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Challenging Religious Issues

Supporting Religious Studies at A-level and beyond

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Challenging Religious Issues
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The Psalms as a Guide for Christian Living

Francis Loftus

This article offers an introduction to the Psalms and their place within the biblical tradition. It raises some issues about the understanding of God which emerges from the Psalms, what religious experiences can be discerned in them and how their religious language is used. There then follows a more detailed explanation of parts of two Psalms and a look at the way Christians use the Psalms in communal worship and prayer, and whether they serve as a guide for Christian living.

Specification links:
EDUQAS/WJEC/CBAC Component 1, Option A Christianity: Theme 1C, the Bible as a guide to living … and as a source of comfort and encouragement (with exemplar Psalms)
SCOTTISH HIGHERS Component 1: question paper 1 world religion and morality and belief: Beliefs about God, Worship (in Christianity, Judaism)

The Psalms in the biblical tradition

The Book of Psalms is a canonical work of poetry, prayer and worship songs. It is the first book in the 'Writings' portion of the Hebrew Scriptures (or Old Testament). In Hebrew it is entitled *Sepher Tehillim* (Book of Praises), yet it is not just a hymn book.

The Book of Psalms is made up of 150 individual psalms, divided internally into five books which may reflect the possibility that the Book of Psalms was brought together from earlier separate works.

It is impossible to date the Book of Psalms, as its contents were written over a long period of time. Many psalms have titles stating that King David (c. tenth century BCE) was the author, but this is not accepted by modern scholars. What is clear is that the psalms were used in the worship of the Temple and contemporary scholarship ascribes the composition of many psalms to the guilds of singers and musicians that existed in Israel (I Chronicles 15-16).

As a collection of many styles of writing the Book of Psalms as a whole is unclassifiable, as there are many types of

psalms within it. Examples include:

- thanksgiving psalms (e.g., Psalms 18, 30, 40),
- laments (e.g., 22, 42, 43, 69),
- rural psalms often linked to the harvest (e.g., 65, 67, 85),
- psalms linked to a coronation or anniversary (e.g., 2, 72),
- wisdom psalms, (e.g., 32, 34), and
- liturgies, often with question-and-answer passages or a theme (e.g., 136).

One feature of major importance is that the psalms give an insight into the theology of the Israelites (their understanding of God) and their worship, public and personal, over many centuries of composition, illuminating the faith of the nation over that time. In the Christian tradition, the Book of Psalms is still used as a source of prayer and of ideas about God. Indeed, many psalms have been adapted into hymns.

The understanding of God in the Book of Psalms

Many images of God emerge from the Book of Psalms. One of the most important characteristics of God in the Psalms is that God is depicted as the creator. Psalm 8 is one example of this. It refers to God as creator of everything, and then describes the place of humans within creation in these terms:

> What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?
>
> Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour.
>
> You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet. (vv. 4-6)

A related theme is that God is omnipotent. Psalms 95-101 are all psalms which praise God as a king and ruler. When these psalms are read alongside Psalms 105 and 106, a strong view clearly emerges that God controls Israelite history, and that sin leads to suffering.

The idea of a God of justice also surfaces in the Book of Psalms. In Psalm 33:4-6 the assertion is made that God is a God of justice and this is linked to creation. But God as a merciful God underpins many of the lament psalms; Psalm 103:8 describes God in these terms, 'The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love'. God is also a God who offers comfort to those who are in trouble, as in Psalm 46.

However, questions and doubts may also be voiced at times, as when the psalmist insists that God has left the nation. In the Christian tradition, as Jesus was being crucified, the Gospels report that in the moment before he died he quoted Psalm 22:1, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mark 15:34).

The religious language of the Psalms

The language in the Book of Psalms is that of believers. Christians have used the language of the psalms to express their own descriptions of God, particularly through the words of their hymns. Psalms employ non-literal metaphors and similes to allow the reader to understand God's character and activity.

Some of images in the Psalms express the power of God, whether exemplified through creation or in the way that the psalmist expects God to protect the nation from their enemies. Thus, God is described as a 'shield' in Psalm 3:3; he will defend the psalmist from his enemies. God is also depicted as 'enthroned' (Psalm 2:4), which carries

through into Christian tradition where Jesus will be enthroned with him (Mark 14:62). Psalm 23, by contrast, depicts God's protection in terms of a 'shepherd' tending sheep.

In Psalm 36:6, God's righteousness is described as 'like the mighty mountains' and his judgements as 'like the great deep'. Yet, God has compassion 'as a father has compassion for his children' (Psalm 103:13). In another image, God will give the psalmist 'wings like a dove' (Psalm 55:6-8), enabling his escape into a safe place away from his enemies.

Religious experience within the Book of Psalms

The Old Testament conveys a number of visions of God, for example when Moses encounters the burning bush (Exodus 3) and hears the voice of God. (In Jewish tradition the voice of God is conceived as one of the ultimate proofs of God's existence.)

Some psalms look for such a vision of God. One example of this is in Psalm 17:15, where the writer hopes to have a vision, 'beholding' the 'face' of God and God's 'likeness' (note the metaphors). Another is in Psalm 27:4, where he prays 'to behold the beauty of the LORD'. But perhaps a different sort of religious experience (a form of seeing-as?) is implied in the psalmist's metaphorical exhortation, 'O taste and see that the LORD is good' (Psalm 34:8).

Some comments on Psalm 119 and Christianity

Psalm 119 is an acrostic, in which each section begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It has been described as a remarkable example of the Israelite understanding of God. The theme of this Psalm is the Law (Torah) of God. Eight words are used in the psalm for law: word, law, commandment, rules, decree, precepts, ordinances and teaching. The psalm could be classified as a wisdom psalm, giving advice to people about how to live their lives.

Verses 9-16

The search for wisdom, and finding the correct way to live, ultimately relates to the teaching of God. This is something that the writer has looked to follow, and here he asks God to ensure that he does not stray from God's commandments. In the Gospel tradition there is an incident where Jesus is asked by a young man what he must do to earn eternal life. Jesus' first response is to tell him to follow the commandments (Matthew 19:16-27).

The writer of the psalm states that joy is to be found in obedience to God's laws, far above any joy brought through wealth. The author also refers to God's 'way'. Jewish tradition's concept of *Halakha*, the collective body of Jewish laws, is based on the Hebrew verb meaning 'to walk'. Similarly, the early Christian church was known as 'The Way' and in John 14:6 Jesus described himself as 'the way' to God.

Verses 105-112

In this passage the author refers to the word of God as a 'light on my path.' The idea of Christ as the word and light of God are key themes in John's Gospel (John 1:1-5; Jesus referred to himself as the light of the world in John 8:12).

The commitment of the author in the psalm is total. In verse 106 we may glimpse an oath sworn by those who were worshippers in the Temple. The clear belief is expressed that God will sustain believers whatever their enemies do. This links to the early church's experience of being persecuted, and that of many who are still being persecuted today.

Another idea articulated here is that the decrees of God are inherited yet eternal, a conjunction that is very important in both Jewish and Christian traditions. Memory is a key element in the religious practices of both religions.

Some comments on Psalm 46 and Christianity

This psalm is best known as the inspiration for Martin Luther's hymn *Ein Feste Burg* (*A safe stronghold our God is still*).[1] Luther was responding to the Pope, who had quoted Psalm 74 as the title of his encyclical about Luther, 'Arise Lord and Defend Your Cause'.

Psalm 46 is a psalm written by someone who is certain that whatever happens God will be with him. It has been described as a community hymn or 'psalm of confidence'. The psalm is to be a reminder that in a chaotic world God is in charge – whereas the kingdoms of the earth totter (v. 6). God can even calm the raging seas and the trembling mountains, and turn them into rivers of life and calm dwelling places. All that the worshipper has to do is to be still and acknowledge the presence of God 'with us' (v. 7).

The image of God as a refuge (verse 1, repeated in vv. 7 and 11) is common in the Hebrew Bible, being used 94 times. The reference to God 'living' in Jerusalem (v. 5) expresses the concept that God was somehow at home in the Temple.

The psalmist invites everyone to 'behold' and 'see' (v. 8) God's activity, as in John 1:39 Jesus invited the new disciples to 'come and see' (also compare Matthew 11:4-6//Luke 7:22-23).[2] In v. 10, people are also therefore told to stop what they are doing and concentrate on what is important – God.

Christian understanding and use of the Psalms

In the New Testament there are many references to the Psalms. They underpin the theology of Jesus as a figure who saves people from their sins and promises a way of life that gives them a structure. One example is in I Peter 3:10-12 which quotes Psalm 34:12-16, emphasising the need to follow the right actions and 'turn away from evil'. The Psalms, like other texts of the OT, were used by the early church as a source to show that Jesus was the Messiah who was prophesied to come. Psalm 2:7 states, 'You are my son, today have I begotten you.' This text is quoted in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark1:11 and parallels) in support of the claim that Jesus was the Son of God (compare Mark 1:1; see also John 1:34). In Acts 13:33, Paul quotes this verse in the context of the resurrection of Jesus; it is also quoted in Hebrews 1:5 and 5:5.

The Psalms were also regarded as predicting aspects of Jesus' life. Thus, Psalm 72:10-11 and 15 refers to kings offering gifts and prostrating themselves before Israel's king, a theme taken up in the visit of the Magi to the baby Jesus in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1-9; in later Christian tradition the Magi are called 'kings'). During the temptations of Jesus (Matthew 4:6//Luke 4:10-11) the devil quotes Psalm 91:11-12 to Jesus, 'He will command his angels concerning you … On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'

(Recall also the use of Psalm 22:1 on the lips of Jesus at his crucifixion, quoted above.)

[1] It is sometimes said that Psalm 46 was translated by Shakespeare (or a fan of his) for the King James' Bible, and that he arrived at the translation on his 46th birthday. He is thought to have 'left his mark' on the psalm, in that the forty sixth word of the Psalm is 'shake' and the forty sixth word from the end is 'spear'! However, the KJV version of the Psalms was mostly based on the translation by Miles Coverdale.

[2] Compare the seeing-as form of religious experience touched on above.

The Psalms as a Guide for Christian Living

Christians have adopted the Book of Psalms and it has often been central totheir worship. Thus, in the Anglican services of Holy Communion and Morning and Evening Prayer a psalm is always set for use. Other Christian communities have adopted their own patterns for the use of the psalms. Perhaps the most well-known Christian use of a psalm as the basis for a hymn is 'The Lord's my Shepherd', an adaptation of Psalm 23. On a more personal level, the Psalms can act as a framework for prayer and meditation. John Goldingay (2013, pp. 3-4) lists four ways in which Christians can use the Book of Psalms: for saying to God, 'You are great'; for saying 'help!' when they are feeling desperate; for saying to God, 'I trust you', particularly in dark times and, finally, for saying 'thank you' when they feel that God has helped them in some way.

The early Christian writer, Athanasius (293-373), described the Book of Psalms as 'an epitome of the whole scriptures' and Basil of Caesarea (330-79) described it as a 'compendium of all theology'. Later, the Reformation theologian Martin Luther (1483-1546) described this book as 'a little Bible'. The German theologian and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, preached on the psalms in the 1930s and 1940s and concluded: 'There is not a single detail of the piety and impiety of the Christian church, which is not found there'. He went on to write that the study of the Psalms is 'a strange journey of up and downs, falling and rising, despair and exaltation' (Bonhoeffer, 2001, p. 8).

