation. The Old Testament speaks of many kinds of plagues, and of God as the source of these, for purposes of chastisement and judgement.

In the New Testament, Jesus is interrogated for healing a blind man (John 9), with the discussion turning on why the man was blind (with Jesus somewhat indifferent to its cause) and then asking whether spiritual blindness is worse. Finding theological meaning in the midst of suffering is a well-established trope in literature. For example, in Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927), we meet a Franciscan monk ruminating on the apparently meaningless deaths of five people who fell from a bridge. What is the point of this?, he muses; Where is God's purpose in this tragedy?

> some say we shall never know, and that to the gods we are like flies killed on a summer day, and some say, on the contrary, that the very sparrows do not lose a feather that has not been brushed away by the finger of God . . .

Yet Wilder ends his novel with an affirmation of what the Gospels assure us, namely, of God's total care and love for everyone, wherever and whoever we are:

> But soon we shall die and all memory of those five will have left the earth, and we ourselves shall be loved for a while and forgotten. But the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. Even memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning. (Wilder, 1927, p. 192)

But what of viruses? Twenty-five years ago John Bowker, then Dean of Chapel at Trinity College Cambridge, wrote an intriguing book entitled *Is God a virus?* (1995). Bowker reflected on the argument that belief in God could be likened to a virus infecting human minds, with damaging results. His claim was discussed and tested in the context of work both in genetics and theories of gene-culture co-evolution, suggesting ways in which the interaction between genes and culture may be interpreted. In a complementary vein, many advocates of secularisation theses have likened the gradual reduction and retreat of the role of religion in public life as a kind of 'cultural virus.' The body politic – society, in other words – has been infected and affected by invasive and pervasive factors that have weakened the strength and 'immunity system' of religion.

Still with 'viral religion,' I recall an electrifying (unpublished) lecture also given in 1995 by the late Professor Anthony Dyson, in which he suggested that 'the body of Christ had Aids/HIV'. His lecture galvanised and divided the audience. Some interpreted it as an appeal to the incarnational solidarity and suffering of Christ (in much the way that we can see in the famous Alsace *Isenheim Altarpiece,* sculpted and painted by Nikolaus of Haguenau and Matthias Grünewald between 1512–16). Others read Dyson's paper as saying that the contemporary church could not fight or withstand viral secularisation. Yet others understood Dyson to be arguing

that the 'virus' was a kind of natural pathogen within religion, which moderated the spiritual body-politic.

Then there is *mortality* to consider. To what extent do we need religion to make sense of death, or faith to provide consolation in the midst of loss? For many, some spirituality remains important in the face of death. However, it must be conceded that religious forms of memorialisation (including ritual) are now subject to considerable secular competition, and that formal faith-orientated ceremonies are contracting in contemporary culture.

Camus's The plague

In the short but prescient novel by Albert Camus – *The plague* (in French, *La peste*, 1947) – we encounter a story that narrates a plague sweeping the French Algerian city of Oran. Initially, just a few die; then some more; then even more. Panic grips the streets as the epidemic enfolds the population. No-one was ready for this, and few thought any plague could draw near to them.

The citizens of Oran live in a state of perpetual denial. Even when, like London in 1665-6, a quarter of the city is dying, they reason it will not be them. These folk are, after all, living in modern times. The have newspapers, cars, aeroplanes and telephones. The people of Oran cannot, surely, perish like the poor wretches of 17th-century London or 18th-century Canton?

The hero of the book is Doctor Rieux, and his resilient humanism is profoundly moving. He does not buy into the religious interpretations of the plague offered by a local priest, or of the abrogation of reason by the citizenry. As the death-toll peaks at 500 per-week, Doctor Rieux reflects on a child he has tended but who has died. He reasons that suffering is unevenly and randomly distributed. For all the theodicy in the world, suffering simply makes no sense. It is absurd – and that is the kindest thing one can say of it.

How does Doctor Rieux respond to what is going on around him? He works tirelessly to lessen the suffering of those in his care. But he is no hero. As he later remarks, '[this] may seem a ridiculous idea, but the only way to fight the plague is with decency'. Another character enquires of him as to what decency is. '[Just] doing my job,' replies Doctor Rieux. In other words, duty and vocation come first. He is committed to caring for others in need. Little more need be said.

In life, there is no guaranteed security. From Camus, through Doctor Rieux, we learn the following lesson: to love our fellow humans (whether we like them or not, and no matter how long they live for or how much time they take to die), and to work with courage and hope for the relief of suffering. Life is ultimately a hospice, not a hospital. We are here to provide some salve in the midst of desolation and despair.

As the novel closes, Doctor Rieux opines that 'this chronicle could not be a story of definitive victory', because the plague never dies; it 'waits patiently in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, handkerchiefs and old papers' for the day when it will arise again. One might think this is a depressing note on which to end this novel. But it is profoundly humanitarian.

On being humanitarian

I choose the adjective 'humanitarian' with care. Because to be humanitarian is to have a binding duty and concern for helping to improve the welfare of people, and this impulse can spring from moral and religious roots. To be a humanitarian can be religious and humanist (and neither party will mind which), because it is about valuing people as inherently

precious. Or, valuing them as God would value them. The result is the same. It is the lesson of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10). Or the Ten Lepers (Luke 17). Goodness for goodness' sake: not for gratitude or for converts. Mercy matters.

Correspondingly, there is nothing explicitly 'Christian' about Dame Cicely Saunders and her founding of the modern hospice movement. Committed to the alleviation of suffering, she wrote to her patients: 'You matter because you are you, and you matter to the end of your life . . . we will do all we can not only to help you die peacefully, but also to live until you die' (Saunders in Stoddard, 1978, p. 91). Similarly, Chad Varah, an Anglican curate from Lincoln, founded the Samaritans to help the suicidal and the depressed. All it took was the suicide of a young teenage girl, who was traumatised by commencing menstruation and feared that she had a sexually transmitted disease, to restart Varah's vocation.

Both these examples are profoundly humanitarian, and the religious pulses within them are lively, if implicit. Sometimes it is only the shock and despair at the manner of people's deaths that leads us to review the actual lives of others, and how to respond. Think Live Aid. Think Christian Aid: 'We believe in life *before* death'.

On counting

What was it Einstein once said? 'Not everything that counts can be counted; and not everything that can be counted, counts' (Einstein in Cameron et al., 2015, p. 38). Einstein was right. For what can measure the loss of trust by so many, when it only concerned the actions of a few? We need to be mindful of what we count; and always question the value attributed to any numbers we are invited to note (and those we are asked to ignore). Everyone matters. No-one is expendable. For all the talk of 'spikes,' 'flattening curves' and 'keeping the R number below 1', in this pandemic there are going to be over 50,000 *preventable* deaths in the UK. Which means at least 500,000 (perhaps a million) preventable bereavements.

Recently I took a funeral for a friend, whose mother had died in a care home. Our funeral followed the protocols at that time. One son present, with his partner, the funeral director and me. It was not the send-off he would have planned for his mother. Many more could have come, and would have come, were it not for restrictions on travel and the demands of social distancing. Yet we commended her to God's gracious care and keeping, and I thought of the words of comfort Jesus offers: 'where two or three are gathered, I am in the midst of them' (Matthew 18). I thought of times when Jesus sat with the bereaved (Luke 8, John 11). The life and ministry of Jesus teaches us that to God, each and every one is precious. The detail of caring matters. As Luke 12:7 has it, 'the very hairs of your head are all numbered . . . so do not be afraid, for you are worth more than many sparrows.' Put another way, to God, no one is expendable. We all matter. We are asked to live as God sees this world: everyone matters.

