

# Christianity

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Introduction.....</b>                           | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>Beliefs, Teachings, Wisdom, Authority .....</b> | <b>2</b>  |
| Basic Beliefs .....                                | 2         |
| Scriptures.....                                    | 2         |
| Revelation.....                                    | 3         |
| The Nicene Creed .....                             | 3         |
| Sources of Authority .....                         | 3         |
| Founders & Exemplars.....                          | 4         |
| Vision & Salvation.....                            | 5         |
| <b>Ways of Living.....</b>                         | <b>5</b>  |
| Guidance for Life .....                            | 5         |
| Religious Practice.....                            | 6         |
| The Scriptures.....                                | 6         |
| The Journey of Life.....                           | 7         |
| Holy Days and Celebrations.....                    | 7         |
| <b>Ways of Expressing Meaning.....</b>             | <b>8</b>  |
| Stories of Faith.....                              | 8         |
| Symbols of Faith .....                             | 9         |
| Art & Architecture .....                           | 10        |
| Expression & Worship.....                          | 10        |
| The Kingdom of God .....                           | 11        |
| Pilgrimage .....                                   | 11        |
| <b>Identity, Diversity and Belonging .....</b>     | <b>12</b> |
| Responsibility, Belonging & Community.....         | 12        |
| Religious / Spiritual Identity .....               | 12        |
| Foundations of Identity .....                      | 13        |
| Family and Community.....                          | 13        |
| Christian Diversity.....                           | 14        |
| <b>Meaning, Purpose and Truth.....</b>             | <b>15</b> |
| Religious Experience .....                         | 15        |
| Answers to Ultimate Questions.....                 | 16        |
| Religion and Science .....                         | 16        |
| <b>Values and Commitments .....</b>                | <b>17</b> |
| Rules & Ethical Guidelines .....                   | 17        |
| Moral Exemplars.....                               | 18        |
| Individual & Social Responsibility .....           | 18        |
| The Environment .....                              | 19        |
| Ethical Decision Making.....                       | 19        |
| <b>Websites.....</b>                               | <b>20</b> |
| <b>Bibliography .....</b>                          | <b>21</b> |

# Introduction

The Christian faith is founded upon the life, death, resurrection and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth who was born about two thousand years ago in Palestine. Christianity is a worldwide religion with over 2,000 million adherents. This is about 32% of the world's population.

The resources contained in the list of subjects to the right are a basic introduction to the facts and beliefs of Christianity. They are a portal or window into the world of Christianity and by following the websites and bibliographies, an enquirer may discover more about this faith.

The six units are based on the QCA non-statutory framework for Religious Education and the Areas of Enquiry. They provide not only a comprehensive guide to the factual and belief structures of Christianity but also address the issues that Christianity encounters as it engages with the 21st century.

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## Beliefs, Teachings, Wisdom, Authority

Interpreting teachings, sources, authorities and ways of life in order to understand religions and beliefs;

Understanding and responding critically to beliefs and attitudes.

## Basic Beliefs

Christianity is a monotheistic religion and belongs to the family of religions often referred to as the Abrahamic, or those deriving from the near Middle Eastern countries of Israel, Palestine and Saudi Arabia. It differs from both Judaism and Islam in the manner in which the nature of God has been revealed to humankind. Judaism believes that it is through the Torah, as revealed through Moses and the prophets, that the nature of God and human responsibility is shown. Islam accepts Allah's revelation to Muhammad (pbuh) in the Qur'an. The mediator of revelation in Christianity however, is Jesus Christ who, as Son of God, is one with God the Father and reveals the truth God accordingly. In the Indian traditions, although Hinduism appears polytheistic in practice, it is essentially a belief in one god manifested through many attributes. The Hindu belief in the avatar, or Godhead becoming human, enables direct mediation of revelation to happen. Sikhism again strongly adheres to belief in a personal God.

## Scriptures

The Bible is the single most important source of authority in the Christian tradition. Accepted by most Christian scholars to reflect 'Heilsgeschichte' or 'salvation history' the Bible is an account of the history of Israel and the early church in its exploration of their relationship with God. Through defining acts in the history of Israel and through events and people in this history, the nature of God and the manner in which God interacts with the people of faith is explored through revealed writing.

## Revelation

The Bible tells a story for Christians that discloses the true nature of God and accordingly Jesus Christ, alongside the way in which God's creation should behave in the world. Beginning with a creation story in the Book of Genesis that reflects the inception of a relationship between humans and God, yet culminating in the heavenly vision of the Revelation of St John in the New Testament, that is available for those who have gained reward through participation in the values of the Kingdom. For Christians, the revelations given through Jesus Christ as God incarnate, means that his teachings are the absolute authority. It is considered by many that the limitations inherent in Jesus' human nature must be taken into account, but these teachings have special authority. The Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, has passed on these teachings through tradition, and interpreted them accordingly so that authority also lies in this tradition. For Roman Catholics, such authority of the Church lies with the Pope. For Protestants, preferable authority lies with the Bible guided by individual conscience, directed through the offices of church leaders such as bishops, priests and ministers.

## The Nicene Creed

The central beliefs of Christianity are summed up in the Nicene Creed which is recited each Sunday by Christians of most denominations in their act of worship, usually the Eucharist or Lord's Supper. The Nicene Creed was drawn up in 325CE by the Council of Nicaea in order to defend the orthodox faith from various heresies that had arisen. This Creed is the belief that God is Three-in-One or the Trinity. The core of the Nicene Creed states the acceptance of God as Creator and Father, belief in Jesus as the Son of God, and faith in the Holy Spirit that permeates and reinforces the work of the Church. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. (2 Corinthians 13:14).

The Trinitarian formula is not explicitly stated in the New Testament. However, belief in God as creator and Father runs as a theme throughout the Old and New Testaments. The relationship of Jesus to God, and the definition of Jesus' nature, is further refined from implicit and explicit statements in scripture. Jesus also promised to send his disciples the Holy Spirit to aid them in their work as a church, and as the invisible working hand of God in the present. As a creed, this system of belief has been used in common worship for over one and a half thousand years, and although philosophically and theologically complex, in the sense of belief in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is distilled.

Most denominations of the Christian religion adhere to belief in the Trinity. Accordingly, places of worship are communal and congregational in nature so that the act of worship which Jesus demonstrated at his Last Supper, can be practiced and the words of the Nicene Creed can be recited. As a corollary of this, Christians are expected to follow a spiritual and ethical lifestyle based the life of Jesus, and explained in the scriptural readings given during worship.