Glossary

canonical: A book that is included in the Bible.

lament: A psalm which expresses individual pain or the pain of the nation.

metaphor: a figure of speech in which one thing is implicitly spoken of in terms of another.

simile: a figure of speech that explicitly compares two things, often introduced by the words 'like' or 'as'.

wisdom: A type of writing found in Jewish tradition (e.g., Proverbs. Ecclesiastes, Job) that ranges from pithy sayings on prudent behaviour to deep and controversial reflections on topics such as evil and existence.

Internet link

https://www.biblestudyguide.org/comment/calvin/comm_vol12/htm/xxxvi.htm (This includes a list of the places where the Psalms are used in the New Testament)

Discussion points

1. The Psalms regard God as a creator and sustainer. Does a belief in a creator God raise issues for our understanding of the concept of free will?
2. With reference to Psalm 119, discuss whether doing the right thing is a matter of just following the rules.
3. 'God is both refuge and strength for us, a help always ready in trouble' (Psalm 46:1). Do you agree with this statement? In your answer give arguments in support and arguments against, then come to a reasoned conclusion.
4. How might Christians in the 21st century use the Psalms to deepen their faith? What problems might they face in doing so?

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Christian Eschatological Engagement with the Book of Revelation: From Apocalypse to Amillennialism

Joseph Powell

The Book of Revelation offers up some of the most graphic depictions of a fiery judgement set to befall humanity at an undetermined point in the future. These images speak vividly of the context from which Revelation emerged and have presented Christians in subsequent centuries with much to consider about how to relate them to their own times. This article takes a look at both this period of emergence and Revelation's subsequent interpretation.

Specification links:
WJEC / CBAC / EDUQAS Unit 6: Textual Studies (New Testament) Theme 4: New Testament Literature – Apocalyptic; (also relevant to?) Unit 1, Option A Christianity: Theme 1C, the Bible as a guide to living … and as a source of comfort and encouragement
SCOTTISH HIGHERS Question Paper 1, World Religion: Christianity, Beliefs

Introduction

While we now inhabit a time in which the apocalyptic might feel just that little bit closer, with regular images of wildfires, floods and droughts filling our TV screens, and the saddening prospect of more to come, Christians throughout history have grappled with the possibility of a divinely enacted apocalypse and what it might mean for humanity. As the only canonical apocalyptic NT text for many Christian groups, the Book of Revelation has served as the main means of inspiration in this regard.

But what does its deeply vivid, even graphic, contents tell us about the context from which it emerged? And how have other Christians sought to interpret it in relation to their own contexts of strife?

The Book of Revelation

This New Testament. book offers a highly potent source of eschatological imagery for Christians. Both the date and authorship of Revelation are a matter of

some scholarly debate (Osborne, 2002, pp. 2-10), with the former often deduced by scholars from internal references within the text rather than the dating of manuscripts. This leads some to offer a date for its writing around 95 CE, towards the tail end of the relatively lengthy and purportedly ruthless reign of Roman Emperor Domitian. Domitian presided over domestic religious policy that saw the Empire increasingly assertive in its attempts to establish the Roman pantheon, and the emperor as a wholly divine manifestation of it, as the only legitimate form of spiritual worship, in the face of increasing competition from alternative models, including Christianity.

The promotion of this form of 'emperor worship' is often described as having reached its apex under Domitian, who is alleged to have insisted on being addressed as *dominus et deus*, 'Master and God', by his loyal subjects (Galimberti, 2016, p. 101). Consequently, groups, movements and individuals refusing to bow to this state religion were very much on the radar of imperial authorities, who are described by near contemporary sources such as Eusebius and Pliny the Younger as having engaged in a campaign of persecution against Jewish and fledgling Christian communities. For these communities, this domineering external force was also coupled with a process of philosophical introspection. After Jesus' crucifixion around 30 CE the expectation of many early Christians was that Christ would come to humanity again and that this was to be anticipated imminently. As time moved on, however, this sense of imminence moved with it. As those who knew Jesus began to die and the church passed to their spiritual successors, rationalisations of a second coming that might be 'soon' rather than 'now' began to be considered. Through this process, Christian eschatology became malleable, ready to be shaped by its earliest thinkers and writers.

Revelation constitutes an extensive effort in this vein and appears to represent a manifestation of both these internal and external forces. In it, its author attempts to grapple with what pain and suffering in the name of Christ means and where it might ultimately lead.

Written in a style immediately familiar to those in the community acquainted with Jewish apocalyptic prophecy, such as that present with us today in the Book of Daniel,[1] the text is opened by an author who describes himself simply as 'John'.[2] John immediately sets an eschatological tone in informing readers that the following text lays out 'what must soon take place' (1:1) as he addresses its contents to 'the seven churches in the province of Asia' (1:4), detailed as 'Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea' (1:9), which are dotted around what is today Western Turkey. He then goes on to identify himself as one 'who share[s] with you the persecution and the kingdom and the endurance in Jesus' and who has been exiled to the island of Patmos for preaching Christ (1:9). John's address to these churches and his clearly highly informed knowledge of their worship, alongside his identification with them as one who is a fellow persecuted, suggests both that these were churches with which the author was immediately familiar

[1] Mounce, 1997 rightly notes important distinctions between Revelation and this previous literature, however, namely the urgency of Revelation's calls for repentance and its 'practice of simply narrating visions and leaving the interpretive task to the reader instead of supplying a heavenly tutor' (p. 7).

[2] The simplicity of the author's identification might suggest that intended audiences would know immediately which 'John' this was. But this was not the case for many audiences and scholars who have since debated whether this 'John' is, or is attempting to appear to be, John the Apostle.

(perhaps as their bishop or some other presiding authority) and that early Christians on the far outer reaches of the Empire were seemingly just as vulnerable in their worship as those being similarly persecuted in Rome. John's response to the adversity that has befallen both himself and the churches he holds most dear presents some of the most vivid and often highly graphic depictions of an end time still 'soon' to come: a surreal, often nightmarish, outline of divine suffering, judgement and, ultimately, redemption.

The persecution faced in the present, here at the hands of the Roman Empire, is to be seen as a precursor of a judgement soon to be at hand, in which all conquering cosmic forces will bring fiery vengeance to the earth, and in which empires will crumble. Only the truly faithful will be preserved. As this plays out, more subtle but extensive uses of numerology stand alongside descriptions of mountains 'burning with fire' and thrown into the sea (8:8-9),[3] excruciating torture at the hands of subterranean locusts with 'power like that of scorpions of the earth' (9:3-5) and images that have since achieved broad cultural familiarity such as the 'Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse' and 'Armageddon'.[4]

This period of immense suffering and destruction eventually subsides as Jesus comes to reign on earth for 'a thousand years', alongside those 'who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God' and those who have suffered like John and the 'churches in Asia', who will be apparently resurrected as 'priests of God and Christ' (20:4-6). After this, Jesus is to establish a 'new heaven', a 'new earth' and a 'new Jerusalem', 'coming down out of heaven from God' (21:1-2). Death then ceases to have any power over humanity (21:4), and 'nothing accursed' or sinful 'will be found there anymore' (22:3). John ends by quoting Christ's reassurance, 'See, I am coming soon!' (22:7). Finishing as it started, the book again offers a glimpse into this sense of a shifting eschatology towards redemption 'soon': one which encourages those looking around for signs, as well as his fellow persecuted, to hold firm and keep the faith.

But how would Christian communities beyond the Book's original context respond to its graphic, and often abstract, content?

Millennialism and amillennialism

Whilst it might be the descriptions of inconceivable swarms and supernatural phenomenon that is most conspicuous and eye catching within the pages of Revelation, John's description of a 'thousand-year reign' and its possible meanings and manifestations has proved equally arresting for many Christian theologians over the centuries. Questions have been asked as to whether John's other-worldly and fantastical descriptions could refer to a literal period of time on earth, in which this violent judgement under Jesus as earthly monarch might unfold, or whether we should instead seek to envisage something more figurative. Further, how do such descriptions of violent torment align with the all-loving example of Christ? And is an earthly reign, and a bodily resurrection of saints, even necessary for righteous judgement?

These considerations were hotly debated by the early 'church fathers' who sought to interrogate the value of

[3] The result of this is the death of 'a third of the living creatures in the sea', as well as 'a third of the ships' being destroyed.

[4] John's original reference to Armageddon (16:16) denotes a place, possibly the mountains or hills around the city of Megiddo in the ancient kingdom of Israel, where the chosen shall be gathered and saved.

Revelation along with its descriptions of a thousand-year reign, a belief which came to be known as *chiliasm* or more commonly today *millennialism.*[5] While those closer in time to its authorship, including Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Tertullian, held opinions close to a chiliastic viewpoint, others took issue with John's book as a whole. Thus, Eusebius of Caesarea admitted Revelation to the canon 'with some reluctance' and Cyril of Jerusalem rejected it completely (Backus, 1998, p. 651). Some, such as Origen, advocated an allegorical view of Revelation, and of the Bible more broadly. Others, such as Dionysus of Alexandria, a pupil of Origen, added to his scepticism of its contents doubts about the book's authorship, as being unlikely to have been by the Apostle John.

Perhaps of greatest influence in the development of perspectives towards millennialism and its journey into the present, however, was someone who had been in both of these camps. Augustine of Hippo, systematic theologian and fellow church father, had previously considered the case of millennialism, specifically a 'premillennialist' view that Christ would herald the coming of the millennium, to be the most convincing (*The city of God*, 2009 edition, p. 665). A seismic rupture would however come for Augustine and all of those within the now decaying Roman Empire when in 410 the former heart of this imperial regime, the 'Eternal City' of Rome, was sacked by pagan Visigoths. Whilst this event dealt a major blow to the political legitimacy of the Empire and its previously resolute guarantee of security to its citizens, it also bought with it major spiritual ramifications.

Since Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity around 312, the faith had grown steadily among the general populace and the elite of the Empire, culminating in the 380 'Edict of Thessalonica' in which the Emperor Theodosius I declared Christianity, and specifically Nicene Catholic Christianity, as the 'state church of the Roman Empire'. Coming only thirty years after this, Rome's sacking led many to the belief that the success of their pagan invaders was due in no small part to the abandonment of the Roman pantheon in favour of Christianity. Augustine's response to this charge, an attempt to calm Christian nerves, came in the form of one the most systematic and influential collections of Christian theological thought, his *The city of God*. At its core Augustine sought to demonstrate that whilst earthly empires and civilisations may falter, as indeed John had hoped and predicted, the eponymous 'City of God' would always triumph, and humanity would eventually take its rightful place in an ethereal heaven.

This crux is distinctly visible in Augustine's treatment of millennialism. Here he asserts that those who have been advocating this doctrine have become fixated on its earthly ramifications, with an earthly reign offering the possibility of gaining 'pleasure' in our present bodily form. He derides Christians who 'assert that those who then rise again shall enjoy the leisure of immoderate carnal banquets, furnished with an amount of meat and drink'. This not only threatens to 'shock the feeling of the temperate' but goes so far as to 'surpass the measure of credulity' (Augustine, 2009, p. 665). Instead, Augustine advocates his position, the true 'understanding', as one that sees Christ's reign on earth as having begun with his *first* coming: in which the church now reigns supreme and shall do so either for 'a thousand

[5] From the Latin *mille* and Greek *chilioi*, a thousand.

years, or all the years which are to elapse till the end of the world' (Augustine, 2009, p. 667), upon which all will reside in heaven. There would be no literal, bloodthirsty plagues or mass extinction events, and no 'carnal' banquets in this world.