Harold Kushner's *When bad things happen to good people* (1978) sold millions of copies worldwide. But few recall that this best-selling book grew out of his own personal loss. Kushner was a rabbi who dedicated the book to the memory of his young son, Aaron, who died in his early teens from an incurable genetic disease. So the book was written by a good man who prayed very hard – but who still lost his son. Like Doctor Rieux and Albert Camus, Kushner knew that real religion is not measured by how we avoid suffering or

loss, but rather, how we engage with it.

> people who pray for courage, for strength to bear the unbearable, for the grace to remember what they have, instead of what they have lost, very often find their prayers answered . . . [because] God. . . doesn't send us the problems. . . but God does give us the strength to cope with them. (Kushner, 1978, pp. 125-127)

We are plagued by all manner of numbers and statistics in our age. But even plague-related numbers and statistics may not be looking and counting in the right way anymore. We are asked to see the world and humanity as God sees it. To count as God counts. One stray hair, one stray sparrow (Luke 12: 7), one stray sheep (Luke 15: 3-7): all matter. Everyone matters. No one doesn't. Each person is made in the image of God, and precious to God's sight and heart. I think Jesus, as the Verb of God, would agree. It is certainly what he practised. And it is what he believed. Jesus was less concerned with what people believed, and far more interested in how they acted. A good atheist is better than a bad Pharisee. A kind sinner or a good Samaritan engaged in caring was of far more use to God than a separatist Sadducee. Jesus did seem to think that you could be spiritual, but not religious.

What drove the humanitarian impulses of Doctor Rieux, Cicely Saunders and Chad Varah – and many who currently work on the frontline of NHS and in challenging social care contexts, whose names will never be known – is what Einstein hinted at. Everyone counts, equally. No numbers or statistics that any government promotes on pandemics, and that suggest it might be otherwise, have any real business to be wielding much power in this world. Nor in the world to come.

Internet links

https://www.christianaid.org.uk/our-work/about-us/our-aims (Aims of Christian Aid)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chad_Varah (Wikipedia on Chad Varah)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cicely_Saunders (Wikipedia on Cicely Saunders)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Plague (Wikipedia on Camus's *The plague*)

Discussion points.

1. How might people make sense of suffering and death in an increasingly secular society that gives less space and prominence to religion, yet is still spiritual?
2. If religion is a virus, it may be that we have caught it at one time or another: have you experienced in yourself or others a bad 'bout' of religion, and if so, how did you/they recover?
3. Many viruses live 'naturally' in the body without causing harm, even doing good quite often. What good aspects of religion may be noted in the modern world, even by those who do not want any part of faith themselves?
4. Have a look at the *Isenheim Altarpiece* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isenheim_Altarpiece) – what do you think the painter and sculptor were trying to tell us about the life of God in the world?
5. How would you like to be remembered and why? Try to write your own obituary.

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Stephen Hawking and a Universe without God?

David Wilkinson

Does a scientific account of the origin of the Universe rule out, or at least undermine, the religious claim that God is the creator of the universe? The work of physicist Stephen Hawking is often quoted as evidence for this. This article looks at Hawking's work and suggests that it is important for theological discussion in challenging certain arguments for the existence of God, while at the same time raising fruitful questions.

Specification links:
AQA 3.1 Component 1: Philosophy of religion and ethics, 3.1 3.1.1 Section A: Philosophy of religion . . . Cosmological argument
EDEXCEL Paper 1: Philosophy of Religion: Topic 1.2 Cosmological Argument; 6.3 Religion and science debates and their significance for philosophy of religion, b) Creation themes and scientific cosmologies: Big Bang, steady state theories
EDUQAS Component 1: A Study of Religion [all options]: the challenge of science [regarding creation]; Component 2: Philosophy of Religion Theme 1: Arguments for the existence of God – inductive, Cosmological argument
OCR Philosophy of religion (H573/01): 2. The Existence of God . . . Knowledge Arguments based on observation, the cosmological argument

Hawking, God and the media

When Stephen Hawking died in March 2018, the huge media interest reflected a diverse number of issues. First, there was his achievements as one of the great physicists of his time, having made fundamental contributions to understanding relativity, the Big Bang and black holes. Second, these achievements were largely done while battling with the debilitating illness of a rare form of motor neuron disease. This was a remarkable personal story. Third, while not being a rock star physicist such as Brian Cox, Hawking had international fame with best-selling books such *A brief history of time* and appearances in pop culture such as *The Simpsons, Star Trek: The Next Generation* and as Sheldon's hero in *The Big Bang theory*.

However, there was a fourth component and that was public interest in what Hawking said about God, not least whether God was needed in any way for the beginning of the Universe. His book *A brief history of time,* which sold over 10 million copies, was described by fellow

astrophysicist Carl Sagan in the foreword as:

> a book about God . . . or perhaps about the absence of God . . . The word God fills these pages . . . a universe with no edge in space, no beginning or end in time, and nothing for a Creator to do. (Hawking, 1988, p. x)

When his next bestseller, *The grand design* (Hawking & Mlodinow, 2010), was published *The Times* newspaper (2 Sept, 2010) led with headline 'Hawking: God did not create the universe'. Alongside him, another astrophysicist, Lawrence Krauss in *A Universe from nothing*, made the theological claim that God is not needed at the very first moment of the Universe (Krauss, 2012).

Towards the end of his life, Hawking took a stronger stance on the non-existence of God:

> We are each free to believe what we want, and it's my view that the simplest explanation is that there is no God. No one created the universe, and no one directs our fate. (Hawking, 2018, p. 211)

However, against the media stereotype, that these discoveries mean the death of a creator, the interaction of Christian faith with the science of the origin of the Universe is much more subtle and indeed fruitful. Sometimes these discoveries encourage a new dialogue with faith, and sometimes they lead to a new understanding of faith. The challenge of contemporary cosmology for Christianity is not a direct attack, but an opportunity to take science seriously in theological thinking, and in building bridges between faith and culture.

In order to examine this we need to understand Hawking's approach and the way it interacts with traditional approaches to theism.

Hawking, God and science

Hawking provocatively claimed that 'philosophy is dead. Philosophy has not kept up with modern developments in science, particularly physics' (Hawking & Mlodinow, 2010, p. 5). This reflects a feeling among some scientists that there has been a lack of a *specific* understanding or engagement with scientific theories such as inflation, string theory or M-theory. Instead, they argue, theologians and philosophers continue to assert generalisations about creation.

One of the great achievements of cosmology has been the Big Bang model of the origin of the Universe. It describes the expansion of the Universe from a time when it was only 10^{-43} seconds old. At that stage, 13.8 billion years ago, the Universe was an incredibly dense mass, so small that it could pass through the eye of a needle. This model is supported by the evidence of the redshift of galaxies, the microwave background radiation and the abundance of helium in the Universe. Of course, like any scientific model it has some gaps. A large proportion of the Universe (over 70%) is in the form of dark energy and at the moment we have little idea as to what that is. Another 23% of the Universe is in the form of dark matter; we know it is there but we are not sure what it is, either. The fact that we know only a tiny fraction of what the Universe is made of is somewhat embarrassing for cosmologists. Yet the power of science is that we know what we do not know, and we are able to design experiments at the Large Hadron Collider that might at least tell us what dark matter is.

Some questions are much more difficult. The standard model of the hot Big Bang

describes the origin of the Universe as an expansion from a singularity, that is, a point of infinite density. But that singularity raises immediate problems. First, general relativity, which describes the expansion of the Universe so well, suggests that time is not completely independent of space, and that gravity is then explained as a consequence of this space-time being curved by the distribution of mass-energy within it. Thus, the distribution of mass determines the geometry of space and the rate of flow of time. However, at a singularity there is infinite density and infinite curvature of space-time. General relativity is unable to cope with this infinity and predicts its own downfall; that is, the theory breaks down at the singularity.