The Nicene Creed was developed as a formula to provide a bench-mark of orthodoxy. It is likely that to be classified as a Christian denomination a congregation would need to demonstrate belief in the Trinity. The main Trinitarian denominations are Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian and United Reform Churches. Other denominations of Christianity have arisen but they do not necessarily adhere to a Trinitarian creed.

## Sources of Authority

St. Paul's conversion to Christianity on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1-8) is one of the earliest examples of the impact of the resurrected Jesus on an individual. As Christians believe in God as a personal being, so many believe that God acts within their lives through the mediation of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, the congregations of churches of many millions of Christians throughout history and throughout the world, have sought inspiration from the Holy Spirit, and have believed that such inspiration comes from God to help them.

Leaders in the church are those who have been chosen either by their congregation or selection committee according to certain criteria which demonstrates the persons 'calling'. In the Bible there are many examples of God searching and 'calling' various people for specific jobs, (for example, 1 Samuel 3). These religious roles have served the needs of the religious community and provided a pattern for the Christian Church since New Testament times. All churches select according to the manner in which a person identifies their calling. Priests, Ministers, Bishops, Archbishops and Popes are all selected through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is often known as 'identifying a vocation'.

The Bible is pivotal to the Christian faith. It therefore takes a central position in the church which recognizes this authority. Normally it is placed on a lectern at the east end or front of the church. In all church services readings are taken from it, and sermons are prepared from these readings. Many Christians will have a Bible in their home and will read a daily lesson from it.

Priests in the Church of England and Catholic traditions wear distinctive clothing which shows they are in the service of God. The clerical collar, or 'dog collar' is a visible symbol of their authority given by God and demonstrates the special place they have within their community. Their clothing in worship also signifies this authority, and they are often referred to by special titles such as 'Father', vicar or the Reverend.

Various traditions have practices in worship that denote authority – some Christians genuflect to show obeisance, most kneel for prayer and some kiss icons, as in the Orthodox tradition.

In the UK, the authority of the Church of England is recognized through the legislative power it has. Bishops sit in the House of Lords and thus hold a key to enormous influence. Prayers are said each day in Parliament in the House of Commons and there is a Parliamentary Chaplain. The Archbishop of Canterbury's London residence is opposite the Houses of Parliament and demonstrates the traditional balance of power and authority between church and state. By recognizing the authority of the Church, the state also has church dignitaries present on all state occasions. Even within the media, which is becoming increasingly secularized in the UK, popular television programmes such as Songs of Praise on Sunday, and the daily act of worship or Thought for the Day on national radio, are still popular with both those involved in church worship and those less committed.

The influence of the words of the Pope, and to a lesser extent the Archbishop of Canterbury and other leaders of Christian denominations, is still considerable, and many world leaders look to their church leaders for guidance on ethical, moral and spiritual and sometimes political matters. Many priests and ministers in are often the focus for change within their community. Their high education, experience of public speaking and willingness to express opinions on subjects with authority means many church leaders become the centre of their communities. A number of church leaders are school governors, town councillors, and spokespersons for various local and national charities.

On a political level, politicians know the power, influence and authority Christian pressure groups can exert. In the USA the 'Bible belt' of the southern states of America can and often does, influence the election of the President of the USA. In the UK, politicians are always extremely sensitive to religious issues with political leaders encouraging balanced media coverage of their religious affiliations.

## **Founders & Exemplars**

The life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth have all provided Christians with the template upon which they may base their own lives. In many respects, throughout the last 2000 years, Christians have justified their actions by suggesting that some experience of 'the risen Christ' has awoken in them a desire to follow Jesus' example and attempt to make the world more like the Kingdom of God. On a local level there are always Christians – clergy, church wardens and devoted practitioners of the faith, who follow this principle. However, there are other Christians who have made a significant impact in modern times by their unswerving allegiance to their beliefs and are regarded as 'saintly' in some way. Martin Luther King Jr., Fr. Kolbe, Rosa Parks, Blessed Mother Teresa and Archbishop Desmond Tutu are all examples, having overcome the worst tendencies in human nature. The embracement of the poor, rejection of inequality and acceptance of the value of overcoming hatred, are examples of qualities found in these 'modern saints'.

Stories associated with great Christian leaders inevitably reflect the self-sacrifice that these Christians are willing to endure. Whether it is working in the shadow of fear and continual threat of death as with Martin Luther King Jr., or placing the sick and lonely at the centre of her life, as with Blessed Mother Teresa, it is the commitment to the Christian ideal of love that is the motivating principle for these Christians.

For Christians, Jesus' teaching provided the ideal example for living. Jesus taught by the Golden Rule, 'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you' (Matthew 7:12a). Simply, this places each person in the world on the same level, and the great Christian saints have sought to use this ethical principle for themselves and applied it accordingly.

Equality of people of all races, creeds and kinds, loving kindness in difficult situations, compassion in the face of anger, patience and a belief in a loving God who cares for his world, are all values which reflect the morality many Christians feel they should apply to the world today. It is from individual Christians who uphold these values that Christians take their lead.

Many Christians aspire to the commitment the great Christian leaders have shown. Christians acknowledge that the world is imperfect and that contemporary society is a reflection of this imperfection. William Wilberforce's work for the abolition of the slave trade is a good example of a Christian recognising that slavery should have no place in the Kingdom. Similarly, today's economic and social migrants along with political refugees need to be recipients of Christian concern. Reflecting on the lives of those Christians in past times helps Christians in today's world enrich the work with which they are concerned. By so doing, Christians believe that society can become a more just and equitable place in which to live

## **Vision & Salvation**

The motivation for great Christian leaders however, is not merely a sense of the lack of right and wrong, it is a firm conviction that this is what God wants. It is so deeply held within them, that they are willing themselves to be poor, to be threatened with death, and even suffer death because of what they believe. In the same way that Jesus taught, lived, died and was resurrected, so Christians believe that through this example they will also find 'salvation'.

Christians believe that God wants change for the better for all people, and where there is evil and wrong, it is the light of the message of the gospel that will enable change to happen.

# Ways of Living

Exploring the impact of religions and beliefs on how people live their lives;

Understanding and responding critically to beliefs and attitudes.