Augustine's position, which would come to be known as 'amillennialism',[6] was to prove highly convincing and would in time be widely adopted by the world's largest churches. Today, it holds a central position in Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist and Lutheran Churches.

Towards modern times

So where does this leave millennialism today?

In Western Europe, the Reformation bought further endorsement for amillennialism amongst its most influential thinkers. The Augsburg Confession, the primary document of faith for the Lutheran Church, contains within it explicit 'condemn[ation]' of the view that 'before the resurrection of the dead, the Godly shall occupy the kingdom of the world' (Schmid, 2008, p. 650). John Calvin also wrote contemptuously of 'the chiliasts' who 'limited the reign of Christ to a thousand years'. 'Their fiction', he derides, 'is too childish either to need or to be worth a refutation' (*Institutes*, 3, 25.5).

However, a spiritual monopoly did not emerge from these proclamations. Within Protestantism, as it developed with an innate suspicion of doctrinal centrality, the diversity of spiritual groups under its umbrella began to grow. This pace quickened into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through the rise of Puritan and 'nonconformist' or 'free church' groups who held a spectrum of views on millennialism. North America would come to play a particularly prominent role in this. As well as serving as a refuge for many of those seeking religious autonomy in its earlier days, the nineteenth century would see the formation within its borders of the millennialist Jehovah's Witness and Seventh-day Adventist Church groups.[7] Later, the 'Niagara Prophecy Conference' would bring a diversity of Protestant Churches together to consider matters of eschatology, issuing the 'Niagara Creed' in 1878 which attested that 'the Lord Jesus will come in person to introduce the millennial age … and the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord' (Stone, 2008, p. 508). The mid twentieth century also saw an increased sense of imminence for some, with Jehovah's Witnesses predicting that 1975 might bring an earthly millennium (Singelenberg, 1989, pp. 23-26), while American evangelical Hal Lindsey identified 1988 as the time, forty years on from the foundation of modern Israel (Sweetnam, 2011, pp. 217-220).

Conclusion

The Book of Revelation continues to shape Christian eschatological understanding up until the present, both in the form of a full literal embrace of its visions and by the efforts of others to come to terms with something other than this. Revelation's journey is arguably more fraught than that of other canonical books, in part due to the graphic, at times seemingly impenetrable, prophecy and apocalypse within it. For all Christian groups however, it continues to fascinate, amaze, horrify and inspire, in varying and

[6] Many amillennialists advocate the view that Jesus' coming can be described as 'already but not yet': that the Kingdom of God is present on earth already in his first coming but that it has yet to reach its full and total expression.

[7] Both groups also incorporated the apocalyptic imagery and rapture in Revelation in their eschatological formulations.

sometimes equal degrees.

As the times we inhabit increasingly come to mirror the fiery, supernatural imagery within Revelation, Christian eschatological attitudes and interpretations will doubtless further shift and contort.

Glossary

allegorical: a story or passage conveying a hidden symbolic meaning.

amillennialism: the belief that descriptions of a thousand-year reign in Revelation are to be interpreted figuratively.

apocalyptic: prophecy, descriptions or real-world events relating to the destruction of the world.

canonical: accepted as authoritative.

chiliasm: see *millennialism.*

church fathers: an undefined group of particularly influential Christian theologians who established the foundations of Christian theology.

eschatology: theology concerned with death, judgement and the end times for humanity and the world.

millennialism (or *millenarianism*, *millenarism*): belief in a thousand-year reign of Christ in which righteous judgement will be delivered.

numerology: the relationship between numbers and real-world events, often with numbers used to signify particular themes.

pantheon: the collected gods within a polytheistic religion.

premillennialism: the belief that Jesus will return to earth before a period of judgement.

rapture: the transporting of believers to heaven at the Second Coming of Christ.

Discussion points

1. How has both the writing and interpretation of Revelation been influenced by the contexts in which this has happened? What contextual explanations might there be for an increased sense of imminence in the twentieth century?
2. Do you think that the content of Revelation contradicts Jesus' message of love and acceptance? If so, how might modern Christian communities interpret and come to terms with this book?
3. Is there any real theological difference between Jesus coming back to earth to enact judgement or doing this from heaven? If so, what is that difference?

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A Process-Relational Theology

Wm. Andrew Schwartz

Ancient Greek views on what the world is like have served as the foundation for classical Christian views on what God is like. Unfortunately, this world-view is outdated and has contributed to an incoherent theology that is increasingly unpalatable for young generations. If 21st century Christianity is to remain compelling, it will need to articulate a view of God that is consistent with modern scientific insights, personal experiences and basic intuitions. Doing so will require a new philosophical foundation — an alternative to the Ancient Greek world-view. That is what process-relational theology seeks to do. This essay offers a brief critique of classical theism and an introduction to the process-relational view of God.

Specification links:
AQA-7061 / AQA-7062- 3.1.1. Philosophy of religion: process theodicy; 3.2.2 2B Christianity: Concept of God in process theology; objective immortality in process theology
EDEXCEL Paper 1 Philosophy of religion: 3 Problems of evil and suffering, process theodicy
SCOTTISH HIGHERS: The problem of suffering and evil, process theodicy

The emergence of theology

Theology is often summarised as the study of God, but that is not where it typically begins. Theology emerges in response to the big questions of human existence: How did the world come to be? Is there a purpose to it all? How should I live? What happens when I die?

The concept of God comes about when answering such questions. God is the creator, God provides the basis for morality, and so on. However, exploration into what God is like can never be done apart from a particular world-view. A world-view is how one views the world. Like a pair of philosophical glasses, a world-view provides the interpretive lenses by which we understand reality. The question, 'What is God like?' is best answered alongside the question, 'What is the world like?'

Christian conceptions of God did not emerge within a vacuum. Christianity, like all religions, developed in conversation with unique cultural and historical contexts. This is why Christianity takes on so many diverse expressions in different places and different times. The origins of Christian theology, however, are thoroughly shaped by ancient Greek philosophy – especially that of Plato and Aristotle. These ancient views on what the world is like have served as the foundation for classical Christian views on what God is like. Unfortunately, these views are outdated and have contributed to incoherent theology. By updating our

world-view we can also update our theology, articulating a view of God that is consistent with modern scientific insights, personal experience and our basic intuitions. That is what process-relational theology seeks to do.

So, what is the world like? Let's begin with two basic observations – firstly that things change; I am not exactly the same today as I was a few years ago (just ask my bathroom scales). Secondly, that things remain the same; there is a sense in which I am always me regardless of how much I change over time. After all, if I'm not me, then who would I be? So, how do we make sense of both continuity and change being core features of reality?

The substance world-view and God

According to the dominant Ancient Greek explanation, the most basic building blocks of reality are static, unchanging and independent things called 'substances'. This isn't an explicit rejection of the idea that we experience change, but an attempt to explain how (amidst change) there is some continuity of identity over time. How are you the same person today that you were as a child? According to the substance world-view, it's because beneath the appearance of change there is a substantial self that endures unchanged from moment to moment. For this reason, the substance world-view is also a world-view that emphasises permanence. A 'being' (such as a human being) is fundamentally a permanent and independent substance that endures through superficial changes on the surface. In dualistic terms, it is the impermanent body that undergoes change while the permanent soul endures unchanged.

In Christian theology, substance thinking contributed to a conception of God as without a body, without a beginning and without change. As Aristotle reasoned, everything has a cause. God, as creator, is the cause of the cosmos. But who created God? Nobody! If God were created, then the creator of God would be the real God since God is the greatest of all beings. Therefore, God must be uncreated: the uncaused cause, or the first cause. Since God is uncreated, God must be eternal (thus without a beginning or end). God is also unchanging. This is called the doctrine of *immutability*. After all, if God is perfect, then changing for the better would mean God was previously less than perfect, while changing for the worse would mean God is becoming less than perfect. And if God is unchanging, then God must be unaffected by us. This is known as the doctrine of *impassibility*. If God were emotionally affected by us (to suffer because of us, or experience joy because of us) then God would be changed by us. One way to explain why God is unaffected is that God is separate from the world. Because God is 'out there', God is unaffected by what we do 'over here'. Classical theism often separates God from the world to such an extent that God is thought to somehow exist outside of space-time altogether, which is to say outside of reality as we know it. But this line of thinking creates a problem – a God that is completely separate from the world is wholly unknown to the world.

God's power, evil and suffering

How then can we make sense of God's presence and action in the world? The popular solution is to believe that while God is separate from the world, God occasionally intervenes in the world. But since God is not part of the world, God's interventions are supernatural (beyond nature). These supernatural interventions

are possible because God is all-powerful (omnipotent). In this substance perspective, to be all-powerful is to be able to effect change upon the world without being affected by the world. Therefore, God's power is understood as one-directional, one-sided and top-down. Because God has all the power, everything that happens in the world is because God allows it.

What then can we say about tragedy, suffering and evil? Is God responsible for such things? Classical theism also holds that God is all-good (omnibenevolent). Of course, an all-good and all-loving God would *want* to prevent evil and innocent suffering. Furthermore, a unilaterally all-powerful God would be *capable* of preventing such suffering single-handedly. Yet the world is full of atrocities. How do we explain this? A common answer is free will. God gives us freedom and when we use that freedom poorly bad things happen. Interestingly, the free will defence conflicts with another characteristic of God in classical theism – the belief that God has perfect knowledge that must include the future. If God is all-knowing (omniscient), and knows the future, then the future is already determined. If the future is already determined all of our actions are predestined. But if we are predestined, in what sense are we truly free? Moreover, if God is all powerful how can we use our freedom to reject God's plan for the good? In fact, if the future is predetermined and God controls everything (including us), then what we do is of no real consequence. Our lives are but shadows, as we are but puppets.

Comparing classical and process theology

Over two millennia, Christian theologians have tried to explain away these problems through complicated nuances. But, ultimately, classical theism struggles to provide a coherent view of God and the world because it is tied to an outdated philosophical system. A simpler solution (shown in the table below) would be to reimagine God in light of a contemporary and comprehensive philosophical system that is consistent with modern insights and sensibilities.

Comparison between classical and process theology

Classical Theism	Process-Relational Theology
God is unchanging (immutable)	God is always expanding, as every moment in history becomes part of the life of God
God is emotionally unaffected by the world (impassible)	God is the most affected by the world
God knows everything, including the future (omniscient)	God knows all that can be known, which doesn't include an open and undetermined future
God is coercively powerful, acting single-handedly to impose God's will (omnipotent)	God is relationally powerful, working persuasively with us towards the good of all
God is all good, but allows horrible evil	God is all good and always working for the good, against evil and suffering, in every moment
God exists beyond the world, only occasionally intervening supernaturally upon the world	God is intertwined with the world, acting in every moment with and through the natural world

Process philosophy is an alternative to the substance world-view of ancient Greece. In fact, some of the core insights of the process-relational world-view can be traced back to views from ancient Greece that were marginalised (like that of Heraclitus, who famously argued that you can't step into the same river twice). According to the process perspective, our experience of continuity is not the result of an independent enduring substance, but an interdependent series of experiences. I was the 'same' me yesterday as I am today because today flows out of yesterday. Yesterday and today are interrelated. Whereas the substance view relies upon a non-changing part of reality (in other words, 'substances') to explain continuity amidst change, the process view remains consistent – *everything flows*. The flow that causes change also explains continuity. There is a sense in which you can't step into the same river twice. The river flows and is therefore constantly changing (as are we who do the stepping). But there is also a sense in which you most definitely can step into the same river twice. The Nile doesn't magically become the Mississippi. The Nile remains the Nile because of its history. The river flows from one moment to the next, the present emerging out of the past. In the process-relational world-view the flow of time, understood as a serially ordered series of events, explains both continuity and change.