Second, general relativity as a theory is inconsistent with quantum theory. General relativity, which is extremely successful in describing the large-scale structure of the Universe, needs to specify mass and position in order then to describe the geometry and rate of flow of time. At a singularity, where the gravitational field is so strong and the whole Universe is so small that it is on the atomic scale of quantum theory, it is believed that quantum effects should be important. Quantum theory, however, says that one can never know both the mass and the position of anything without an intrinsic uncertainty. One cannot call on both general relativity and quantum theory to describe a situation.

The singularity problem, therefore, is that general relativity is unable to give a description of the singularity; in other words, general relativity cannot explain the initial conditions of the expansion of the Universe. So the great scientific theories of the 20th century are unable to predict what will come out of the singularity. They can describe the subsequent expansion but they are unable to reach back beyond an age of 10^{-43} seconds to zero.

This limit of scientific theory, its being unable to reach back to the very beginning, was frustrating to physicists but attractive to some theologians. Is God needed to 'fix' the initial conditions of the Universe? If science is unable to describe the initial moments, is this 'the gap' where God comes in to set the Universe off?

However, many scientists rightly resist this trajectory. Hawking attempts to use the laws of physics to explain not just the evolution of the Universe but also its initial conditions. In order to do this, one must bring quantum theory and general relativity together into a quantum theory of gravity. Such a theory, he suggests, can explain how the blue touch paper of the Big Bang *lights itself*. The core of Hawking's theory, in John Barrow's phrase, is that 'once upon a time there was no time' (Barrow, 1993). According to Hawking, the Universe *does* have a beginning but it *does not* need a cause, since in this theory the notion of time melts away. Hawking's Universe emerges from a fluctuation in a quantum field. No cause as such is necessary.

Hawking believes that the best theory for explaining the Universe's initial conditions is M-theory, which is in fact a whole family of different theories where each theory applies to phenomena within a certain range. It suggests eleven dimensions of space-time. However, for Hawking, it also suggests that our Universe is one in 10^{500} universes that arise naturally out of physical laws. And for him, 'their creation does not require the intervention of some supernatural being or god' (Hawking & Mlodinow, 2010, p. 8).

It must be stressed that Hawking's thinking on this is not fully accepted by the rest of the scientific community. There are other proposals on how to deal with

the problem of the laws breaking down, and it remains difficult to know whether quantum theory can be applied to the whole Universe.

Hawking, God and theology

If Hawking's attempt to explain scientifically the first moment of the Universe's history is indeed successful, then this demolishes any 'god of the gaps' theology. But the God of Christian theology is not a God who fills in any gaps in our current scientific ignorance, nor one who interacts with the very first moment of the Universe's history and then retires to a safe distance. Hawking's use of M-theory may eventually work, but the Christian theologian, while applauding enthusiastically, will also raise the question as to where M-theory itself comes from. Theology asserts that God is the one who creates and sustains the laws of physics, laws which science assumes but does not explain.

Such a god-of-the-gaps argument has sometimes been used in apologetic arguments that attempt to prove the existence of God. The argument that the Big Bang needs God to start it off is the 'cosmological argument' in temporal form, and has been used in different contexts for centuries. However, it has a number of weaknesses. Augustine pointed out many centuries ago that the Universe was created *with time*, not *in time*. Therefore, to ask a question about what came *before* the Universe is to attempt to use the concept of time before time itself came into existence. In addition, the first-cause argument derives from a notion that the Universe is a thing or event. It is easy to claim that everything has a cause, but is the Universe a thing or event?

More importantly, as scientists explain more and more of the Universe, there is a temptation to look for unexplained gaps in the knowledge of the natural world in order to find space for God. But such a 'god of the gaps' is always in danger of becoming irrelevant, as science fills in more of its own story.

By contrast, the Bible understands that the whole Universe is the result of God's working. Thus, God is at much at work at the first 10^{-43} second as at any other time. A scientific description of that moment in time does not invalidate it as being as much the activity of God as any other event. Indeed, the biblical images are not of a deistic god who breaks a bottle against the hull of the Universe and then waves it off into the distance (perhaps saying, 'Good-bye, see you on judgement day'?). Rather, Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, speaks of Christ as 'the image of the invisible God', one in whom 'all things were created' and 'all things hold together' (1:15-17). This paints a picture of God much more as the one who keeps the Universe afloat and together. God is the basis of the natural order, the basis of its physical laws. This is far closer to the God of Christian theism than is deism.

Don Page, a long-time collaborator of Hawking, sums up this view in these words:

> God creates and sustains the entire Universe rather than just the beginning. Whether or not the Universe has a beginning has no relevance to the question of its creation, just as whether an artist's line has a beginning and an end, or instead forms a circle with no end, has no relevance to the question of its being drawn. (Page, 1998)

What Hawking *has* achieved is to show the inadequacy of a deistic god of the gaps which arises out of a rather naïve, temporal version of the cosmological

argument. While there have been periods in Christian history when such arguments for the existence of God have been prominent, Christian theology has never rested on them. Rather, it has recognised that our knowledge of God mainly comes from God's self-revelation in history and experience.

Hawking never seriously engaged with those claims of Christian thinking.

Internet links

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pj7nItu4bxw (Capturing Christianity, David Wilkinson and Dave Hutchings interviewed about their interest in Stephen Hawking and his work)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAk2cUlx0_o (The World as Told by Stephen Hawking)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6lFGJdwRyo (Stephen Hawking's big ideas . . . made simple, *Guardian Animations*)

Discussion points

1. Hawking, in a Discovery Channel documentary, has stated:

   > I believe the simplest explanation is, there is no God. No one created the universe and no one directs our fate. This leads me to a profound realization that there probably is no heaven and no afterlife either. We have this one life to appreciate the grand design of the universe and for that, I am extremely grateful.

   How might a theist respond to this view of the Universe?

2. Does the beginning of something always need a cause?
3. How important is the cosmological argument to Christian belief?

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Does the Genetic Basis of Life on Earth make Life after Death an Impossibility?

C. Mark Harrison

This article was first created in response to a question from a sample A-level paper in philosophy of religion, 'Critically assess Dawkins' claim that since life is no more that DNA reproducing itself there can be no life after death'. It raises issues around the thought of Richard Dawkins, biological reductionism and the vexed and challenging question of post-mortal existence.

Specification links:
AQA Component 1: Section A: Philosophy of Religion. 3.1.1 Self, Death and Afterlife; Component 2:, Study of Religion and Dialogues. 3.2.2 2B: Christianity, Section A:Self, Death and Afterlife, Christianity and science, Christianity and the challenge of secularisation; Section B: Dialogues between Christianity and Philosophy
EDEXCEL Paper 1 Philosophy of Religion (9RS0/01): Topic 5 Works of scholars 5.1 Context to critiques of religious belief and points for discussion . . . types of atheism and agnosticism. With reference to the ideas of R Dawkins and M Westphal; Topic 6: Influences of Developments in Religion and Belief, 6.1 Views about life after death across a range of religious traditions; 6.2 Points for discussion about life and death
EDUQAS Component 1, Option A: A Study of Christianity: Theme 3: Significant social and historical developments in religious thought, Knowledge and understanding of religion and belief, E: The relationship between religion and society: respect and recognition and the ways that religious traditions view other religions and non-religious worldviews and their truth claims. Historical developments in religious thought – challenges from science
OCR Philosophy of Religion (H573/01): 1. Philosophical Language and Thought: Soul, Mind and Body; Developments in Christian thought (H573/03): 6. Challenges facing religious thought from areas such as science

Scientific reductionism

This claim by Dawkins[1] clearly defines life in terms that could be called *reductionist*, as is implied by the phrase 'no more than', and it is here that some would see it as being flawed. Reductionism has its uses: we need to know that our bodies are made up of billions of cells in order to understand their workings, and it is useful to know that human and animal behaviour can be analysed in terms of motivation and reinforcement. However, to describe a lion purely in terms of the elements of which its body is composed,

[1] I have been unable to trace an exact quote from Dawkins that makes this connection, although there can be no doubt that he could have made it (although he would probably have expressed it a little more precisely).

or to call a computer a ‘metal, plastic and glass thing’ – whilst true – is neither helpful nor informative. Organisation is everything and often the whole is greater, often considerably greater, than the sum of the parts. So we must be careful of accepting reductionist claims at face value.