## **Guidance for Life**

The sacred text of Christianity is the Bible. The Bible is divided into two sections, the Old and New Testaments. Testament means 'covenant' and so the Old and New Testaments are descriptions of the bond between God and humans, and an explanation of their place in the divine plan. There are 66 chapters (known as 'Books') in the Bible. 39 books in the Old Testament, and 27 in the New Testament.

The Old Testament comprises a 'history' of the relationship between God and the people of Israel from its inception at creation until the time just preceding the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. The Old Testament includes a variety of written styles, including historical narrative, poetry, legend, myth, laws, allegory and symbolism. They are contained in three main sections of the Old Testament – the Law, Prophets and Writings.

The New Testament contains the four Gospels which contain an outline of the life, teaching death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The New Testament also includes descriptions of the early church in Acts of the Apostles, and a series of letters or epistles by St Paul to the early church. These epistles relate to controversies and theological issues of the day, as well as referring to other related tracts and homilies, and ends with the Revelation of St John which is an exploration of eschatological issues.

The Bible commands a central place in the life of the Church and the individual Christian. It provides guidance and inspiration and is regarded as the 'Word of God'. For some Christian denominations, the bible is to be read and understood literally, for others, it is open to interpretation by spiritual leaders.

Passages from the Old and New Testaments will be read during worship as part of a lectionary of readings to ensure that all important parts in the Bible are considered over a period of time. It should be noted that in the UK the importance of the bible within the community can still be seen as witnesses who are Christian are required by law to swear an oath on the Bible during court proceedings.

The Bible is a theological work. It is Heilsgeschichte or 'salvation history' and the many authors and editors of the Bible moulded the text into a description of the way God has worked historically to bring about his plan for humankind. Accordingly, the text will contain complex as well as simple strands but, by unravelling the setting within which the text was written, as well as applying the text to present day situations, a fuller appreciation of the Bible may be gained.

Although the history of the development of the Bible is complex, with the many theological and interpretative stances of its authors and editors having to be considered, Christians nevertheless believe that the inspiration from, and guiding hand of, God enables the truth of the texts to become apparent.

## Religious Practice

Most denominations use a prayer book during worship. A prayer book is a series of liturgy with additional prayers which provides structure and formality to congregational worship. The Church of England or Anglican Communion places a great deal of authority on the Book of Common Prayer, originally prepared by Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), and its succeeding editions. Most churches also use some form of hymn book.

There is a necessary relationship for Christians between belief and action. To profess to be a Christian means professing to act like a Christian and this involves adhering to the Christian ethic of love. In the same way that a person loves another human being and must act upon this love, so a Christian must act upon their beliefs. Thus Jesus' example of service, even unto death, is the template for Christian action. Accordingly, a Christian will consider the best way to follow a vocation by asking God, through prayer, what it is that they should do as a career. Jesus had a lot to say about politics and finance, much of it being both radical and thought provoking.

It has been argued that the Christian ideal would be the institution of the Kingdom of God on earth. i.e. an earthly theocracy where the rule of love is seen in the equality and freedom of all human beings. As this is not apparent in the world today, many Christians see their role as helping to bring about this state. Some Christians, for example in South America, promote the principle of Liberation Theology which believes that Christians should physically fight against poverty, exploitation and lack of human rights. Other Christians choose to enter politics in order to bring about social change. The World Council of Churches, which includes Orthodox, Protestant and Pentecostal churches, is a platform for the churches of the world to talk and work together for a better future. Alongside this, it funds long-term development programmes and promotes dialogue with other faiths.

Christian pro-activity has resulted in all areas of social concern being addressed, from individuals, to society and to those of world concern. Action against suicide, action for urban renewal, health care, support for the aged, action against weapons which kill millions and nuclear weapons are all causes which have been supported by Christians.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was a German pastor and theologian. He was an active participant in the German Resistance movement against Nazism. He was involved in an unsuccessful plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler, was arrested in March 1943, imprisoned and eventually hanged just before the end of the World War II. What is notable about Bonhoeffer's life and writings is his willingness to follow Jesus' example for the good of the world whilst supporting violent action in order to stop the spread of Nazism.

## The Scriptures

Although some Christians interpret the Bible literally, i.e. as a book dictated by God to humans and infallible in all ways, and most Christians accept a divine guidance in the work, most scholars and Christians believe the Bible is best understood with the help of textual, historical and critical analysis.

The Creation stories in the book of Genesis are, for most Christians, seen as 'mythological' in nature, explaining the relationship between God and humans, rather than a literal explanation of the beginning of the cosmos. However, a number of Christians interpret the bible in a literal manner, notably, the current Creationist movement. Much figurative language is found in the Bible. The book of Jonah, the apocalyptic descriptions of Ezekiel, the legendary exaggerations of the histories of Moses, and others, all suggest a deeper meaning is to be found in the text by critical analysis.

Over the past two hundred years, scholars such as Wellhausen, Schweitzer, Bultmann, Dodd and Sanders have contributed to the theological and philosophical understanding of Biblical texts.

## The Journey of Life

John Bunyan (1628-88) author of the 'Pilgrim's Progress' illustrates the Christian life through allegory, portraits of various human lives and the way in which he travels from this world to the next. Like Bunyan, Christians regard life as a journey through which they travel, seeking the right path and making both themselves and others around them better in the process.

As Christians believe life is a gift from God, the birth of a baby is a time of great promise and thanks are given for the start of a new life. Many Christians, but not all, agree with Infant Baptism or christening which brings the new baby into the membership of the church and so starts that child on the path along which Jesus has already gone. The Baptist Church leaves baptism until adolescence so that a person may decide for themselves whether to commit. By the time a child reaches adolescence, Christians hope that they are growing in the faith and are ready to participate more actively in worship.

The central act of worship in many churches is the Eucharist (Mass, Liturgy, Holy Communion, Lord's Supper) and, in order to participate and show commitment, a young person aged about 12 or 13 will take part in a service known as Confirmation. Here, a young Christian takes on the responsibility for his or her own faith and prays that the Holy Spirit will work through them and strengthen their faith.

By the time a young Christian is ready to marry, he or she will believe that marriage is the joining of two people in a faithful and loving relationship. A Christian marriage ceremony takes place in the sight of God and is conducted by an ordained minister or priest. The couple make vows (binding obligations towards each other), rings are exchanged (a sign of the everlasting nature of the vows and the couple's relationship) and prayers are said for the couple and their life together.

Life ends in death for everyone. For Christians however this is not the end. Christians believe that the body dies but the spiritual body will continue in some way, united with God and finding eternal peace. Jesus' resurrection is the assurance of this. At death, Christians may be cremated or buried with a service conducted by a priest or minister who reinforces the message that God's love is stronger than death itself.