Interdependent process, not independent substance, is the core feature of reality.

Theology as process

From the idea that the most basic feature of reality is permanence, emerges images of God as unchanged, unaffected and distant. Our lives have no real meaning or purpose, as God single-handedly controls it all. This framework perpetuates top-down hierarchy, giving priority to force over persuasion, while suggesting that to be affected is weakness but to be unaffected is strength. It conveys a rigid view of God that leaves no room for questions or differences. Churches that have embraced this view of God have become cold and uninviting spaces. Classical theology offers a view of God that isn't consistent with modern intuitions and common sense. As a result, there has been a mass exodus as an increasing number of people are expressing interest in spirituality (experiencing the divine) while rejecting rigid and exclusive religion (Christian dogmatism).

By contrast, if we begin with the principle of interconnected process, God need not be a distant, unaffected, static super being 'out there' that we hope will intervene occasionally 'over here'. Instead, a God that exemplifies the principle of interconnection is a God capable of genuine love. A loving God is engaged in give-and-receive relationships, very much affected by, and invested in, our lives. The process-relational God is not separate from but intertwined with the world. As such, God does not act unilaterally, but always cooperatively – working with creation in every moment to bring about the best possible world. This is a view of God that is non-hierarchical. It is the reason why process theologian John Cobb has argued for translating *Basileia tou Theou* as 'Divine Commonwealth' rather than 'Kingdom of God', so as to portray God among us rather than God above us (see John Cobb's book, *Salvation: Jesus's mission and ours*). The process-relational view of God and the world is consistent with our experience of creaturely freedom and an undetermined future. There is no fate but what we make. The world is full

of possibilities. Which possibilities become actualities is up to us. What we do matters in the world, and it matters to God. We are invited to be co-creators with God, building a better world in each moment. The process-relational God is not a dead God, but a living God whose size ever increases as each moment in history becomes part of the life of God.

Those of us who are process-relational theologians not only believe that a process-relational world-view is more coherent and consistent, but that it contributes to a much more attractive view of God. Of course, no theology is perfect, and no world-view is complete. Between quantum physics, astrobiology, psychology and more, we humans are continuing to learn new things about the world and our place in it. As our understanding of the world changes, so should our theology.

Theology is a process, after all.

Internet links

Center for Open and Relational Theology (A go-to website for information about people, events and resources on open and relational theology)

Center for Process Studies YouTube Channel (A growing archive of recorded lectures on the process-relational world-view)

Homebrewed Christianity Podcast (One of the most popular theological podcasts in the world, featuring lots of process-relational theology from the host Tripp Fuller)

Open Horizons (An online magazine for spiritual entrepreneurs and seekers in the tradition of open and relational [process] thinking)

Process & Faith (A multifaith network for relational spirituality that offers a variety of educational initiatives)

Discussion points

1. In what ways does a classical view of God resonate with you, and why?
2. In what ways does a process-relational view of God resonate with you, and why?

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James Lovelock and the Gaia Hypothesis

Jeff Astley

James Lovelock and others have argued that biological life on Earth affects the physical and chemical conditions of the atmosphere, oceans and other environmental variables, in a way that keeps the environment constant and in a state comfortable for life. This article explores and critiques this 'Gaia hypothesis'.

Specification links:
AQA 3.1 Philosophy of Religion and Ethics: 3.1.2 B Ethics and religion, The application of [normative ethics] to issues of non-human life and death; 3.2 Study of religion and dialogues: 3.2.2 2B. 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 1: Philosophy of Religion: Topic 6.3 Religion and science debates and their significance for philosophy of religion a) Methodologies with emphasis on observation, hypothesis and experiment, identifying connections and differences vis a vis religious belief and processes; miracles. b) Creation themes and scientific cosmologies: Gaia hypothesis; Paper 2: Religion and Ethics, Topic Significant concepts in issues or debates in religion and ethics 1.1 Environmental issues a) Concepts of stewardship and conservation from the point of view of at least one religion and at least one secular ethical perspective; animal welfare and protection, sustainability, waste management and climate change. b) Strengths and weaknesses of significant areas of disagreement and debate, assessment of relevant examples, legal changes and social attitudes, appropriateness and value of employing religious perspectives in these debates. With reference to the ideas of J Lovelock and A Næss

SCOTTISH HIGHERS Question Paper 1: section 2, morality and belief, Part C — morality, environment and global issues

Introduction

The British inventor, chemist and environmentalist James Ephraim Lovelock, CH CBE FRS, died in Dorset on 26 July 2022, his 103rd birthday.

Lovelock was born to a mother who – despite having won a scholarship to grammar school – had to work in a pickle factory from the age of thirteen, and a father who had served sixth months' hard labour for poaching. He was brought up as a Quaker but became an agnostic adult.

After school he worked at a photography firm, but eventually studied chemistry at Manchester University, receiving his PhD in 1948 and embarking on a career in medical research. Lovelock then undertook research in various American universities and developed his Gaia hypothesis while working as a consultant for NASA's planetary exploration programme. He created the electron capture detector which enabled the discovery of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) in the atmosphere, chemicals that deplete the ozone layer and operate as potent 'greenhouse gases'.

He has been described by the philosopher John Gray as the one person he had met who was 'closest to genius' (*Observer,* 11/12/22, p. 26).

The 'Gaia hypothesis'

Lovelock first formulated this hypothesis (later designated a 'theory') in print in the early 1970s, co-developing it with the American microbiologist, Lynn Margulis, who also championed the role of symbiosis as the driving force of evolution. Lovelock's proposal was that all the Earth's living and non-living phenomena formed a complex interacting *system* that behaved like one superorganism with self-regulatory functions. He named this, at his neighbour the novelist William Golding's suggestion, after the Greek goddess *Gaia*, the personification of the Earth.

A key element here is Lovelock's view that 'the Earth is alive', though much of it is dead (Lovelock, 1988, p. 27; Foreword to Midgley, 2007). He recognised that this claim is strongly poetical and metaphorical (e.g., Lovelock, 2007, pp. 20-21). He writes, too, of Gaia as being 'stern', 'tough' and 'ruthless in her destruction of those who transgress' her 'rules' (1988, p. 212), of Gaia's 'impatience', 'authority' and her 'obligation to keep the planet fit for life' (1987, p. 81; 2007, p. 187) and even of her 'intelligence' – albeit in the limited sense that an oven's thermostatic control system, which keeps its temperature constant, is intelligent (1987, p. 146). Although he sometimes implies that the Earth *is* a living organism (e.g., 1988, p. 205), he always means that it behaves *like* such an organism; it is 'a planet that behaves as if it were alive' – but not 'alive in a sentient way, or even alive like an animal or a bacterium' (2007, pp. 20-21).[1] Yet the Earth is also, he argues, an active, self-maintaining whole.

The *biosphere* is the thin layer on the surface of our planet where life exists, which extends from the deep-sea vents up to a few kilometres into the atmosphere. All the living creatures within it (the *biota*), and especially microbial life, actively work to keep constant the environmental conditions that sustain their life, including the global temperature, salinity of the oceans and levels of oxygen and other gases in the atmosphere. It is both the biosphere and biota working together as a single unit that forms (or forms part of) Gaia, 'a total planetary being', 'the largest living creature on Earth' (1987, p. 34; 1988, p. 19), whose target is 'the regulation of surface conditions so as always to be as favourable as possible for contemporary life' (2007, p. 208).[2] This automatic feedback mechanism means that *life on Earth sustains the conditions for its own existence*.

[1] Lovelock initially wrote of Gaia's 'intentional' actions, but this was not meant literally: Gaia does not intentionally or consciously maintain the complex balance in her environment that life requires. Gaia's 'geophysiological regulation systems' have evolved 'without foresight or planning' (1988, p. 145).

[2] This is actually Lovelock's 'Gaia theory'. In his earlier 'Gaia hypothesis' he thought that the biota kept the surface conditions always favourable for organic life, at least in the short term (1988, p. 190; 2007, p. 208).

The place of God and humanity

Lovelock had no specifically religious 'axe to grind' in advocating this theory.[3] 'In no way do I see Gaia as … a surrogate God', he insisted (1988, p. 218). Nevertheless, he acknowledged that 'Gaia is a religious as well as a scientific concept' (Lovelock, 1988, p. 206). Perhaps a better word here might have been 'spiritual' rather than religious (see Midgley, 2007, Introduction and chapter by David Midgley; Lovelock, 1988, p. 217). Yet he also sometimes regards Gaia as both 'of this Universe and, conceivably, a part of God' (1988, p. 206), a view that is close to *panentheism*: though he 'reacts' to the view that Gaia was created, saying only that 'it might have been' (1988, p. 205) – while adding that 'Mary' could be 'another name for Gaia' or an 'embodiment of Gaia' (1988, pp. 206, 223).

Lovelock further insisted that Gaia's feedback mechanism was not specifically for *human* survival. This is in distinction from versions of the teleological argument (the 'argument to design') that employ the anthropic principle, claiming that the universe's physical constants and initial state appear to have been precisely 'fine-tuned' for human life (cf. Astley, 2019, p. 11). Lovelock's perspective, by contrast, is strongly non-anthropocentric, unlike that of many environmentalists. Gaia and Life may survive, but why should *human* life? However, 'Gaia is not purposefully antihuman' (1988, p. 236).

Status as science

Such a 'holistic' approach seeks to understand Nature as an organised, interacting whole, acting as a single unit. This is very different from 'reductionist' scientific perspectives that work by reducing it into its component parts, which are then interpreted in terms of their simplest chemical and physical laws (compare 1987, p. 52; 1988, p. 215; 2007, p. 10). *Ecologists* (biologists who study the relationships between living organisms and their physical environment) have always stressed the importance of the interrelatedness of the many different parts that comprise Nature, both animate and inanimate. Such scientists certainly acknowledge that the networks that form the whole of living organisms, and the whole that comprises their lives within their environments, are more than the sum of their individual parts, and some refer to the Gaia hypothesis on occasions.

Lovelock's theoretical view (1988, p. 45), like all wide-ranging claims, is hard to test. Indeed, he occasionally appears to declare it 'untestable' (1987, p. ix). But testability is usually regarded as a defining characteristic of scientific claims. Lovelock's own attempts to illustrate its testability have seemed implausible to many, as does its implication of some form of unconscious communication between all living things to provide coordinated feedback to their environment (thus, Deane-Drummond, 1992, pp. 278-279; cf. Lovelock, 1988, p. 96). Yet he has claimed that his theory is 'wide open for experimental investigation' (1988, p. 43).

Biology provides much evidence of living things changing their environment, such as the influence of sea plankton that soak up the sun's rays and emit chemical substances that seed cloud cover, thereby changing the weather. Such mechanisms often appear to be minimal, however, compared with the *physical* phenomena that form clouds (such as sea spray). Explanations that do not

[3] In a 2020 interview he agreed that he was not at all religious and claimed that Gaia is 'an easier thing to understand than God and religions' – and more empirically testable (*Observer*, 19/07/20, pp. 20-21).

involve living organisms exist for many of the constant conditions in Nature (e.g., volcanoes and the weathering of rocks producing atmospheric carbon dioxide).