For Dawkins, the theory of evolution by natural selection, as put forward by Darwin in his *Origin of species*, is as good as proved and forms a central and absolutely essential part of his thinking, as does the existence of DNA, whose nature – discovered by Watson and Crick in the 1950s – provides a biochemical basis for genetics and heredity. Dawkins’s book *The selfish gene* (1976), which made him famous, is absolute in its insistence that *all* aspects of life, whether vegetable, animal or human, can be explained in terms of the (unconscious) drive by genes to reproduce themselves. Even human beings, with all their aesthetic and intellectual facets, are essentially machines for the propagation of their genes, Dawkins claims.

In his more recent career, Dawkins has been acclaimed as Britain’s leading atheist; the death of Christopher Hitchens, a rival for the title, has confirmed him in this role as he approaches his eightieth birthday. He adopts a materialist view that is in line with the severe empiricism inherent in his understanding of evolutionary biology. His 2006 best-seller *The God delusion* is a decisive rejection of theism.[2] He famously states in *River out of Eden*: ‘there is no spirit-driven life force, no throbbing, heaving, pullulating, protoplasmic, mystic jelly. Life is just bytes and bytes of digital information’ (Dawkins, 1995, pp. 18-19); this is a clear rejection of the metaphysical and leaves no room for any dualist understanding of the soul nor, clearly, for any view that the soul may somehow survive death.

On the one hand, he is clearly correct in that, biologically, all forms of life are brought about by the coding of DNA in genes, and humans are no exception to this. On one level, we have evolved as the means for propagating our genes, as has every other living organism. The genes which make our bodies what they are may well continue to exist for thousands of years, but we as individuals clearly do not. We die, and the body which has been the sole physical expression of our selves ceases to function and decays or is burned (or possibly eaten). After a while, there is no sense in which that body ‘exists’ at all, except in the memory of others or in pictures. Most people would not want it otherwise, as a prolonged, possibly endless, physical life in a body, subject to the ravages of time and disease, would seem to be anathema. So, Dawkins is right to claim that biology offers no basis for life after death – and even if it did, this would not be what people wanted.

However, is biology all there is to be said about a human being? Can we really be summed up as a mass of interconnected biological processes, geared merely to the propagation of the strands of DNA that we call genes?

Going beyond reductionism?

Some of Dawkins’ writing, notably in *Unweaving the rainbow*, does seem to suggest that humans ultimately transcend their biology, although not in any sort of post-mortal existence. ‘We are going to die’, clearly, but he asserts that ‘that makes us the lucky ones’ (Dawkins, 1998, p. 1) because it means that we

[2]Dawkins’s increasingly implacable hostility to religion and the notion of afterlife, evident in *The God delusion*, resulted to some extent from the events in New York on 11 September 2001, which profoundly affected him as they did many, and the apparent religious motivation of those who perpetrated the atrocities. Dawkins increasingly sees belief in an afterlife as not just irrational, but also positively dangerous.

have lived. There are an infinite number of possible humans that might have existed, with the right combination of genes, but it so happens that we are the ones that do exist. This gives us the chance to enjoy, for a brief number of years, the aesthetic, intellectual and social facets of life. There are vast opportunities that we should not miss, in our short span of life, to know who and what we are, to love and to celebrate our existence. Such considerations have a spiritual feel to them that is hard to reconcile with the notion that 'life is no more than DNA reproducing itself'. As a species, we would seem to have transcended our origins.

Interestingly, there is support for Dawkins's view in the writings of St Paul, in 1 Corinthians, chapter 15. Having expounded the idea of resurrection to the early Gentile churches, Paul was vexed by enquiries as to the nature of the resurrection body and has to make it clear that it will not be the same as the body we now have; indeed, it is necessary for this physical body to die. So, in whatever way we may exist in the afterlife, it is not as the biological entities we now are. To put it theologically, 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God' (1 Corinthians 15:50). So, in one sense, Dawkins's claim does not run counter to religious thinking, but in parallel to it.

Dawkins's rejection of the notion of an afterlife would be endorsed by the majority of atheist, agnostic and sceptical philosophers. His materialism, which could also be described as 'physicalism',[3] clearly flies directly in the face of Cartesian or Platonic dualism claiming, as it does, that empirical evidence does not support such ideas. Others, notably Antony Flew in *Could we survive our own deaths?*, have also used an a *priori* approach: by definition, death means the end of life, so life after death is inherently a contradictory idea. However, all that this move does is to confirm that, whatever the afterlife is, it is not simply a continuation of this life; it cannot be. But it must involve some sort of conscious existence if it is to be termed 'life' at all ('Life, Jim, but not as we know it', to slightly misuse the celebrated quote from *Star Trek*).

(Flew himself had a conversion of sorts to theism late in his life, although this was through a re-appraisal of the teleological and cosmological arguments rather than through any religious experience. But he remained strongly and stubbornly sceptical of the possibility of life after death and did not withdraw the opinions he had expressed in '*Could we survive our own deaths?*')

Interestingly, not all agnostic or sceptical philosophers have necessarily rejected the possibility of life after death. Moritz Schlick, a member of the Vienna Circle, from whose ideas Ayer derived his Verification Principle, sees it as something potentially verifiable:

> In fact I can easily imagine, e.g. witnessing the funeral of my own body and continuing to exist without a body, for nothing is easier than to describe a world which differs from our ordinary world . . . We must conclude that immortality, in the sense defined, should . . . be regarded . . . as an empirical hypothesis, because it possesses logical verifiability. It could be verified by following the prescription 'Wait until you die!'. (Schlick, 1938, pp. 354-355)[4]

[3]The term 'materialism' can have a range of meanings, but this does not generally lead to confusion as its use is normally clarified by the context. However, some would prefer the term 'physicalism' to describe Dawkins's thinking, although this term itself can also be confusing in that it can be harder than it first appears to define exactly what is meant by the physical world.

[4]This is an interesting parallel to John Hick's notion that all claims relating to God and the afterlife are potentially subject to what he called 'eschatological verification'.

Survival, souls and resurrection

Other atheist and agnostic philosophers have also not been as categorical as Dawkins and Flew in their rejection of the possibility of a post-mortal existence. The Welsh philosopher, Henry ('H. H.') Price, proposed that the notion of a disembodied, non-physical existence was a logical possibility and should not be too readily dismissed by those sceptical about religious claims and theological argument. However, in no way does he claim that a non-physical survival of the soul or personal identity can be proved and no doubt his thinking would be dismissed by Dawkins as idle and unscientific speculation; Dawkins would not see philosophical plausibility as valid or convincing. Indeed, the evidence for the existence of disembodied souls or minds would be regarded as flimsy by most empiricists, amounting to sightings and experiences of ghosts and such phenomena as extra-sensory perception and near-death, or out-of-body, experiences. All of these would be regarded as being explicable in other ways that do not require recourse to disembodied entities and, if we are to take a Humean approach,[5] those alternative explanations are always the more probable.