Many Christians in the 21st century have a weak image of eschatology, both personal and corporate, and as a consequence, many Christians have an under-developed concept of death and the afterlife. Like the other Abrahamic faiths, Christianity concentrates on the importance of living life for improvement of self and others, in the assurance of gaining everlasting life through death – often explained as Heaven. Most eastern traditions like Hinduism and Theravadin Buddhism have developed concepts of the self and the place of death within a karmic, (good and bad deeds) system.

Life is an opportunity to learn about Christianity and grow into it. Christians also believe that God guides and supports them on this journey, in the same way as a parent looks after a child, and although there will be difficult times and joyful times, Christians have marked these times of transition with celebrations or ceremonies of passing.

Christians believe that throughout their own life they are following in the footsteps of Jesus. He is the example by which Christians should behave. Jesus' example included time of prayer, giving help to the poor and sick. By showing commitment through rites of passage, a Christian is demonstrating their willingness to follow this example within their family, their community and the world as a whole.

## Holy Days and Celebrations

Festival occasions in the main Christian Churches are basically centred around the life of Jesus as portrayed in the gospels. The principle festivals are Christmas which is preceded by Advent, Easter which is preceded by Lent and Passion Week, and Whit Sunday or Pentecost, fifty days after Easter Sunday. Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus, Easter remembers the death and resurrection of Jesus, and Whit marks the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church.

Advent, which means coming, is the period including the four Sundays leading up to Christmas, and is the beginning of the Christian year. During this time Advent and Christmas Carol Services take place. The theme is God's relationship with his son, the messenger of hope, Jesus. Nativity plays based on the theme of Jesus' birth are performed in primary schools and churches.

Christmas is a corruption of the term Christ's Mass and celebrates Jesus' birth. Most churches celebrate this festival on 25th December although Eastern Orthodox Christians prefer 7th January. Many Christians attend a midnight Mass or Christmas day

service, and manger scenes are placed in the church to remind worshippers of Jesus' lowly birth. Christmas is a time for family gatherings and presents are exchanged in remembrance that God gave his son ('a gift') to the world. Many children are told that their presents are brought by Santa Claus, or St Nicholas, the patron saint of children.

Lent reminds Christians of Jesus' temptations during his forty days in the wilderness. It begins on Ash Wednesday when Christians traditionally deny themselves luxuries. The day before Ash Wednesday, called Shrove Tuesday or Pancake Day, was traditionally the day when a feast of pancakes used up the luxuries in the house ready for a period of abstinence. During the last week of Lent, called Passion Week, Palm Sunday, Holy (Maundy Thursday) and Good Friday are especially important days for Christian observance. Palm Sunday celebrates Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem with Palm crosses given out. Maundy Thursday remembers the institution of the Last Supper and in many churches feet are washed by the priest. Good Friday is the day upon which Jesus was crucified. Often there are long services, passion plays or processions. Easter Sunday marks the end of Lent and celebrates the empty tomb and Jesus' resurrection. This is probably the most important day of the year for practicing Christians. Whit Sunday comes 50 days after Easter and marks the time when the gift of the Holy Spirit came to the believers of the early church.

Festivals are important to both individual believers and the faith community as events which mark out the religious and worshipping year. For Christians these are public occasions when the whole community of faith expresses its religious commitment. For individuals it provides an opportunity for learning more deeply about the faith and, through the nativity and Easter stories enable children to be nurtured in the central Christian texts. For many, these festivals have become extremely secularised, but they nevertheless indicate the deep hold they have over people in the United Kingdom.

Central to most Christian festivals is the sharing of worship – whether it is enacting a Nativity Play at Christmas, participating in the Lord's Supper on Easter Sunday or sharing meditations on the Cross on Good Friday, the importance of congregational worship and ritual is paramount to the Christian faith.

Festivals are a distinctive part of all religions and through its festivals Christianity is able to plot a calendar for the religious year. Many churches have a lectionary based around the Christian year in order for the faith community to learn scripture and grow in knowledge of the faith. Festivals hold a public place in the imagination of most people, and for Christianity they bind many – participating Christians, non-active Christians, secularised post-Christians, families and individuals into a community of faith.

## Ways of Expressing Meaning

Appreciating that individuals and cultures express their beliefs and values through many different forms.

### Stories of Faith

The principle stories for Christianity originate in the New Testament, predominantly in the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke (with Acts) and John. The main theological ideas are found in the epistles of St Paul. Christians often refer initially to stories in the gospel of Luke. As these have an implicit universalistic theology, along with references to gentiles and women. Luke also contains the birth narratives, parables, teaching on the Kingdom of God and a succinct account of the events leading up to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Luke's second work, the Acts of the Apostles, completes Luke's theological understanding of the 'Jesus event' through the delayed parousia. A set of Jesus' main teachings and the Lord's Prayer are explained in Matthew's Gospel in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). However, to gain a fuller understanding of the way the early church came to understand Jesus' teaching, the letters of Paul, particularly Romans, require consideration.

These accounts are sacred as they contain the essence of the Christian faith. The relationship of Jesus with God, Jesus' understanding of the way humans can gain access to God through prayer and the means by which unconditional love overcomes death, are all part of the core Christian stories.

Although some Christian events such as the nativity stories have become secularised in the western world, the manner in which they continue to create awe, wonder and commitment in both Christians and non-Christians alike, demonstrates the power these narratives continue to hold.

Stories form a central part in the Christian faith. Children learn the main events in infancy, in the form of picture books and oral tradition. Jesus taught using stories and this tradition has continued through history. Christian values such as treating everyone with respect and helping those around you are introduced through story-telling. While some stories are clearly more popular than others, the central themes remain the same.

Over time, Christian tales have been subject to an increasing degree of elaboration and interpretation. This is due in part to the use of oral tradition. However, it also occurred because of the element the author wished to emphasise for his audience. This accounts for the fact there are four gospels, rather than one. Each of the four gospel writers was using the material before him to mould a theology. It is therefore important for Christians to understand that there are levels of interpretation in the stories which are central to their faith.

A Christian looks towards the teaching of Jesus for inspiration. It is through these teachings, and the stories they are within, that Christians find their 'template for action' and through which their beliefs are channelled.