Nevertheless, many convincing *local* feedback systems have been found, e.g., in the effect of the behaviour of social insects such as termites and wasps in keeping their mounds or nests at a stable temperature, and the influence in seeding clouds over forests of the organic chemicals emitted by trees (George, 2016, pp. 67-69).

Other issues

- Lovelock contends that Gaia is *not a teleological concept*: that is, Gaia is not purposefully and consciously designed (1988, pp. 45, 61, 102, 111).
- Darwinian natural selection[4] leads to the adaptation of living organisms to their changing environment through evolution over generations; but this is largely a 'one way' causal effect – from the environment to this (particular) organism. It is also driven largely by competition (for limited resources); and only by cooperation between genetically closely related individuals or where animals have evolved skills to detect non-cooperative 'cheating'.
- While the Earth's conditions are currently in a 'steady state' conducive to life, this has not always been the case. For example, the production of oxygen, methane or hydrogen sulphide by some living things proved poisonous for many other ancestral forms of life, and the reduction of CO_2 in the atmosphere through plant metabolism led to ice ages that rendered many species extinct. Lovelock recognises that these changes have happened in the past, however, and he strongly argues that pollution, overpopulation, intensive farming and global heating are likely to interrupt mechanisms that currently produce beneficial feedback from living organisms to the environment (Lovelock, 1987, chapter 7; 1988, pp. 158-159, 177-179; 2007, pp. 43-45, 56-60). However, unlike most environmentalists, he advocates the use of nuclear energy 'as an essential part of a portfolio of energy sources', looking forward to the development of 'clean and everlasting [nuclear] fusion' technology (1988, pp. 171-177; 2007, pp. 14, 86, 133).
- The oceanographer, Toby Tyrell, who accepts that life and the Earth have coevolved, argues that the outcome has not necessarily improved or even maintained earth's habitability. He therefore concludes that 'the Gaia hypothesis is not an accurate picture of how our world works. Unfortunately, our planet is less robustly stabilised than Gaia implies, and therefore more fragile' (George, 2016, pp. 74-75).

The influence of the concept of Gaia

The imagery of Gaia has encouraged a sense of the integrity and interdependent connectedness of Nature and a resistance to separative, 'parts-only' thinking about it. More radically, Lovelock's basic theme has been enthusiastically taken up by New Age movements looking for a spirituality that is not traditionally monotheistic, as well as by popular Green movements of many kinds. Some think of Gaia as conscious, as a 'mythic goddess' (Lovelock, 2007, p. 188), and even advocate communication ('conversation') with it. The universe may then be regarded as a quasi-divine process bringing redemption.

Yet Gaia is inconsistent with the New Age ideology's 'affirmation of human

[4] Lovelock accepts this mechanism but believes that it gave rise to the evolution of the biota and the biosphere together (1988, pp. 34, 133; 2007, pp. 34-36, 178).

potential and individual self-improvement' (Deane-Drummond, 1992, p. 283). And the Gaia hypothesis, in its role as a sort of secular doctrine of providence, has been criticised for finding no special place for humankind (see above). Indeed, many theists regard it as merely a more sophisticated version of *pantheism*, perhaps leading to a subjugation of the human and personal in favour of some impersonal 'balance of Nature'.

Compared with a personal God, who may have moral reasons and intentions for his creation that (at the very least) include humans, the mindless, amoral forces of Gaia could appear to be a less significant and powerful – and therefore riskier – substitute.

For some 'deep ecologists' (a term coined by the Norwegian philosopher and activist, Arne Næss) every living being has an equal right to live and flourish, and humans may be regarded as less important than their environment. For Lovelock, too, 'we are just another species, neither the owners nor the stewards of this planet' (Lovelock, 1988, p. 14; compare 1987, p. 145). 'The idea that humans are yet intelligent enough to serve as stewards of the earth is among the most hubristic [presumptuous, arrogant] ever' (2007, p. 195). Nonetheless, he rejects the view that we are like a plague weed or cancerous growth that is harmful to Gaia (1987, p. 139; 1988, pp. 177, 181).

However, the idea of respect for and wonder at, even love for Nature, as a whole 'web' or 'system' of interdependent created beings – at least on this planet – has seemed valuable to many religious people, encouraging sympathy with Gaia thinking among many advocates of 'Celtic spirituality' and some writers on 'green theology' and 'ecotheology' (cf. Tranter, 2020). But traditional biblical and Christian spirituality is often assumed to be oppressive, and 'ecofeminists' and others have therefore frequently sought out alternative, often naturalistic spiritualities, rejecting any attitude to life that understands Nature (so often spoken of as feminine) as something to be used, exploited and dominated (see Village, 2019). This can lead both to the view that women should serve men, just as Nature serves culture, and especially to the claim that animals exist only for the service of the human race. Christians might, however, interpret human dominance in the way they understand the sovereignty of a Christ-like God who exercises his divinity by laying aside power and becoming a caring servant, respecting rather than dominating his creatures (Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 10:42-45).

Many theologians would further argue for a relationship between humanity and the rest of creation that is modelled on the mutuality and community that exists within the Trinity. Speaking solely of God as Father may give the wrong message about God's relationship with creation (as autocratic, domineering, powerful, patriarchal and impassible), unless this is properly explained and qualified. Divine activity may be viewed very differently if God is also described as Spirit (which is often described in more feminine and maternal language) and understood as an immanent presence indwelling creation and luring it to its appointed goal. The same may be said of God understood as God the Son or Word, acting cosmically as the agent of creation, yet revealed most fully in the caring, non-violent, healing and rescuing figure of Jesus Christ.

Ecological attitudes, values and spirituality

Lovelock's Gaia imagery, like the doctrine of creation, may have their most

significant influence in generating a more tender attitude towards Nature and a more affirmative evaluation of the importance of other (non-human) living things, in an ecological ethic that expresses our duty of care for the world. The picture of a mechanistic universe, as portrayed by earlier scientific thinking, often led to a brutal, 'asset-stripping' attitude towards Nature (see Midgley, 2007, Introduction); as have interpretations of evolution that privilege competition over cooperative forces in natural selection. But evolutionary biology, properly understood, blurs the distinction between humans and the rest of Nature, and the sciences of animal and plant ecology have uncovered the interconnectedness and vulnerability of life on earth. Today's more open, emergent and hierarchical portrait of Nature is also likely to result in a rather more sensitive way of behaving. According to one theologian, 'ecology is simply one aspect' of a holistic, relational view of Nature, a view that may even be described as an 'ecological cosmology' (Hodgson, 1994, p. 92) and is compatible with a profoundly ecological spirituality. (See also Astley, Brown, & Loades, 2003, pp. 72-78.)

Lovelock himself has said that 'Gaia should be a way to view the Earth, ourselves, and our relationships with living things' (1988, p. 207). Perhaps his writings function best, then, as a perspective, a way of looking at and seeing Life and its related World (compare 1988, p. 236) which should affect both our judging and valuing of creation and our way of behaving towards it (compare Crispin Tickell in Lovelock, 2007, p. xvi).

Glossary

amoral: (here) non-moral; neither moral nor immoral.

anthropocentric: the view that humans are at the centre of life and existence.

feedback: the modification or control of a process or system by its effects. ('Negative feedback' suppresses a process, but more dangerous 'positive feedback' amplifies it.)

holistic: relating to the whole of something or to a total system, instead of just to its parts. In this approach, the whole is viewed as more than the sum of its parts.

homeostasis: the maintenance of a stable state of equilibrium (balance) between different components.

panentheism: the belief that the universe exists within God, but God is greater than the universe.

pantheism: the belief that God is identical to the universe.

symbiosis: a close relationship between different biological organisms, often benefitting both.

Internet links

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James Lovelock (Article in Wikipedia)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaia_hypothesis (Article in Wikipedia)

Gaia theory: is it science yet? (theconversation.com) (Article by Ian Enting)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaia (Article in Wikipedia)

https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/science-environment-53644147/james-lovelock-gaia-theory-creator-on-coronavirus-and-turning-101 and

James Lovelock on the future of AI and climate change - BBC News (two brief video interviews with James Lovelock)

James Lovelock: the death of scientific independence? | Aeon Essays (Roger Highfield on James Lovelock)

Discussion points

1. What elements in the Gaia hypothesis are compatible, and which seem incompatible, with religious ideas of God's creation?
2. In what ways is the Gaia hypothesis (a) scientific, (b) spiritual, (c) religious?
3. What is the status of human beings in (a) the Gaia hypothesis, (b) the Christian doctrine of creation?

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The Morality of Forgiveness

Anthony Bash

Forgiveness has become a focus of discussion among contemporary theologians and philosophers. This article looks at the place of resentment in forgiveness, what forgiveness is not and three different kinds of responses that people call 'forgiving'. Each of the responses is evaluated.

Specification links:
AQA 3.1.2: Section B: Ethics and religion, virtue ethics; 3.2.2B Christianity Section B: Dialogues, Christian responses to character based virtue ethics
EDEXCEL Paper 3 New Testament Studies: Topic 6.2 How should we live? (a) Christian life, forgiveness
WJEC/CBAC AS Unit 1: Option A – An Introduction to the Study of Christianity: Theme 3: Religious life Knowledge and understanding of religion and belief, C. Religious life – key moral principles: the need for forgiveness; Unit 2: Section A - An Introduction to Religion and Ethics, Theme 1: Ethical Thought, Knowledge and understanding of religion and belief, virtue theory

Forgiveness is widely recognised as one of the distinctives of Christian ethics. People cite Jesus' dying words on the cross as evidence of the importance of forgiveness as a moral virtue, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' (Luke 23:34). His words are widely interpreted as Jesus forgiving his enemies and they are often held up as a great moral example for people to follow. Given that this is so, it is surprising that a concept that is so often thought about as being 'religious' has become of so much interest to philosophers – and of debate among Christian writers and thinkers.

Bishop Joseph Butler

The modern study of forgiveness is considered to have been initiated in the eighteenth century by Bishop Joseph Butler (1692-1752). Butler is known as a Christian apologist and as having had a significant impact on the development of moral philosophy in Britain in the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Butler explored the idea of forgiveness in two sermons on forgiveness preached in the Rolls Chapel, London (Butler, 1827, sermons VIII and IX).

Butler's starting point is that human beings experience 'injury' when they have been wronged by 'human villainy and baseness, … wickedness' or when 'the rules of justice and equity' are flouted. As a result, people feel 'resentment', that is, hatred, malice and revenge. Butler says resentment is 'a harsh and turbulent passion' and 'a vice of ill desert' because it can lead to retaliation and revenge (Butler, 1827, pp. 66, 71). In his view, retaliation and revenge are the antithesis of Christian virtue and to be avoided.

Contemporary philosophers

More recently, the study of forgiveness has been taken up by contemporary philosophers. The two philosophers who have 'set the agenda' for the modern philosophical exploration of forgiveness are Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton, in a book to which they each contributed separate chapters (Murphy & Hampton, 1988).

Murphy (1940-2020) was a legal philosopher. He agrees with Butler that the starting point of forgiveness is resentment but his approach to resentment and its value is sharply different from Butler's. Murphy's view is that 'resentment functions primarily in defence … of certain *values of the self*' (p. 16). In his view, what resentment defends is a person's self-respect or self-esteem and perception of their own worth. In short, for Murphy, resentment is a form of indignation that people feel when they have been mistreated, insulted, or regarded or treated as less than the way they deserve.