No doubt those who believe in a surviving soul would claim that they have no problem with the view that biological life ends at death, asserting that whatever comes afterwards is non-biological and that therefore Dawkins's claim is irrelevant to them. However, much orthodox Christianity, Judaism and Islam has rejected both dualism and soul survival as an ultimate description of post-mortal existence. Aquinas stated, unequivocally, '*anima mea non est ego*' ('My soul is not me'). For him, any separate existence of the soul was temporary (and assumed post-mortal temporality); ultimately, the dead would rise again at the Last Judgement. The resurrection of the dead, accepted as doctrine by all the Abrahamic faiths, assumes a post-mortal bodily existence and this could be seen to conflict more seriously with Dawkins's claim that the intrinsic nature of biological life rules out the possibility of life after death.

Here we might return to the writings of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. The resurrected body is a 'spiritual body'[6] (1 Corinthians 15:44) but we will only achieve this state if our 'earthly' body dies. He uses the analogy of the seed 'dying' in the ground in order for the plant to grow. Our present biological existence cannot be projected into the afterlife; death is a necessary prerequisite for resurrection. We could see this as meaning that our current biological life will not be prolonged and that our resurrected body will be transformed, renewed and animated by something other and greater than the crude and earthly chemical processes deriving from DNA.

The theologian and religious believer should have no problem with this, but the sceptical philosopher might well do, and it was to meet these concerns that John Hick, a Christian philosopher rather than a theologian, developed his famous (and famously misunderstood!) 'replica theory' which he puts forward in his 'Resurrection of the person'. This is essentially a thought experiment and is emphatically not an attempt to suggest what actually might happen in the afterlife. Hick is trying to suggest that resurrection might actually mean 're-creation' – in essence it has to, because the bodies of the dead, in the vast majority of cases, cannot be 'raised' because they no longer

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[5]That is, as adopted by or aligned to David Hume.

[6]A confusing term philosophically, but then Paul was not a philosopher!

exist.[7] He is also trying to overcome one of the most difficult philosophical problems with the resurrection of the dead: the spatio-temporal break between the death and the resurrection of the individual. Whilst we are alive, part of the identity that makes us the 'same' person throughout our lives is our bodily spatio-temporal continuity. The body of the person may change drastically in the course of life but there is a recognisable continuity. Throughout the physical life of the individual, the body is always somewhere – it does not disappear or reappear. So, how can a resurrected person be 'the same person' as the one who lived their pre-mortal life?

Hick begins by suggesting the possibility of a man disappearing in London and a replica appearing in New York with the exact same physical make-up and character; we would regard such a replica as the 'same' person, in spite of the spatio-temporal break. He suggests that an omnipotent God could re-create a psycho-physical replica of all humans in 'another space', which could be seen as the afterlife world. Such replicas would be perfected, so that the dying man is not simply replicated as a dying man.

Hick's ideas are a significant contribution to the philosophical validation of the afterlife, but can be seen to raise many difficult questions as well, and one of these could be related to Dawkins's assertion that biology provides no basis for life after death. If we are to be replicated as physical entities, to what extent will we still be *biological* entities? Will we still need to eat, drink and sleep? If we are, will our bodies not be subject to the same frailties as they are at present? If not, and we have some sort of transformed, revitalised corporeal existence, in what sense is this 'bodily' in any real sense that we can understand now? The religious believer, and possibly the theologian, says 'It's a mystery–leave it all to God!' The non-religious philosopher is likely to retreat despairingly (or possibly gratefully!) into scepticism.

So Dawkins's claim that the biological facts that underlie life mean that there can be no life after death can be seen to be, at least partially, true – even by the most committed believer in the afterlife. It is clear that what follows this life cannot be a continuation of it; this is impossible. But Dawkins has asserted more than this and many would say that, as life is more than biology, he has used undoubted biological facts to reach unwarranted philosophical conclusions. The religious believer would no doubt add that he has also reckoned without an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God, whose powers and purposes are way beyond human imaginings.

[7] This causes a problem for those Christians who insist that the resurrection of Jesus is the model for the general resurrection if they also believe that Jesus' dead body was literally 'raised'.

Glossary

Abrahamic: the Abrahamic faiths are Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all of which see Abraham as their spiritual father; some adherents go further and see him as their ancestor.

dualist: a word with many uses in philosophy and theology. In this article, it refers to the idea that humans have a separate non-physical soul that can exist independently from the physical body after death.

empiricism: the theory that all knowledge and ideas are derived from experience based on the senses. Knowledge cannot extend beyond experience, observation and experiment.

metaphysical: relating to metaphysics, which, strictly defined, is the branch of philosophy that studies the ultimate nature of existence, reality and experience; but which is also sometimes used disparagingly to imply ideas and concepts that go beyond the empirical and testable and which verge on the supernatural.

physicalism: the real world consists only of the physical world. (See also footnote 3.)

reductionist: a philosophical position that interprets a complex system as the sum of its parts and no more. It is a term that is sometimes used disparagingly, but reductionist approaches can, in the right circumstances, be helpful.

Discussion points

1. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul is insistent that speculation about the afterlife and, specifically, about the nature of the resurrection body, is ultimately futile and unhelpful. Is this good advice?
2. Some religious thinkers attach great importance to the afterlife (one thinks of Teresa of Avila’s view that our earthly life is ‘one night in an uncomfortable hotel’) and suggest that we should see everything *sub specie aeternitatis* – that is, in relation to the eternal. Others, including many Jewish thinkers, think our main focus should be on living our life on earth. Which seems to you to be the best approach?
3. Richard Dawkins strongly objects to the notion that his ideas imply a mechanistic and soulless world; he claims that it is only when a person has rid themselves of the outdated, irrational and dangerous ideas and ‘memes’ associated with God and religion, including the afterlife, that they can fully appreciate the natural wonders of the world and the glorious intellectual and artistic achievements of humanity. How do you respond to this?

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On Buddhism and Violence

Phra Nicholas Thanissaro

Outsiders may be surprised to find Buddhists involved in wars or sanctioning standing armies and conscription within their countries. This article maps out an historical shift in the Buddhist ethics of violence from early era pacifism, through later apologetics and justifications for violence, to late era acceptance of violence and feudalism. Six excuses used by Buddhists to justify their imperfect track record on violence are outlined, together with counter-arguments.

Specification links:
EDEXCEL Paper 4, Option 4A: Buddhism: Topic 6 Religion and society 6.1 The interpretation and application of ahiṃsā for a Buddhist in the modern world (4) a) The First Precept — to refrain from harming a living thing, the interpretation of ahiṃsā by Buddhists with specific examples of how this may be lived, such as vegetarianism, right livelihood and involvement in the armed forces. b) The role of other beliefs and considerations in the living of ahiṃsā, including differences in application and importance within different traditions, and in the example of the Buddha. Specific reference should be made to excerpts of the Pali Canon and the Lotus Sutra. With reference to the ideas of the 14th Dalai Lama and T Bartholomeusz.
EDUQAS Component 1: A Study of Religion: Option D: A Study of Buddhism, Theme 4: Religious practices that shape religious identity.
OCR Developments in Buddhist thought (H573/06): 3 Living, Topic: Living in Accordance with Dharma, the virtues of non-violence

Introduction

Until the 1950s most people would have considered violence hypocritical for Buddhists. Walpola Rahula's claim that 'not one drop of blood had been shed in the name of conversion or spread of Buddhism' went largely unchallenged. It was the pioneering work of Paul Demiéville that presented evidence that violence had figured repeatedly in Buddhist history but had merely avoided the fanatical excesses familiar to other religions.