In a time when literacy was limited it was inevitable that symbolism in art and architecture would develop in order to convey depth and meaning to religious stories. The writers of the Gospels themselves became symbolic characters represented in churches: St Luke as an ox, St Mark a lion, St Matthew a man, St John an eagle. Architecture of churches and cathedrals developed symbolic structure, such as the spire representing a finger pointing heavenward, the footprint of the cathedral based on the cross and the altar a place of sacrifice as well as a table for eating the Lord's meal. Symbolism permeates all aspects of religious life, from words and phrases through to buildings. Even clothing worn by clergy, the materials used in making vestments and chalices, altar cloths and stained glass windows are enhanced by the symbolic themes accorded them.

## **Symbols of Faith**

Religious symbolism permeates all aspects of the religious life. For Christians, symbolism is in use in devotional practice such as genuflection or 'crossing', in acts of worship in the liturgy, even in the architectural design of the building, the church, chapel or cathedral. Christian symbolism is implicitly apparent in the art of stained glass windows, the poetry of hymns, the music of an oratorio. Today Christians often wear symbols as personal reminders or as a public witness of their faith. Most popular symbols include the cross and the fish.

Symbolism enables both Christians and the secular world to recognise the presence of Christianity in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. Whether this is by an individual who chooses to wear a cross around his or her neck, a fish placed on the boot of the car, the dominant symbolic presence of a parish church or the distinctive clothing of the clergy, all these things aid the easy identification of a Christian presence.

The cross is the principle symbol by which Christianity is now recognised. It reflects the central belief of the sacrifice and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Over time, the cross has been altered by different denominations to reflect their own traditions. However, it is likely that the earliest Christian symbol (dating from the 2nd century CE) was in fact, the fish, derived from the acrostic ICHTHUS in Greek meaning 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour'.

Other symbols are visible through literature. Tolkien's 'Lord of the Rings' and CS Lewis' 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' are explicit in their use of symbolism to convey the Christian message of salvation. Many other writers, such as Evelyn Waugh, use implicit symbolism. This is a common pattern in all areas of art, music and literature. Study of the nature of symbolism enables the reader to gain new insights into the Christian faith.

The language of devotions in worship and theology often carries a meaning of a symbolic rather than a literal nature. This is most apparent, for many Christians, in the rich language of the Eucharist. A priest in the Anglican tradition says, 'Take eat, this is my body' and 'Drink you all of this, for this is my blood' not in a literal sense but in a mystical way, affirming the life-changing nature of the Kingdom of God which is seen in the body of the church.

Symbolism is therefore a useful tool that allows a Christian to gain insights and understanding into their faith which is a mystery. In many respects, symbolism is a concrete and picturesque manifestation of belief, and provides a useful structure around which belief can be hung for expressing that which cannot fully be expressed in everyday language.

When a Christian bows before the cross, or kneels in the pew for prayer, or genuflects at the blessing, or holds his or her hands up to receive the blessing of the Holy Spirit, symbolic expressions of belief are being made, and the direct relationship between belief, expression and action are formed indicating belief in an all-powerful God who is Trinity and who sends blessings on His children.

## **Art & Architecture**

Francis Bacon in modern times is recognised as one of the greatest of all modern religious artists expressing the angst, alienation and yet desire that humans have for the love of God. Throughout the last two thousand years artists, musicians, composers, have used symbolic representation in their works to express stories from the scriptures, or aspects of God and his creation.

The symbolic aspects of artefacts and the architecture of a building for Christians of all denominations reflect their belief about their faith. Christians would maintain that the beauty and grandeur of a church or a cathedral has the ability to create a sense of wonder or awe. Alongside the worship these places encourage community, commitment to the faith can be strengthened and a sense of the closeness of God, as Creator and Father, can be heightened. Thus a sense of God's presence, of sanctity and prayer is often associated with such a place of worship.

The architecture of a church is influenced by the beliefs of Christians. It is often shaped as a cross from an aerial perspective, and has high spires and arches which reach up to heaven. Since the altar is symbolic of the death of Jesus, and the table for the central act of worship is found at the front of the church, so therefore the pews must face in that direction. Christians believe that to pray on their knees is important as a sign of respect, so pews have kneelers to make this more convenient.

Church buildings such as King's College in Cambridge or St Paul's Cathedral in London are symbolic of the heavenly majesty of God who dwells therein. Stained glass created by Burne-Jones, tapestry by Sutherland, reflect a symbolism that encourages the Christian to look more deeply at the story of the image as well as to look more deeply at the impact it has upon them.

In the Church of England or Anglican community, churches can be found in all parishes in the country. Roman Catholic churches are fewer in number in the UK but also have traditional boundaries. A church is a 'sacred space' where God is worshipped and where, it is believed, God comes closer to humans and humans are able to come closer to God. The main function of a church is thus to offer prayer to God, through the example of Jesus Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit. The church is the main place of worship for the Christian community. The traditional plan for a church is the nave for the congregation, the chancel where the priest officiates, and the sanctuary which contains the altar. Within the church are numerous artefacts and symbols that aid worship, devotions and practice. The font, the altar, the crucifix and cross, candles, stained glass windows, pulpit and lectern, all have symbolic and practical uses.

A chapel is a place of worship in the Christian tradition belonging to non-conformist groups such as the Methodist Church, the United Reformed Church, and the Baptist Church (the word is also used for individual parts of larger churches). Most non-conformist chapels are less ornate but have similar features and artefacts to a parish church, although they often place more emphasis on the pulpit and the preaching of God's Word.

A Cathedral is the central church of a diocese which is the 'Seat' of the bishop. There are 42 dioceses in England, each having a cathedral in the main town or city of the diocese.

## **Expression & Worship**

Christian worship is 'congregational'. It developed out of Jewish worship practice which had been congregational for centuries. Alongside this, by suggesting in Matthew 18:20, (For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.) Jesus lays down a pattern for corporate worship. Sunday is also the traditional day of corporate worship for Christians. This is a remembrance that Jesus is believed by Christians to have risen from the dead on a Sunday. It is also likely that Sunday took great importance in the early church in order to distinguish it from Jewish practice of worship on the Sabbath (Friday evening/Saturday).

Traditional Anglican or Church of England practice was to have two or three services on a Sunday. These were Morning Prayer, Matins and Evensong. These services included prayers, hymns, readings from the Bible, Collects and a sermon. In recent

years, Matins has often been replaced by a 'Eucharistic' form of service. In these services, the priest leads a form of worship based on the Last Supper that Jesus had with his disciples often called a sacramental service, which Roman Catholics call Mass, the Orthodox call it the Liturgy, Anglicans call it the Eucharist, and non-conformists call it the Lord's Supper. Here, bread and wine is blessed and the congregation participate. These services normally start about 10am on a Sunday and last about an hour in total.