Since Murphy and Hampton wrote, there has been an increasing number of books written by philosophers who explore the nature and scope of the ethics of forgiveness. Three of the important ones are by Griswold (2007), Holmgren (2012) and Nussbaum (2016).

Important non-academic work has also been pioneered through the work of the *Forgiveness Project* (www.theforgivenessproject.com), formerly headed by Marina Cantacuzino. Cantacuzino has also written two fine and easily accessible books (2015, 2022). These books offer wise insights on the varieties of ways that contemporary people see forgiveness and its moral place in human relations.

Contemporary theologians

At the same time as new work by secular ethicists, some Christian theologians have also started to ask some of the same questions as philosophers and psychologists, and in many respects there has been a coming together of philosophical and theological thought, though by different routes. The modern Christian writers include Jones (1995), Bash (2007, 2011, 2015) and Cherry (2012).

In the remainder of this article, we explore some of the main points of discussion in modern forgiveness studies.

What forgiveness is not

Even if we are not sure what forgiveness is – and there is considerable debate about its nature and scope – can we say clearly what forgiveness is not? Forgiveness is usually distinguished from at least four other responses to wrongdoing and these responses are regarded as not being forgiving, because they are regarded as not necessarily *morally virtuous responses* to having been wronged, in the way that forgiveness *is* such a response.

First, the usual view is that forgiveness is not the same as *forgetting*. For example, the passing of time may heal the wounds of resentment; past wrongs become distant memories and of little relevance to current situations. Forgetting makes forgiveness irrelevant, because there is nothing to forgive if both 'forgiver' and 'wrongdoer' have forgotten about their resentment.

Next, forgiveness is also different from *excusing*. We excuse people when we decide to overlook and not to hold them responsible or blameable for what they have done. What they have done is wrong, but we choose not to hold them to account. In this situation, excusing is usually a unilateral, unconditional act – something the excuser decides to do – and is not done because the wrongdoer is sorry or has put things right.

Additionally, to *condone* is not to forgive. To condone is not to accept wrongdoing to be wrong. It is therefore also not to condemn or judge wrong behaviour. In other words, to condone is to be complicit. In our view, condonation is a morally deficient assessment of an action or omission, and a morally deficient response to it. With condonation, the injured person who condones a moral injury in effect denies that there is a moral injury at all.

Lastly, *pardoning* is not to forgive. In a judicial sense, if people are pardoned, the wrong they have done remains recognised as wrongdoing, and they are not acquitted; they are, however, spared penalties for the injuries. In a more popular sense, and this is what we are referring to, people often mean by 'pardoning' that they have overlooked a moral injury. But doing no more than to overlook an injury, without also engaging with the wrong that was done, is not a morally virtuous response to having been wronged.

What forgiveness is

In addition to distinguishing what forgiveness is not, there is some debate about the scope of what forgiveness is. The debated question is whether it is virtuous to forgive the unrepentant (those who do not regret what they have done nor seek to make amends); or whether it is virtuous *not* to forgive the unrepentant and virtuous *only* to forgive the repentant. In answer to these questions, three approaches have been taken.

Undisclosed forgiveness

The first is to commend what is called 'undisclosed' forgiveness. This is when an injured person decides to forgive a wrongdoer without telling the wrongdoer of the forgiveness. The forgiver is seen as giving a 'gift' to the forgiven person. This approach is proposed particularly by Robert C. Enright in his writings on the psychology of forgiveness (e.g., Enright & North, 1998) and also by the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida (2001).

Forgiving in this way is not necessarily so absurd as it first appears to be, for there is a place for forgiveness of this sort when the wrongdoer has died, or perhaps when we cannot now find or contact the person who wronged us. Forgiving in this way may also spare those from further hurt and pain who would be otherwise deeply hurt or traumatised by having to face again those who have wronged them. But if we could speak to or contact the people we intend to forgive but choose not to – perhaps because we lack personal courage to speak to them or do not want them to know they have wronged us – are we truly forgiving them: if the 'gift' of forgiveness has not been 'delivered' and passed on? There is also a sense in which forgiving without disclosing the forgiveness is a betrayal of acknowledging and 'owning' the violation

that wrongdoing inflicts on victims. There can also be something distasteful about making light of serious hurt and injury.

Unconditional forgiveness

The second approach is to commend what is called 'unconditional' forgiveness. If we decide that it is usually better to face the people who have injured us if we are to forgive them, should we also forgive them unconditionally, without expecting anything in return from the person we forgive? This question has been debated for at least two millennia, and especially since forgiveness was first explored in the Christian tradition.

The question is usually put more specifically in these terms: is it right to offer forgiveness to wrongdoers, even if they have not repented? Or should we expect to offer the gift of forgiveness only after someone has owned up and admitted to what they have done, if they are sorry for it, and are committed not to repeat the same mistake again? In other words, can forgiveness be offered to the unrepentant as a 'no strings attached' gift?

It is curious that Jesus' words ('Father, forgive them for they know not what they do) are often interpreted as an example of unconditional forgiveness. This is strange, because on any straightforward reading of the words there is no statement of forgiveness on the part of Jesus. What we do read from Jesus' reported words is a prayer that *God* would forgive those who were crucifying Jesus, an innocent man. Such a prayer is in keeping with two aspects of Jewish thought at the time.

- The first is that God, in response to sacrifices, forgave the wrong actions of those who, out of ignorance, did wrong. Hence Jesus prayed for such people. He recognised that those engaged in the act of crucifying him were innocent pawns.
- The second aspect is that there were no sacrifices for the wrong actions that people chose to do if they had *known* that their actions were wrong. Such people were those who engineered Jesus' trial and conviction on false charges. Jesus did not apparently hold out hope of forgiveness to this latter group: he did not pray for their forgiveness or offer them his own forgiveness.

More generally, a culture that promotes and celebrates unconditional forgiveness as a supposed pattern of virtuous behaviour runs the risk of buttressing patterns of normative behaviour that look to injured people to forgive, rather than to challenge, those whose behaviour helps to maintain systemic abuse and oppression. Forgiveness seen in this way is a tool of control. Feminist writers point out, for example, that expectations of forgiveness are 'gendered', that is, developed within a patriarchal framework and used to sustain patriarchal frameworks of power. The same is true when forgiveness is celebrated in societies that maintain inequalities based on race or wealth. In these cases, the oppressed are expected to forgive their oppressors. Whether the forgivers in such situations know it or not, they sustain and even collude with injustice, domination and abusive structures of power and control

Interdependent forgiveness

The third approach is 'interdependent' forgiveness. Forgiveness is interdependent when both injured person and wrongdoer have a part to play in bringing about forgiveness. More specifically, interdependent forgiveness happens when people who have done

wrong express regret for what they have done to those they have wronged. They do this because they have come to recognise that what they did was wrong. They choose to acknowledge their wrongdoing, admitting responsibility for it, not only to themselves but also to the people they have injured. If they can, and if it is necessary, they also do what they can to put matters right. The wronged person may then offer forgiveness in response to the wrongdoer's contrition and repentance. With forgiveness given and received in this way, the wrongdoer and the injured person each have a discrete, and interdependent, role. The argument for this approach to forgiveness – and especially the place of reparations as part of the process of forgiveness – has been powerfully made and illustrated in Tutu van Furth, 2022.

Interdependent forgiveness has two main constituents. The first is *the manifestation of affect* (that is, the outward expression of internal emotions, commonly known as 'feelings'). In this context, expressions of affect include regret, remorse and repentance. The second are *actions*, such as repentance, restitution and reparations. (You will have noticed that repentance is both an expression of affect and an action.) We can put what we are saying very simply: where there is interdependent forgiveness, the wrongdoer will regret what has been done, make a settled decision not to do the same thing again, and put right what can be put right.

We can refer to these constituents in formal language and say that what they involve are *regret*, *repentance* and *recompense*. These are the 'three Rs' of interdependent forgiveness. We usually regard the three Rs of interdependent forgiveness to be the basic framework for seeking, being offered, and accepting forgiveness (on the part of the wrongdoer) and of offering and giving forgiveness (on the part of the injured person).

Forgiveness given and received this way is usually likely to lead to better, and more lasting, beneficial outcomes than the outcomes from any of the other ways people may forgive. It also satisfies many of the conditions of what is regarded as morally virtuous.

In closing

As you have seen, there is a range of views about what forgiveness is and what forgiveness is not, and when it is right to forgive and when it is right to choose not to forgive. We leave you a question in closing.

The question is asked by Michael Lapsley. Lapsley, an Anglican priest originally from New Zealand, worked in South Africa opposing apartheid and was expelled from the country. In 1990, while living in Zimbabwe, he suffered severe injuries from a letter-bomb, probably one that the South African security forces covertly sent to kill him. He lost both hands and was blinded in one eye. When asked if he should unconditionally forgive the perpetrators of the crime (even though he does not know for sure who they are), Lapsley posed a question along these lines in response: 'If you steal my bike, and I forgive you, who keeps the bike?'

What do you think is the answer to this question? And how does this affect your view of the nature and scope of forgiveness?

Internet links

Forgiveness (Article by Paul M. Hughes and Brandon Warmke, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2017)

www.theforgivenessproject.com (sharing stories from both victims/ survivors and perpetrators of crime and conflict who have rebuilt their lives following hurt and trauma)

Forgiveness (Article in Wikipedia)

Discussion points

(in addition to the question Michael Lapsley raises)

1. What do you think resentment is?
2. If someone does not feel resentment, can they forgive?
3. What do you think forgiveness is – and what other responses do you think are related to forgiveness but are not properly forgiveness?
4. Can you think of situations when it is morally virtuous to forgive a wrongdoer who does not show regret, repentance and recompense for having done wrong?

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Mindfulness and McMindfulness

Phra Nicholas Thanissaro

Mindfulness and meditation are part of the way Buddhists shape and express their religious identity. Mindfulness has become more 'mainstream' recently in Western society as a means of therapy for specific health disorders and also to promote subjective wellbeing – leading to an understanding of mindfulness that contrasts with that of traditional Buddhists. This essay seeks to describe the three phases of adaptation of mindfulness in the West, while sketching how meditation and mindfulness are understood more traditionally, the tensions 'commercial' mindfulness has created for the community of traditional Buddhist practitioners, and diverse ways these issues have been resolved in the present.

Specification links:
AQA 7062 2A Buddhism: Expressions of Buddhist Identity: Meditation, the modern usage of Buddhist meditation as a form of therapy and how Buddhists have responded to this
OCR Developments in Buddhist thought (H573/06): 3 Living, Topic: Role of mindfulness in Buddhist practice
Also:
EDUQAS Component 1: A Study of Religion: Option D: A Study of Buddhism, Theme 4: Religious practices that shape religious identity
EDEXCEL Paper 4, Option 4A: Buddhism: Topic 3 Practices that shape and express religious identity; Topic 3, 3.3 the context and application of meditation

Traditional mindfulness

'Mindfulness' is the English translation of the ancient Pali word *sati* or the Sanskrit word *smṛti*, which in the original languages literally meant 'memory' or 'retention'. It started out as an important part of Buddhist practice, shaping religious identity as one of the factors in the seven factors of enlightenment [*bojjhaṅga*] and elaborated in terms of the Four Foundations of mindfulness found in the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta(s). Religious Studies students will recognise mindfulness in its Buddhist context as 'Right Mindfulness' [*sammā sati*] where it is one of the steps on the Noble Eightfold Path – a place where it is distinguished from the separate concept of 'Right Meditation' [*sammā samādhi*].