Indeed, the concept of 'violence' is highly problematic for Buddhist thought, but in this article I have defined it as 'inflicting physical injury or death on another person – whether portrayed symbolically or as part of a social act, such as punishment or warfare'. For Buddhism, the word *ahiṃsā* (or *avihiṃsā*)

never had the unambiguous meaning 'non-violence' that it might have had for Mahatma Gandhi. For Buddhists, rather, the word has a subtler shade of meaning closer to 'non-*harm*'. Non-harm might more accurately describe a good remedy that involves a painful treatment. The Buddhist scriptures give the example of a child with a stick or a pebble caught in their throat, where the Buddha advocated intervention with force even if it causes pain and bleeding: an example of violence that produces benefit. Violence to 'minimize harm' could potentially refer to a wide range of acts, including self-defence, torture, militarisation, suicide, hate-crimes, offensive warfare, defensive warfare or honour killing – but here I shall focus on systemic (i.e. institutionally-sanctioned) violence, such as war and violent punishment.

Historical changes in the Buddhist attitude toward violence

The Buddhist attitude to violence has not remained unchanged down the centuries – and the changes do *not* reflect a simple liberalisation of attitudes toward violence in modern times. In overview, you can say that the early texts started out advocating pacifism alongside ambivalence concerning state violence or toward heretics. Later texts and commentaries show a divergence towards pacifistic apologetics, on the one hand, and a 'beefed-up' justification for violence, on the other.

On the pacifism side, references from the earliest Buddhist texts advocate non-violence in a way that would discourage war or violent punishment, forbidding the taking of life or even allowing others to do so – reasoning that because all people fear death, Buddhists should not strike or slay. Scripture asserts that hatred can never be appeased by (further) hatred and that anyone who has not renounced violence cannot be considered holy. Monastic rules prohibit monks from even *watching* battles and, instead of glorifying war, the Yodhājiva Sutta predicted that soldiers would be reborn in hell. Early Pali commentaries relate occasions in the Buddha's lifetime when he tried to prevent war. Commentaries which relate examples of victories obtained without bloodshed further valorise the intention to capture an enemy alive, and the Seyya Jātaka offers the role model of a king who refuses to fight back but eventually wins the day. The *Ovādapāṭimokkha* also stipulates that preaching monks who are spreading the Dhamma should approach unbelievers without verbal or physical aggression.

Despite their general pacifism, early texts remain intentionally ambiguous about the military, perhaps to discourage soldiers from deserting to become Buddhist monks, or where rulers were important stakeholders in supporting the sustenance and growth of Buddhist monasticism and doctrine. Despite Buddhist monks having turned their backs on society, they remain dependent on it for alms. Early Buddhism took for granted the power of king and state and the king's use organised force or violence. The state's right to maintain a standing army also appears to be accepted by the Buddhists. Where the Buddha intervened to stop wars, he seemed to do so only to help kinsmen and did not prohibit warfare outright – leading scholars to conclude that war was acceptable behaviour at the time.

The usual role of monks is 'to tell truth to power' rather than to wield power – an 'arms-length' policy. However, there have been several historical precedents where Buddhists have clung to empire-building personages and *Sangha*s of the past have become subservient to and identified with aggressive, violence-prone

rulers of the day. This is seen clearly in the seeming influence of feudalism in pre-communist Tibet or the Japanese Heian era on Buddhist violence – violence that largely disappeared once feudalism was superseded. State violence in Tibet was deemed acceptable only for as long as it served the interests of Buddhism.

Rather than contradicting earlier scriptures, later Mahāyāna sources add weight to Buddhist teachings on non-violence. Vasubandhu asserted that in war even if only *one* person does the killing, all *others* involved are complicit since they have a common goal. The *Satyakaparivarta* suggested that before resorting to war, kings should first try to befriend, help or scare away the enemy.

Despite the monolithic impression of pacifism in Buddhism, it is apparent that the historical track record of Buddhism has often failed to live up to the scriptural ideals already cited. There have also been examples of violent treatment of heretics who fail to convert after high-stake debates. The Sanskrit *Aśokāvadāna* reports how the supposedly iconic Buddhist emperor Aśoka slaughtered 18,000 Jains. There have been more than 400 incidents of Buddhist monks leading armed revolts in premodern Japan, Chinese monks leading revolts in the Tang dynasty, the 5th Dalai Lama (1617-82) leading a violent uprising in Tibet, Buddhists inciting violent ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka in the period 1983-2009, Aum Shirikyō perpetrating the 1995 nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway and the complicity of Myanmar Buddhists in the ethnic violence against the Rohingyans.

It has thus become a topic of scholarly interest to account for the ways that Buddhists justify violence and to establish whether these are lapses from a peaceful ideal type or a failure to confront roots of violence that may be *intrinsic* to Buddhist ethics.

Buddhist excuses for violence and possible counter-arguments

Six justifications for violence are often heard from Buddhists: skilful means justifications, illusory death justifications, religious nationalism justifications, relativistic justifications, depraved era justifications and non-dogma justifications. We shall look briefly at each in turn, providing examples and suggesting ‘equally Buddhist’ reasons for rejecting such justifications.

1.Skilful means justifications

Skilful means justifications involve the premise that neutral or unskilful means such as making war may be justified *if* the ends are skilful. Although the Theravāda school does not appear to contain a ‘just war’ theory (except for the practical necessity of fighting back in the face of unprovoked aggression), for the Mahāyāna school warfare *may* fall within the ambit of skilful means. Skilful means reasoning has historically been employed by Buddhists to justify violence when converting non-believers to Buddhism; defending Buddhist property, territory or teachings; or where killing is seen as an act of compassion, so as to put a person out of their misery or punish those who have practised Buddhism wrongly.

An example of this is the Srilankan war against the LTTE in the period 1983-2009, citing a perceived obligation to protect the Buddhist religion and the Dharma (Bartholomeusz, 1999). A possible Buddhist counter-argument to such ‘skilful means’ reasoning would be illustrated by Thich Nhat Hanh’s characteristically *non*-violent pledge to avoid violence *even* in defence of Buddhist institutions, buildings or scriptures. Aspects of Buddhist

commoditisation heighten the risk of conflict, which is why Soseki Musō (1275-1351) exhorted monks to renounce valuable possessions rather than bear arms.

2. Illusory death justifications

Illusory death justifications for violence seem to come in four varieties: arguments where killing certain individuals (usually non-Buddhists) does not 'count' as killing; where there is no murderer or victim (because both are seen as belonging to mundane levels of truth); arguments where the karma of killing is obviated by having a skilful *intention*; and arguments where killing is merely enacting the desserts of karma which were coming to the victim anyway.

Examples of illusory death justifications where killing is '*not* really killing' include a latent tendency to demonize 'the other', exemplified by the violent response to Muslim insurgency in the deep south of Thailand or Kittivuddho's famous comments about killing communists. If faced with Buddhist excuses for violence involving illusory death one needs to avoid 'mixing up' the two levels of Buddhist truth (i.e., the mundane [*lokiya*] and the transcendental [*lokuttara*]) that lead perpetrators to believe that acts of killing (i.e., mundane truth) are trivial at a transcendental level. Meanwhile, threats seen in some textual sources need to be recognised as mere hyperbole, rhetoric or ritual – since, in general, these passages are not about killing, but rather represent a ploy to render bland teachings more memorable.

3. Religious nationalism justifications

'Dual state justifications' is shorthand for the assertion that it is beneficial, or at least *just*, that a state be governed by ruler and religion hand-in-hand – a premise that gives rise to two varieties of justification for violence: first, that Buddhists should endorse any political endeavours to establish or preserve Buddhism as a *state* religion and, secondly, to make an allowance for heads of state to use violence to preserve sovereignty, law and order by violent means. Owing to multiple intersectionality, monks in Sri Lanka or Thailand may think it their sacred duty to engage in service to their country (where the state religion is Buddhism) out of a need for religion to have a secure territory (cf. Zionism). If faced with Buddhist excuses for violence involving Buddhist nationalism, special mindfulness is needed when 'push comes to shove' and shaming comes in the form of accusations of disloyalty or cowardice. Buddhists need to pay more attention to the non-violent *content* of what they are protecting (integrity and compassion) and less attention to the need for a strong political container for that culture.