Non-conformist services tend to be based on the 'Word' rather than on the sacrament and so the place of the Bible and the preaching of the minister takes greater place. Hymns, anthems and popular music are often more central.

Worship is an act of devotion to God. It can be expressed through prayer, music, song, quiet and contemplation, even service. Worship recognizes that God can be communicated with and that he will respond accordingly. Institutional and congregational worship is normally associated with a church where worship is part of the learning process of the community of faith. Through activity, support and shared experiences in worship, a member of the Christian faith gains in understanding of their faith. Christians also pray alone and Jesus' injunction about prayer, 'But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.' (Matthew 6:6) suggests that individual prayer is a very important complement to congregational worship.

## **The Kingdom of God**

The community of faith is dependent upon the support of its members. It is a truism to say that a church is not just the building but the people who congregate within it. Church members are the earthly embodiment of the 'Kingdom of God' and hope to act according to the rules which stand in the kingdom – that of unconditional love as embodied in the life, teaching, work, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The importance of a church building to the community as a whole is to provide a physical symbol of the presence of Christianity within that community. The parish church in any community provides a natural contact with the rites of passage, of baptism, marriage and death that many people who would not normally attend church for Sunday worship, still participate in. For Christians, their church provides opportunities not only for worship, but also opportunities to learn about their faith through Bible, prayer and discussion groups. Church groups also meet for social occasions, and mission activities that might take them out into the community. Such activities might provide support and facilities for disadvantaged groups like single mothers, older people and the unemployed. The church is therefore an important part of the social fabric of any community and the Cathedral is significant in importance for confirmations, ordinations and civic events.

## **Pilgrimage**

The main Christian places of pilgrimage include Jerusalem and Bethlehem in the Holy Land, Rome in Italy; Lourdes in France; Santiago de Compostella in Spain; Knock in Ireland; Walsingham and Canterbury in England. In the days before cars, planes and other comfortable transport, a person of faith would have to walk or go by horse, and people who have done long pilgrimages to Santiago by foot, suggest that it is a wonderfully up lifting and spiritually worthwhile effort to walk the hundreds of kilometres necessary to gain the 'compostella' or certificate which confirms that the pilgrimage is completed.

There is also the concept of 'walking in the shoes' of the founder and many Christians view the idea of going where their founder Jesus went; to see the sights he saw, to feel the history and country in which he grew up, taught, died and was risen, to be an educationally and spiritually uplifting experience.

Christians of some denominations, for example Catholics, believe also that pilgrimages to historical places of interest such as the Vatican in Italy in order to see the Pope to be especially beneficial and a sign of devotion to the faith. Alongside this, Catholics also believe that God intervenes on behalf of his people through certain saints in order to be able not only to heal spiritual wounds that pilgrimage helps to cure, but also physical wounds and hurt. At Lourdes in France, many thousands of disabled people visit the grottos hoping for healings, and other similar sites can be found elsewhere.

Christians might also argue, that life itself is a pilgrimage and by doing good, being faithful and helping the world be a better place, then that is what God is wanting Christians to do. This is of course important, and there is no getting away from the fact that a real pilgrimage, with other pilgrims, helps a person understand their faith and helps them in their own spiritual journey.

# Identity, Diversity and Belonging

Understanding how individuals develop a sense of identity and belonging through faith or belief;

Exploring the variety, difference and relationships that exist within and between religions, values and beliefs.

## Responsibility, Belonging & Community

St Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12:27-28 'Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.' Being a Christian therefore means belonging to a community God has ordained, to behave, act and work in a certain way. Paul gives guidance in his letters to new churches and their members about behaviour and much, although not all of it, is appropriate today. In the short letter of James, a Christian is expected 'to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger'. Therefore, much guidance for Christian action today is to be found in the New Testament. Regular worship, right behaviour and correct manner of earning a living are all means by which the Christian life is defined and recognised.

Christians are inevitably to be found in all walks of life. Christian commitment can be variable but many Christians are found in church work, in nursing and health, in teaching and other work which is considered 'vocational'. This is specific work which a person feels God is calling them to do. This does not exclude a person from working in the armed forces, although some Christians such as Quakers (Religious Society of Friends) are pacifists. There are many army chaplains who serve the needs of all soldiers whether Christian or not.

A Christian might explain their vocation as feeling 'at home' in what they are doing, or content doing the work of God. Local, community and national figures all express this feeling and belief.

## Religious / Spiritual Identity

Belonging provides identity. Christians are not identified by the way in which they dress because Christianity and the culture of the UK are so interwoven. Christians however are recognisable by the way in which they behave and act, and believe. Belonging to a Christian community, means an individual can share worship, fellowship and a set of beliefs that provides the individual with a way to interact with others. Through witness to the faith, a Christian is demonstrating what they hold to be the truthfulness of the gospel message of unconditional love, and the hope that this will be recognised accordingly. Blessed Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King Jr. are two such examples.

A Christian is a person who commits him or herself to a belief in God as father, to Jesus as his son, and to the working of the Holy Spirit through the body of the church. Thus people who commit themselves to these beliefs will act in accordance with them, and pray to God as father in the hope that God will hear these prayers as a father listens to the entreaties of his children, act in a manner acceptable to Jesus as his own life demonstrated, and apply themselves to the bringing about of the Kingdom of God through the working through body of the church. To be a Christian implies communal or congregational worship alongside individual devotions, as well as to live according to Jesus' principles of unselfish love.

Christian commitment is demonstrated through certain ceremonies or rites of passage. A Christian will normally attend a place of worship, either a church or a chapel, regularly to pray and meet others of a similar persuasion or denomination, at a specific time. A Christian will be baptised or Christened in order to show publicly that commitment. Christians would also normally desire to marry in a church as well as to request burial with a Christian service. Commitment involves giving time to help the church in some way. This might mean being a server in a service, reading prayers, being a church warden or serving on church committees. It might mean singing in a choir, providing flowers for the church, or it could even mean investigating becoming a full-time church worker or ordained minister. A financial commitment is also expected and although tithing is no longer expected in today's church, a Christian may provide an informal financial agreement with their church.