Within Buddhism, mindfulness is traditionally quite central to the structure of its teachings. What's known in Buddhism as non-recklessness

[*appamāda*] is based very firmly on this idea of being mindful. To most people, recklessness might mean something like running across a street without looking right and left first, but recklessness in Buddhism can mean anything that jeopardises a person's chances at spiritual cultivation. Mindfulness would be the character quality that helps to overcome such obstacles. Traditional properties of mindfulness include protecting the mind from being held to ransom by moods, feelings and proliferating thoughts, while stimulating self-awareness. Benefits of mindfulness would include being able to set up a subjective buffer between a person's physical pain and how it makes them feel, preventing a person getting stuck in selfish or blinkered perspectives, paving a way to penetrative insight into the *roots* of problems rather than dwelling on the symptoms (for example finding the leak in the pipe rather than repeatedly mopping the floor), while adding a dimension of the 'sacred' or the 'pathway to self-improvement' to whatever a person thinks, says or does.

Traditional functions of mindfulness include treating potentially dangerous things with due caution – even when these might superficially seem negligible (such as a small spark that might burn down a city). Since every task has a notional line beyond which harm becomes ethically unacceptable, a mindful person would be able to discern where that line needs to be drawn. Mindfulness would give a person a timely reminder – almost like a catalyst (which, like an alarm clock, would get a person out of bed in the morning although continuing to snooze might seem the more restful choice). If a person has responsibilities, mindfulness would keep them aware of these, engendering thoroughness in all tasks (Bodhi, 2011).

As the concept of mindfulness spread beyond Asia, its adaptation to the West has manifested itself as three historical waves. At the beginning of the first wave, going back to the 1900s, meditation and mindfulness practices were the sole domain of Orientalist scholars and explorers, but later mindfulness was adapted *within* its Buddhist context by Asian instructors visiting the West. In the first wave of adaptation, mindfulness retained its original meaning – namely as a quality of mind that allowed a practitioner to remember to act in an ethical way, with self-awareness and without being distracted by the senses – and always with wise reflection. It was not considered to be merely a passive quality (like something innate to babies and children) but required some *effort* to cultivate. Although the traditional meaning of mindfulness *may* include observing without judging things, it also meant understanding their true value on a deeper level.

Adapting mindfulness to the West

In the second historical wave since the 1990s, mindfulness practices came to enjoy more mainstream appeal through de-traditionalisation, privatisation and de-affiliation from Buddhism. No longer an obscure technical term for Westerners, 'mindfulness' came to be a code word for 'secularised meditation skills'. Psychologists appropriated mindfulness and applied it to improve self-regulation and support emotional, cognitive and behavioural flexibility. Initially Western psychological applications of mindfulness focused on treatment of psychological disorders including pain, stress, depression, distress, intolerance and substance abuse. In the UK, the Mindfulness All-Party Parliamentary Group (2015) agreed that mindfulness was more cost-effective than mainstream interventions for mental

health applications such as depressive relapse (Penman & Williams, 2011). Because at the time secular mindfulness in the clinical context provided treatment for conditions such as depression (where relapse has potentially life-threatening consequences), proponents argued that in order to achieve sustainability, their Mindfulness-based Interventions (MBIs) needed to be well-researched, scholarly and carefully constructed – and by extension, accredited and financially self-sufficient – while retaining the student-teacher pedagogical relationship of the 'first wave'. The reinvented version of 'mindfulness' avoided elements of Buddhist tradition deemed superstitious. Evidence-based research became the new 'gold standard' for MBIs in Western societies, while in Britain the British Association for Mindfulness-based Approaches (BAMBA) took upon itself the task of accrediting Mindfulness-based Programmes (MBPs) and instructors.

Later second-wave developments on the rising tide of positive psychology, extended mindfulness to subjective well-being enhancement, resonating with workplace quality standards (NICE, 2017). Nonetheless, a tension was increasingly recognised between the infrastructure of secular mindfulness acceptable for clinical applications and meditation for general wellbeing (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011) – including that taught by traditional Buddhist teachers. First-wave mindfulness teachers were stymied on one side by second-wave insistence on evidence-based research and on the other by the commercial self-help gimmick that has come to be known pejoratively as 'McMindfulness' (Purser, 2019). The more commercial trends of this 'mindfulness revolution' have tended to overlook some of the most important features it was originally intended to convey – one of the downsides of what sociologists refer to as the process of 'Western cultural appropriation'.

Despite the dumbing-down of certain types of mindfulness, it remained the flavour of the decade with an exponential increase in related publications by scientific researchers and several dedicated peer-reviewed journals. Although the credibility of mindfulness in the West was founded on evidence-based research, what was being measured in those experiments differs slightly from mindfulness in the traditional sense of the word. To give an example of the distinction, one of the most widely cited scales known as the Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (Walach, Buchheld, Buttenmuller, Kleinknecht, & Schmidt, 2006) limits itself to the factors of being open to the experience of the present moment, being aware of your body while doing other activities, bringing the wandering mind back to the experience of the here and now, appreciating yourself, paying attention to what's behind your actions, not judging your mistakes, feeling connected to the here-and-now, accepting unpleasant experiences, being friendly to yourself when things go wrong, watching your feelings without getting lost in them, pausing rather than reacting to difficult situations, experiencing moments of inner peace in spite of hectic surroundings, avoiding impatience with yourself and others and being able to smile when you notice how you sometimes make life difficult. Some Western meditation teachers, moreover, have characterised mindfulness as merely 'bare' or undiscerning attention – otherwise known as 'going with the flow'. Such Western versions of mindfulness often resort to doing things at half-speed, practising McMindfulness to the possible detriment of common sense, feeling virtuous about sitting idle or remaining in equanimity

when faced with life-threatening danger. This is parodied in the *Ladybird Book of Mindfulness*, with examples such as:

> Leanne has been staring at this beautiful tree for five hours. She was meant to be in the office. Tomorrow she will be fired. In this way mindfulness solved her work-related stress. (Hazely & Morris, 2015, 22)

Current trends

In the present third wave, in the early years of the 21st century, much of which reflects general trends in postsecularism, there has been increasing diversification of approaches, in a way that has resolved some of the tension between mindfulness stakeholders. Since BAMBA-accredited services have not managed to scale themselves sufficiently to provide mindfulness to all those wishing to learn about it, mindfulness continues to be widely taught without any evidence-base, on the basis of nothing more than a time-honoured track-record – while to *appear* competent, organisations already teaching meditation have scrambled to produce scientific evidence for the benefits of the MBIs that they have always used. Examples of *post hoc* evidence-based validation of meditation and mindfulness techniques have included Breathworks and 'Mindfulness in Action' by the Triratna Buddhist Community, the Insight-Based Mindfulness Programme and Dhammakāya meditation.

In this third wave of mindfulness, there has been pushback against the more commercial aspects of learning mindfulness. While mindfulness continues to feature in 'wellness' and leisure magazines, there has been increased openness to retrieval of some of the traditional elements of Buddhist culture to complement the secular teaching (Van Gordon, Shonin, & Griffiths, 2015). One by-product of the Covid pandemic in the period 2020-2021 was the disruption at regional locations of normal in-person student-teacher relationships for mindfulness learning. This led to increased learning of mindfulness online or via app(lication)s,[1] in a way similar to the online learning of a second language. Rather than following the prescribed channels of MBI regulation, mindfulness methods (especially for applications such as curing insomnia) gained popularity merely on the basis of effectiveness, accessibility or graphic design – meaning that real or virtual mindfulness instructors have gained increasing degrees of self-regulation. It has become increasingly apparent that suppressing meditation teaching based on (lack of) measurable outcomes was no more tenable than justifying regulation of church services based on supplicatory prayer research. In brief, the third wave of adaptation of mindfulness to the West has seen an increased diversification in modes and styles of mindfulness provision.

So, where does this leave mindfulness in the third wave? In spite of competing perspectives on mindfulness, probably the most accurate way to understand 'mindfulness', in spite of its reinterpretation over the years, is as a set of mental skills that are complementary but distinct from those employed during sitting meditation practice. Where meditation is something a practitioner does when sitting with their eyes closed on a meditation mat, mindfulness is a way of training the mind that takes place *outside* the formal meditation practice while attending to other things. In a way, whether or not a practitioner sets out with an intention to add a more ethical or

[1] For example, Calm, Headspace, Insight Timer, Mindfulness Coach, Mindgem, Smiling Mind, The Mindfulness App and UCLA Mindful.

spiritual aspect to their life, the combination of mindfulness and meditation will enhance this, regardless. Mindfulness helps to apply the wisdom, compassion and purity of the mind attained during sitting meditation to non-meditational aspects of life.

Hybrid Mindfulness: A Cautionary Tale

In 2002, a Buddhist monk journeyed from Sri Lanka to establish the so-called 'Tenement Temple', a meditation centre in the heart of Glasgow. He taught breathing meditation in English, free of charge (as is the Buddhist way), on Friday evenings, but managed to attract only a very small audience. He was beset with worries about how to pay the mortgage on his temple building.

The monk later enrolled for training as an instructor in Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction at the University of Bangor. After gaining his qualification, he continued to teach his 'free' Buddhist meditation class on Friday evenings, while opening a new mindfulness class on Tuesday evenings in his temple and charging each student £250-300 for the eight-week course. Although he admitted teaching the same thing on Friday and Tuesday evenings, the Tuesday evening course attracted a much larger audience. Later, realising the potential end of his mortgage worries, with the attitude of 'if you can't beat them, join them', the monk publicly declared his intention in 2013 to prioritise mindfulness coaching rather than traditional Buddhist activities.

Ultimately, the temple mortgage was paid off, but the monk became increasingly unmoored from his traditional identity and soon fell from grace in a scandal involving female students.

Glossary

Appamāda: the original Pali word for 'non-recklessness'.

post hoc: after the event.

Sati: the original Pali word for 'mindfulness'. (Not to be confused with 'suttee', the historic Hindu widow's practice of self-immolation, which can sometimes be spelt in the same way.)

Internet link

On mindfulness and some of its limitations: https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/mindfulness/definition

Discussion points

1. Find a free mindfulness app and listen to a meditation guidance track while trying to discern whether it is an example of traditional mindfulness or McMindfulness. How can you tell?
2. Stumbling across a poisonous snake in the jungle, how might the reaction of a traditionally mindful person differ from that of a person trained in McMindfulness?
3. Traditionally, mindfulness has been compared to (a) a supporting pillar, (b) a bouncer, (c) an accountant and (d) a ship's rudder. Can you give an example to justify each of these comparisons?

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Challenging Religious Issues
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What can the 2021 Census *Really* Tell us about the Religious Composition of England and Wales?

Leslie J. Francis

This article draws on the headline statistics from the religion question in the 2021 census for England and Wales in order to examine what can and what cannot be deduced from these statistics, and to explore why the religion question remains an important part of mapping the 'social and civil condition' of the population in the 21st century. The inclusion of this question in the census is evidence of the continuing public significance of religion.