4. Relativistic justifications

Relativistic justification for violence is usually invoked when protagonists choose violence as the lesser of two evils. Relativistic justifications are more common in the Mahāyāna than the Theravāda, since in the Mahāyāna compassion tends to win out over non-violence. Examples of this sort of justification includes killing one to save many, such as in the example of a dacoit informer killed to keep a surprise attack secret. Juzan used such relativism to sanction killing a few to save the lives of many when recruiting Chinese Buddhists to fight in the 1951-3 Korean War. If faced with Buddhist excuses for violence involving relativism, it may be argued that it is better to avoid *any* evil action rather than to choose the lesser of two evils – and to resist the temptation to

depersonalise casualties into mere statistics.

5. Depraved era justifications

Sometimes the depraved nature of the historical era is used as a justification, with the reasoning that extreme times demand extreme measures. Typically, such millenarian excuses predict imminent catastrophes that will give way to material bliss. Eight revolts against the Siamese/Thai governments made between 1699-1959 were centred on the promised coming of the Buddha Maitreya. Ryōgen is reported to have said that a time of counterfeit war [*mappō*] demanded extreme solutions. In the Bhaddali Sutta, it is claimed that punishments are required only when Dharma has deteriorated – as a poorly trained horse has need of the 'stick' only when the 'carrot' has failed. If faced with Buddhist excuses for violence involving postulating a depraved era, it should be remembered that scriptural sources such as the Aggañña Sutta show that people's choices and actions *cause* the depravity of an era, rather than vice versa.

6. Non-dogma justifications

A final category of justification for violence is based on a non-attachment to dogma, reversing all values. For example, Yi-hiuan (c. 867) advocated the Buddhist faithful to 'kill the Buddha, patriarchs and saints' – perhaps in an attempt to diffuse the 'violence of absolutes' (to use a concept from Arendt, 1970, p. 56) – where violence can become a by-product of *any* polarisation of view. This was aimed at highlighting the mistake of thinking Buddhahood to be localised in a particular individual or externalised in another. If faced with Buddhist excuses for violence involving non-dogma, teachings such as 'if you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him' should be put in the context of the danger of attachment to views, and not taken literally.

Conclusions

So, should it be concluded that some Buddhists just happen to be violent or that some violent people just happen to be Buddhist; or should Buddhists take more responsibility for making sure violent people become *less* violent? This article has shown that there are many justifications for violence made on *quasi*-Buddhist grounds – but I have argued that *none* of these are entirely defensible. Buddhism is a relatively tolerant religion. Exceptions 'may prove the rule' of non-violence in Buddhism, but nonetheless Buddhism *does* have a need to address violence. In my experience, Buddhists often fail to intervene when violence breaks out – flagging up an unexplored field of scholarly research for Buddhists surrounding the ethics of *omission*. Buddhists are not immune to unskilful ideas. Although higher Buddhist principles condemn war, especially wars to take territory; in practice, Buddhists may justify war to defend themselves against external aggression, but require compassion to be upheld in order to prevent needless proliferation.

In spite of the exceptions described, Buddhism still has much healing balm to offer a violent world, especially the unending violence of a world that is in the grip of greed, hatred and delusion. It is to be remembered that the perpetrators of violence are not human aberrations but in part puppets to a web of conditioning factors that affect everyone – and not just the perpetrators of violence.

Glossary

dacoit: member of a band of armed robbers.

LTTE: Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Discussion points

1. In Sri Lanka, Buddhist soldiers reasoned that they took up arms not with the intention of killing nor out of personal anger, but with the skilful intention to save the country and for the common good. What Buddhist arguments might you use to try to persuade them otherwise?
2. Since all life is suffering in the Buddhist worldview, wouldn't killing one's neighbour be doing them a favour?

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Some Trends in Ecotheology

Samuel Tranter

The article offers an overview of some trends in ecotheology. It introduces the reader to some key thinkers, espousing a range of different perspectives, and to a number of core concepts in contemporary discussion. The conclusion indicates some ways in which Christian theology has not simply theorised about environmental ethics, but informed practical environmental activism.

Specification links:
AQA 3.2 Study of religion and dialogues: B. Christianity – Good conduct and key moral principles, Dominion and stewardship: . . . beliefs about the role of Christians as stewards of animals and the natural environment and how changing understandings of the effects of human activities on the environment have affected that role
EDEXCEL Paper 2 Religion and Ethics: Topic 1.1 Environmental issues
OCR Religion and ethics (H573/02): 3. Applied Ethics, Topic Business Ethics, corporate social responsibility . . . that a business has responsibility towards the community and environment

Introduction

Over the last forty years, Christian theology has given increasing attention to environmental concerns. Andrew Village helpfully sketches some of the background behind this turn to ecology in an earlier article in this journal (Village, 2019). Within this broad development across virtually all of the Christian churches, a number of distinct approaches have emerged. Each of them seeks to address issues such as climate breakdown, environmental degradation and biodiversity loss from a Christian perspective. Where they differ is in the theological resources which they turn to when critiquing humankind's abuse of the natural world and seeking to inspire transformation in our attitude and actions.

In this article, then, I explore some trends under three headings: (1) ecological biblical hermeneutics, in which scholarship on Christianity's authoritative texts is undertaken with a view to environmental concerns; (2) ecotheology: doctrinal perspectives, in which reflection on the central teachings of the Christian faith is pursued in the light of ecological challenges; and (3) ecojustice theologies, in which the concerns of social justice (including gender justice) are integrated

with a critique of the exploitation of Nature and the search for a more sustainable spirituality.

This overview is by no means intended to present a comprehensive picture of all Christian theological responses to the ecological challenges of our era, rather simply to give the reader something of a sampling of some current themes and questions. Moreover, it is important to note that research and writing concerning these subjects is a mere drop in the ocean of the sum total of burgeoning Christian religious reflection about them, which is expressed in more or less formal ways in different forms of liturgy and worship, in Christian art, and in innumerable set and spontaneous prayers. The conclusion indicates some ways in which Christian theology has not simply theorised about environmental ethics, but informed practical environmental activism.

Ecological biblical hermeneutics

Hermeneutics concerns the interpretation of texts, and in this case biblical texts, so when we speak of ecological biblical hermeneutics we mean to denote approaches to reading Christian Scripture that aim to read with environmental horizons in view. This can encompass a whole array of texts and exegetical strategies, from tracing the ministry of Jesus with an eye to his interactions with and teachings about Nature, to meditation upon the cosmic scope of St Paul's vision of redemption (see, for example, Romans 8). Indeed, ecological biblical hermeneutics now extends to essentially the entire span of the Bible (Horrell, 2013), and an ongoing initiative named 'The Earth Bible Project' seeks to produce readings of much of Scripture that prioritise ecological perspectives.

One particularly fruitful approach to ecological biblical hermeneutics has been the '*agrarian*' interpretation of Scripture. Within this approach, theologians seek to pay attention to the significance of Nature and agricultural life within the cultures of the authors of the biblical texts (Davis, 2009). This is, on one hand, a historical exercise, in which, for instance, scholars aim to understand the practical implications of the laws in the book of Leviticus for the non-human creation. On the other hand, though, it is also an imaginative exercise, in which we are encouraged to draw parallels with our own practices of farming and food production.