Unlike other faith groups, Christians are not always recognisable by the clothes or ornamentation they wear. The only exceptions to this are the clergy, who often wear a clerical collar while working and the religious who may wear particular habits.

Christians prefer to be recognizable by their actions. Publicly this would mean attendance at church with daily conduct, both visible and spiritual, based on the teaching of Jesus.

## Foundations of Identity

A Christian moral code is based on Jesus' teaching to 'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you' (Matthew 7:12a). Jesus himself based this on the principle of Loving God and loving humans (Luke and the Good Samaritan). Many Christians use the definitions of the 10 Commandments (Exodus 20) to help them understand concrete ethical situations.

A Christian life requires a 'leap of faith' which entails trusting God. Through prayer and a belief in the efficacy of prayer, a Christian hopes to come to an understanding of the way their life can become God-centred and thus, meaningful.

Christians, particularly in the post-modern world of contemporary UK, have developed many directions for an expression of their spirituality. Devotional practices developed at Taizé and Iona have shown the way that Christians can find individual and corporate expressions that suit all spiritual needs.

In the book of Jeremiah in the Old Testament, God informs Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you" (Jeremiah 1:5a). This has led Christians to believe that God has a special plan for each individual, that each individual is special to God and is uniquely different from any other human. With this uniqueness of physical properties and mental processes, is the attribute of a soul (however defined, but usually attributed to the breath or ruach of God breathed into the first man). Throughout the Old and New Testaments, God is spoken of as a personal being (cf. Moses and the Burning Bush, Jesus and his baptism) with whom it is possible to communicate in various ways. As humans are also personal beings, with personalities and the ability to communicate, so then they can communicate with God, as the creator of life and the father of humanity.

The family is the bedrock of society in the Old and New Testaments. The New Testament does not say if Jesus had a relationship which led to marriage and it is possible that Jesus, knowing the sort of danger his mission might take him into, decided upon a celibate life. Although unusual in Jewish families, it was not unique, as Jews were prepared to take a Nazarene vow which involved celibacy, and John the Baptist might have had a similar rationale. However, the moral individual in the family, and the family within society is central to the stability and uniformity of society. Equally the stability of society reflects back upon the family. Christianity has held the family in the highest regard and the ideal and love of the holy family as seen in Nativity Plays is symptomatic of this. The ideal of marriage, of bringing love to children, and the way the relationship between parents and children reflects the relationship between God and his creation, is an ideal promoted in all churches.

Christianity thus uses the model of body-mind-soul to bring out the relationship that God has established with his creation, and Christians believe that the individual is able to establish such a relationship with a living God, as well as establish a relationship with societies with whom a relationship is built.

The Old Testament is a pragmatic work and although written and edited by many authors, concentrates on life in the 'here and now', rather than dwelling on the life hereafter. Consequently there are very few references to an afterlife in the Old Testament (witch of Endor, Sheol) in order to concentrate on the relationship Israel has with God in historical time. In the New Testament, Paul does mention the spirit, or soul, but again, there is a greater emphasis on life as it is, rather than life as it will be. It is assumed that the life lived in accordance with the teaching of Jesus will lead to the heavenly kingdom, but Jesus' teachings on this are ambivalent, and most commentators play down an imminent parousia, as did the early church. Therefore, Christians should be more concerned with making Jesus' teaching relevant to this life rather than worrying too much about what happens in the next.

## Family and Community

Christianity is a family-centred religion. Jesus' mother, Mary, is mentioned in the birth and death stories of Jesus and his earthly father Joseph has a key place in the birth stories. Jesus' concept of God is based on a very familiar relationship of that between a father and his son, and Jesus uses the term 'abba', the diminutive form of 'father' and meaning 'daddy', to express how close that relationship with God can be. Jesus was a Jew and for Judaism the family unit was the core of the community and society. It is hardly surprising then that the family unit is extremely important in Christian life. The rituals of bringing children into the faith, through familiarity with festivals such as Christmas and Easter, and celebrations such as baptism, are extremely important

introductions to the beliefs and practices of the faith. However, family commitment is also seen through regular church attendance, through family grace at meals, reading the bible at home and praying at bedtime. A Christian family might also support charity, either financially or with a time commitment, either at home or in developing countries.

Christianity is the historical religion of the UK and the evidence for this can be found in all dioceses and parishes in the country. Many parishes in both rural and urban settings have their own church and with it a priest or vicar. Outreach community workers are found based within most Christian churches, regardless of denomination. The parish church has a committee called a Parochial Church Council whose primary function is to support the vicar to ensure worship is regular the church is well maintained. Similar duties are undertaken by denominations. However, the church in the community will also want to reach out further than to its own congregation. In many rural areas, outreach is through putting on events such as flower festivals and fetes, but also through visiting the old and sick, or providing meals in the church hall. In more urban areas where there might be deprivation, the church has always had a significant place and active support of urban renewal initiatives are commonplace. Church halls become community centres and youth clubs. Younger mothers can meet and chat. Church buildings are renovated to become community facilities. Chad Varah, the founder of the Samaritans, first began his work in a church crypt.

Church members are expected to find their own level of use and commitment. The church considers itself a 'corporate body', based on St Paul's concept of the human body, each member having its own use. Similarly, the church believes it has mission commitments in order to reach out to the community and demonstrate the Christian life. The parish church particularly, but also the Methodist or Baptist chapel, the Catholic church, the Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall are symbols of the influence of Christianity within a community.

Belonging to the family of the church brings with it companionship and a sense of belonging to a local and a worldwide community. Through this network, a Christian believes that part of the Kingdom of God on earth can be realised.

Christians believe that their values and beliefs are best supported through the family unit. From this basis these values can permeate through to the wider community and indeed, society as a whole.

Community cohesion is at its best where all members of that society care for each member. It is the belief of Christians that they must do this. Christian leaders are well aware of the way the UK's religious landscape is changing and of the need to respond to the nature of this change. It is the responsibility of all Christians to accept this roles and when necessary, rise to this challenge.

Jesus is reported in the Gospels to have been called to a special relationship with God – that of a son with his father. The example of Jesus has enabled people of faith to explain their own faith in the light of this relationship and gain inspiration accordingly.

## **Christian Diversity**

Christians have a faith tradition stretching back over 2000 years. Christianity is a worldwide religion with over one billion adherents. In England there are over forty dioceses and over 12,000 parish churches. In all cities in the UK, in all towns and villages, the presence of Christianity is visible in its churches and its celebrations. Although the UK is experiencing the secularization of its religious and Christian institutions, and a reduction in those attending church, over 70% of the population of the UK still profess to be Christian in some way.