Specification links:
(as background to)
AQA Component 2 Study of religion and dialogues 2B Christianity: Christianity and the challenge of secularisation, Christianity, migration and religious pluralism
EDEXCEL Paper 4, Option 4B Christianity: Topic 4.2 Secularisation a) Religion in today's society, declining numbers; Topic 6 Religion and society, 6.1 Pluralism and diversity a) The sociological reality of multicultural societies
OCR 2c. Content of Developments in Religious Thought (H573/03–07): 6 The Challenge of Secularism

Introduction

Headline figures

The headline figures issued by the Office for National Statistics (2022) seem at first glance to be self-evident. The question on the census form looks straightforward. It asks the simple question 'What is your religion?', adding 'This question is voluntary'. The question is followed by the following eight options (in *this* order):

- No religion
- Christian (all denominations)
- Buddhist
- Hindu
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Sikh
- Any other religion, write in.

In 2021 the headline figures for England and Wales considered together were, in descending order of endorsement:

- Christian 46.2%
- No religion 37.2%
- Muslim 6.5%
- Hindu 1.7%
- Sikh 0.9%
- Other 0.6%
- Jewish 0.5%
- Buddhist 0.5%
- Declined to answer 6.0%

Headline trends

The religion question was introduced into the census for England and Wales for the first time in 2001, and the same question was repeated in 2011 and 2021. This allows trends to be identified. These are the headline trends for the ten-year period between 2011 and 2021:

- The proportion reported as Christian declined from 59.3% to 46.2%, a drop of 13.1%.
- The proportion reported as no religion increased from 25.2% to 37.2%, a rise of 12.0%.
- The proportion reported as Muslim increased from 4.9% to 6.5%, a rise of 1.6%.
- The proportion reported as Hindu increased from 1.5% to 1.7%, a rise of 0.2%.

(In 2001 the proportion reported as Christian stood at 71.7%, while the proportion reported as no religion stood at 14.8%.)

Headline comparison

While the key trends in England and Wales were in the same direction, they were stronger in Wales than in England:

- Wales had a greater decrease in people reporting their religion as 'Christian', from 57.6% in 2011 to 43.6% in 2021, a decrease of 14.0%, compared with a decrease of 13.1% for England (from 59.4% to 46.3%).
- Wales had a greater increase in people reporting as 'no religion' from 32.1% in 2011 to 46.5% in 2021, an increase of 14.5%, compared with an increase of 12.0% for England (from 24.7% to 36.7%).

In other words, while the largest group in England and Wales combined remained as 'Christian' at 46.2%, the largest group in Wales was now 'no religion' at 46.5%.

Key questions

These headline statistics, however, may raise more questions than they seem to answer. The key issues that we now need to explore are:

1. What counts as religion in the census?
2. What are the shortcomings with the religion question in the census?
3. How are we to interpret the 'no religion' responses?
4. Why is a religion question about affiliation of public benefit?

What counts as religion in the census?

A question about religion was introduced into the census in England and Wales for the first time in 2001, and not without a great deal of controversy (see Sherif, 2011). It was introduced because it was becoming increasingly obvious that religion remained a key component of social identity. It was not possible to map social inequalities without taking religion into account. It was controversial because religion is a complex issue, and

some would argue that it is a highly personal issue into which the state has no right to enquire.

The core point to recognise is that the religion question in the census is a question about *religious affiliation*. The Office for National Statistics (2022) defines religious affiliation as the religion with which people identify, rather than their beliefs or practices. In this sense religious affiliation is conceptualised *as part of social identity*, like age, sex and ethnicity. Religious affiliation is a matter of public and social concern and is of relevance to creating fair and equitable societies – just as much as age, sex and ethnicity. The ethnicity question was introduced to the census for England and Wales for the first time in 1991, and it was in part the introduction of the ethnicity question that prompted minority groups to press for the inclusion of the religious question. For some, religious identity was felt as more important than ethnic identity in shaping who they really are and what really matters to them.

By contrast, religious belief and religious practice belong to the personal and private domain. They are also crucial in shaping personal identity. But, like political belief and political practice, people can properly request that they be protected from some forms of public scrutiny.

Social scientists have long recognised that religious affiliation is a poor proxy measure for religious belief and religious practice. It is totally reasonable for people to claim their social identity as Christian without engaging in religious practice (for example church attendance) and without holding religious beliefs (for example belief in God). At the same time, it is totally reasonable for people to claim affiliation with no religion and yet engage in religious practices (for example prayer) and hold religious beliefs (for example belief in God). These are crucial points to keep in mind when interpreting statistical output from the census.

What are the shortcomings with the religion question in the census?

There are six immediate puzzles posed by the religion question in the census. Why is the religion question voluntary? Why is the same question not asked in Scotland and Northern Ireland? Why is the list of religions limited to six? Why are Christian denominations not differentiated? What about world-views? How are we to interpret the write-in responses?

The voluntary question

A number of attempts were made to frustrate the introduction of a religion question into the 2001 census. Among these attempts was the suggestion that the 1920 census act specifically precluded asking about religious affiliation. The Act made provision for questions about the ‘social and civil condition’ of the population. The legislation branch of the Office for National Statistics advised that neither ‘civil’ not ‘social’ encompass the notion of religion. Specifically, ‘civil’ is defined as ‘secular’ or ‘non-ecclesiastical’ and ‘social’ applies ‘more to earthly than heavenly things’ (see further Francis, 2003, p. 49). Following a concerted campaign by faith communities, the government took the option of amending primary legislation in order to ensure the legality of including the religion question in the 2001 census. Marking the question voluntary seemed to be a way of side-stepping further controversy (or of wrecking the usefulness of the data).

What about Northern Ireland and Scotland?

The simple answer is that the Office for

National Statistics carries responsibility for England and Wales, while responsibility for Northern Ireland and for Scotland comes under two further separate jurisdictions: the National Records of Scotland and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. The religion question has been long-established in Northern Ireland and offers a close differentiation of Christian denomination. The religion question was introduced to Scotland at the same time as to England and Wales (2001) and differentiated among three Christian streams: Church of Scotland, Roman Catholic and 'other Christian, please write in below'.

Why limited to six religions?

The Religious Affiliation Subgroup that organised the case for the inclusion of the religious question in 2001 included voices from across a number of faith traditions. In particular, the case was advanced for including nine traditions (involving the addition of Baha'i', Jainism and Zoroastrianism). In the event, the case was won by the argument to save space on the census form. The problem, however, remains that faiths not listed on the census form may be under counted, since open text responses may be less easy for some participants.

Why not subdivide Christian denominations?

The Religious Affiliation Subgroup advanced six arguments as to why it would be a mistake *not* to subdivide the Christian category (as happens in Northern Ireland and in Scotland). Key among these reasons concerns the different lifestyle choices that are firmly encased within residual Christian affiliation (see Francis, 2003, p. 53). Thus, the social values of non-practising Catholics and of non-practising Baptists may be quite different, for example in respect of abortion and of alcohol consumption. The case for the subdivision of the Christian category was well supported by the Muslim community (although they did not seek subdivision for Muslims) but was not well appreciated by the Christian community.

What about world-views?

The religious question in the census has been criticised by some pressure groups for not reaching beyond religions to include other non-religious belief systems and world-views, including humanism and atheism. These pressure groups have overlooked the specific and precise remit of a religion question concerned with religious affiliation. Religious affiliation has earned its place within the census precisely because it is not a measure of religious belief.

When it comes to the study of belief (rather than affiliation) it is here that the canvas has to be extended to embrace other non-religious belief systems and world-views. Those interested in including such issues in the census need to campaign for a world-views belief question *alongside* the religious affiliation question. Separate questions are needed to deal with separate issues. It would be a mistake to confuse categories and to try to deal with affiliation and belief in the same question. However, putting side-by-side a religious affiliation question and a world-views belief question in the census would really expand our understanding of British society.

How are we to interpret the write-in responses?

0.7% of the overall population in England and Wales chose to write in a response to the 'Any other religion' option. The main religions recorded were:

- Pagan (74,000)
- Alevi (26,000)
- Jain (25,000)
- Wicca (13,000)
- Ravidassia (10,000)
- Shamanism (8,000)
- Rastafarian (6,000)
- Zoroastrian (4,000)

The Office for National Statistics chose to comment on just one of these groups and noted an increase in those identifying with Shamanism from 650 in 2011 to 8,000 in 2021. No mention is made, however, of the 390,127 people who self-identified as Jedi in the 2001 census for England and Wales. This category seems to have disappeared entirely from the 2021 census.

Others chose to write in what the Office for National Statistics describe as 'a non-religious group'. The largest numbers here were:

- Agnostic (32,000)
- Atheist (14,000)
- Humanist (10,000)

How are we to interpret the 'no religion' response?

The census itself can offer no clear insights into the interpretation of the 'no religion' response. Helpfully a quantitative survey of 5,153 UK adults conducted by YouGov on behalf of Theos and The Faraday Institute for Science and Religion between 5 May and 13 June 2021, a month or so after the census, was designed to illuminate this question. The results of this survey are presented in the report *The nones: Who are they and what do they believe?* by Waite (2022).

This report identified three distinctive types or clusters of people who described themselves as 'no religion', characterising these three types as:

- *campaigning nones*, people who are self-consciously atheistic and hostile to religion;
- *tolerant nones*, people who are broadly atheistic but accepting of (and sometimes warm towards) religion;
- *spiritual nones*, people who are characterised by a range of spiritual beliefs and practices.

The analysis suggests roughly equal numbers within each of these three types: campaigning nones (34%), tolerant nones (35%) and spiritual nones (32%).

Why is a religion question about affiliation of public benefit?

Two criteria were set out by the Office for National Statistics for including a question in the census. The Indicative Business Plan advanced by the Religious Affiliation Subgroup demonstrated how the religion question met both criteria (see Francis, 2003, pp. 51-52).

The first criterion was 'information that is required in order to implement or comply with legislation'. An obvious example of such legislation was identified in section 11 of the Education Reform Act 1988 (as amended by the Education Act 1993).

The second criterion was information which 'would result in a benefit to the nation'. The religion question met this criterion in two ways. First, scientific research in areas (for example) of psychology, sociology, gerontology and health care point to the importance of religious indicators for predicting a range of practical outcomes, including: the different pattern of social support required by the religious elderly, the speedier recovery rate from certain illnesses among some religious subjects, the different patterns of substance abuse among religious teenagers. In other words, knowing about the distribution of

religion within society could promote the more effective targeting of resources and indicate the presence of fresh partners in provision.

Second, religious communities are themselves major providers of a range of services in the community. Some of these services are comparatively overt, as for example the role of religious communities in the provision of sheltered accommodation for the elderly and in hospice care. Other services are comparatively covert, as for example the role of religious motivation in prompting voluntary community services in areas like the provision of informal caring networks. In other words, knowing about the changing distribution of religions in society could help predict movements in the availability and provision of voluntary initiatives, with consequent implications for the provision of statutory services.

Glossary

Proxy measure: an approximation.[1]

Internet links

Official data and analysis on religion from the 2021 Census:

https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/religioninenglandandwales2011/2012-12-11

https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021

https://www.gov.wales/ethnic-group-national-identity-language-and-religion-wales-census-2021-html

[1] Religion is a complex construct for which social scientists need to find accessible indicators. Behavioural measures like religious attendance and prayer can provide helpful indication of individual differences in religiosity. In this sense, by comparison, religious affiliation is a poor proxy measure for religiosity. The correlations between religious affiliation and either attendance or prayer tend to be low.

Discussion points

1. What do you see to be the public and social significance of the decline in religious affiliation as Christian between 2011 and 2021?
2. What do you see to be the public and social significance of the rise in 'no religion' between 2011 and 2021?
3. How strong is the case for the religion question in the 2031 census?
4. Would you support a question on world-view beliefs in the 2031 census? Why or why not?

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