Remaining with the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible for a moment, we may notice a blossoming of scholarship on the place of creation in the wisdom *literature*. (While Genesis has very often been the 'go-to' book within debates about creation, Christian theology has always derived its thought about creation from elsewhere in the Old and New Testaments as well, and the wisdom literature is especially significant.) Biblical scholars have explored the depiction of creation's awe-inspiring diversity and otherness in the book of Job, for instance – an account which puts humankind firmly in its place, as at Job chapters 38–41 (Bauckham, 2010). Old Testament theologians have also investigated the role of the place of imagery from the natural world in the sayings of Proverbs. A significant theme within ecological biblical interpretation has been that of the *Sabbath*, the significance of taking time to delight in and enjoy creation's goodness, and in so doing taking notice of the threats to its flourishing (Wirzba, 2006).

Ecotheology: Doctrinal perspectives

In its earlier versions, ecotheology was often concerned with exploring the implications of the *doctrine of creation* for an understanding of the dignity and value

of the non-human world and an account of human responsibility towards it (Deane-Drummond, 2008). At the same time, major theologians writing on the subject of creation began to take ecological issues seriously. A significant voice here was Jürgen Moltmann, whose Gifford Lectures in 1984-1985 were published as *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (Moltmann, 1985).

More recently, however, theologians have begun to consider in a more concerted way the significance of other doctrines for our conceptions of ecological responsibility (Conradie, 2014; Northcott and Scott, 2014). They have also increasingly given thought to the effects that the realities of climate crisis and environmental degradation should have on the articulation of each of the classical doctrines of Christian teaching.

An example of theologians seeking to render doctrine responsive to such concerns would be the contemporary proposals concerning 'deep incarnation' – an approach to *Christology* that emphasises the holistic, all-encompassing nature of God's entering into creation by taking on creaturely flesh in the person of Jesus Christ (Gregersen, 2015). Or we might think of ways that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit (*pneumatology*) has been expressed, which foreground the discernment of the Spirit's work in healing damaged relationships between creatures, and with the earth (Bergmann, 2005).

An area of Christian doctrine – or systematic theology, as it sometimes called – that has been particularly influenced by environmental issues has been *theological anthropology*. This topic of Christian doctrine explores from a Christian perspective the topic of what it means to be human. Questions of what makes humans distinctive in relation to other creatures, and what our obligations are towards them and the rest of creation, have become more complex and more fraught (Kelsey, 2009). What, for instance, does it mean to speak of humankind as bearing the 'image of God', and does that notion carry with it any particular ethical dangers, or, more positively, responsibilities (Wirzba, 2003)?

Finally, we could look at treatments of the doctrine of *eschatology*, which addresses Christian beliefs about the future of the world and of its creatures. Contemporary interpretations are often especially eager to underline and elucidate the scriptural promises of 'a new heaven and a *new earth*' (Revelation 21:1), painting Christian hope as deeply invested in the renewal and restoration of this world, rather than as seeking an otherworldly escape (Middleton, 2014). Scholars have sought to draw quite direct lines between this kind of belief in a holistic understanding of the kingdom of God and the Christian commitment to the preservation of Nature and the struggle for social justice (Wright, 2011).

Ecojustice theologies

Within Christian theology, the struggle for social justice has found especially powerful expression within the school of thought known as *liberation theology*. Originating in Latin America in response to the oppression of unjust regimes and the experience of unrelieved poverty, liberation theology has since found exponents in a vast range of diverse contexts across the globe. Partly because the world's poorest often live in regions where the exploitation of natural resources are rife and the gravest effects of climate change are becoming evident, liberation theologians have increasingly turned to ecological issues alongside existing concerns. A prominent example

here would be the Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff, who speaks of 'the cry of the earth' and 'the cry of the poor' (Boff, 1995, 1997).

Another highly significant development, which we may group with the turn to ecological issues within liberation theology, has been the development of *ecofeminist perspectives*. This term covers a disparate set of thinkers sometimes characterised as the 'third wave' of feminism (Eaton, 2005). One reason for this confluence of concerns has been that it is women around the world that have very often borne the brunt of injustice caused by environmental degradation and climate change. Ecofeminist theologians have worked creatively to address these challenges, at varying angles to traditional Christian thought. Rosemary Radford Ruether, a key feminist theologian more broadly, has sought from a Roman Catholic perspective to integrate aspects of Gaia theory (an account of the earth as a system) with a sacramental spirituality (Radford Ruether, 1992). Mary Grey has also endeavoured to promote a spirituality that emphasises the dignity of both the planet and the human person, in her case drawing on the biblical vision of the prophet Isaiah and contrasting it with the consumerist values of our prevailing globalising culture (Grey, 2003).

Conclusion

We have briefly explored three broad areas of theological reflection that are shaped by their attentiveness to environmental issues. It is helpful to describe them as representing three distinct streams. However, by identifying and introducing different trends within ecotheology in this way, I do not wish to give the impression that we are looking at necessarily incompatible perspectives. It would be more accurate to say that we are dealing with trends in which different parts of theology – we might roughly categorise them as biblical studies, Christian doctrine and political theology – are in their own disciplinary ways getting to grips with the realities of ecological crisis and seeking to reshape their approaches accordingly. Furthermore, while areas of divergence and disagreement certainly exist, these trends often cross-pollinate, and the field as a whole is growing quickly.

There is considerable academic energy within the field of ecotheology. But Christian theological engagement with environmental ethics has not simply been an intellectual exercise. Alongside these streams of thought exist a number of movements of Christian environmental activism, with organisations such as A Rocha, and Christian NGOs increasingly including ecological concerns and climate injustice within their programmes – as, for instance, CAFOD (a Roman Catholic charity), Christian Aid (ecumenical) and Tearfund (evangelical Protestant).

There are also, more generally, many expressions of environmental activism in which Christians and people of other religions are heavily involved. An example of a movement that has gained a high profile in recent years is Extinction Rebellion ('XR'), and the group Christian Climate Action, which is now closely associated with XR.

The relationship between academic ecotheology and everyday Christian practice is not straightforward. In some denominations, the proposals of theologians may have quite a noticeable impact on the wording of set prayers or rituals – leading to the embedding of concern for Nature or ecological injustice within the heart of religious formation, or on the investment practices of church institutions – leading to divestment from

companies involved in fossil fuels, for instance. In others, however, the questions that ecotheology raises will still be deemed tangential or even antithetical to the most important aspects of Christian worship and life.

As in all areas of theology, the filtering of new ideas from academic theology through to Christians' self-understanding and practice can be slow, and Christians' practice is always shaped by many factors other than formal theology written by theologians. This is particularly noticeable in relation to ecological issues, where pressures from the wider culture in respect of lifestyle exist in a complex interaction with expectations of what it means to live faithfully as a believer within a world that is regarded as God's good gift.

Glossary

divestment: the action of selling off investments or business interests.

exegesis, exegetical: usually understood as the detailed explanation of a text's original meaning.

hermeneutics: usually understood as the science of the interpretation of texts.

holistic: treating something as a whole, rather than as just a collection of separate parts.

NGOs: non-governmental organisations.

Internet links

http://arocha.org/en/ (A Rocha, a Christian environmentalist organisation)

https://www.becreaturekind.org/ (An initiative that engages churches on questions of farmed animal welfare)

http://declarationtorreciudad.org/ (The Torreciudad Declaration, inspired by Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si* and jointly signed by theologians, religious leaders and environmental scientists)

http://fore.yale.edu (Yale University's Forum on Religion and Ecology)

Discussion points

1. Which books of the Bible do you think might be most helpful in illuminating environmental issues, and why?
2. To what extent can Christian doctrines be rewritten to incorporate ecological concerns? What, if anything, are the fixed elements of such doctrines?
3. What connections can you see between a concern for gender justice and concern for ecological justice?
4. How might a Christian argue against the view that a concern for Nature is essentially irrelevant to Christian belief, worship and life?

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