Within Christianity there is a huge diversity of belief and practice. There are many denominations worldwide and in the UK ranging from the established Anglican communion of the Church of England, through Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodox, to Baptist and Methodist non-conformists. Often the most heated arguments are those created by members of the same family and the same can be said for Christian denominational arguments. The UK is also home to Christian deviationist groups and sects, of which the Church of Latter Day Saints (or Mormons) and Jehovah's Witnesses are arguably the largest.

In cities, towns and even villages, one can find churches, chapels and halls belonging to various denominations. The ecumenical movement is apparent in areas of the UK with some denominations working together to share resources. However, is more common to find towns with a plethora of different places of Christian worship, meeting at different times, each pursuing different outreach and mission programmes.

Traditionally, the relationship of Christianity with other faith groups has been ambivalent. It is in the nature of most of the main faith traditions to make certain truth claims, which has in some cases, created tension rather than tolerance. However, the Inter-faith network and sympathetic Christian denominations, have worked hard to establish new relationships.

Church of England Schools working in cities with large Muslim, Sikh and Hindu communities create ideal opportunities for cross-cultural and cross-religious dialogue. Teachers of Religious Education in all areas of the country, with many supportive and sympathetic Christian teachers, follow multi-faith syllabi and address the needs of a pluralistic UK.

The UK is a rich mix of religions and cultures and although there are still pockets of the country which are mono-culturally Christian, post-modern spirituality has ensured that even these pockets are now infused with people seeking truth through Buddhism or other alternative routes. The relationship of culture and religion, and of culture and what it means to be a citizen of the UK, is harder to define because of this mix. However, the Christian task is to ensure that the work being done to create a harmonious and dynamic society continues.

## Meaning, Purpose and Truth

Exploring some of the ultimate questions that confront humanity, and responding imaginatively to them;

The ups, downs and meaning(s) of life's journey.

### Religious Experience

In the Bible many references are found to the way humans respond when confronted by God. In Exodus 3:5, Moses is confronted by the vision of the burning bush and from out of the bush the voice of God tells Moses that he is on holy ground. In 1 Kings 19:12, Elijah hears that the voice of God was not in an earthquake but in a still small voice. In Amos 8:2 it is even a basket of fruit that prompts him to see the working hand of God. Paul is stricken down (Acts 9:5), and Jesus has his mission confirmed by a voice from heaven (Luke 3:22). Christians believe that God is alive, personal and able to communicate with them. Mostly this communication is through prayer. Prayer is a form of speaking to God. It can be formal as in a church service, or extempore, as a private prayer. Prayers can be expressions of thanks, of hope, or even petition, asking for something. Christians also believe that God responds. This might be in the still small voice, the silence through which the believer tries to interpret what God wants. It might though be through events that unravel to show that, for the believer, God is working in their lives. As a response to this a Christian will give thanks and praise. Such thanks and praise are often seen in the singing of hymns or anthems in services, the speaking of tongues or glossolalia in charismatic churches, the grand performances of the oratorios of Bach and Mozart. Christian responses to their spiritual feelings are many.

The parish church is one of the few places in a town or village where quiet can be found easily. Often it is a place which has a long history of prayer and so reflects prayerfulness and stillness which can inspire awe and wonder. It can be a place, for Christians and those who are not familiar with church, to express their concerns and worries and find solace. In a church each Sunday, and on other days, prayers are offered for the well-being of the community, and the parish priest each day offers prayers at his daily office, which often he or she might say alone.

Although the wider community might not be aware of these offerings of prayers, they are said to allow God's influence to work through the people in the community. Some churches have house groups and prayer groups that meet to pray and help in the community, with older people, the disadvantaged, young people – all in response to their feelings of gratitude to God for what they have gained in this life.

Many Christians claim to have had religious experiences. These range from the mundane to the extraordinary and include experiences of guidance in making decisions, help with practical situations, and healing of physical and mental distress.. A great deal of research has been undertaken into this area of religious psychology and the Alistair Hardy Archive of Religious Experience at the University of Wales, Lampeter contains about 6000 accounts of first-hand religious experiences from individuals in many countries and of many religions. These are catalogued, with summaries of each account entered on the Archive's database; It also houses the papers of Sir Alistair Hardy FRS (1896-1985) relating to the foundation of the Religious Experience Research Centre in 1969; the archives of the Centre since 1969; an audio archive including lectures given by members of the Centre; a small video archive, including lectures, interviews and programmes made for Channel 4; and a library

of about 2000 volumes, many of them copies formerly owned by Sir Alister Hardy with his inscription, annotations and inserted letters and cuttings. The research potential of this collection for those working in the field of Religious Experience and major world faith traditions is being increasingly recognised and demonstrates the seriousness which this area of study is taken by scholars.

One finding that often comes out of the religious / spiritual experience is that it is life changing for most people. There are many examples of people in modern times who have had these life changing experiences such as Nicki Cruz, who decide to devote themselves to good causes.

## Answers to Ultimate Questions

For a Christian, as with any human being, the ultimate questions facing a person are to do with meaning. What is this all about? Why is existence like this? Is there more to life than what I see and perceive? Is there a God? If there is a God, what is he, she or it like? Does God communicate with human beings? If God is so good, why does he allow suffering? How did the universe come into being? Similarly, but at the other end of the scale, why am I like I am?

Because humans are self-conscious and reflective beings, they are in a position to ask questions of an ultimate nature. The answers to these questions might not be easily apparent, but as the Psalmist, in an attempt to prompt an examination of the nature of God, says, 'Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God."' (Psalm 14:1). Humans encounter awe, transcendence, otherness, and religious experiences however defined, and have sought a means by which they can express these feelings. Often it is in figurative expression such as that seen in the book of Ezekiel, but the Alister Hardy Archive of Religious Experience at Lampeter, University of Wales contains about 6000 accounts of first-hand religious experiences from individuals in many countries and of many religions. The research potential of this collection for those working in the field of religious experience and major world faith traditions is being increasingly recognised.

For Christians, the nature of the self is more than the 'body-mind' model i.e. physical and mental processes. For believers, the nature of self is seen in the model 'body-mind-soul' i.e. in addition to body and mind, physical and mental processes, there is a third element, which tends to be referred to as 'soul'. It is to this that the other two elements belong, and is that part of the person which is real and has communion with God.

An experience of transcendence and awe, an experience that some might refer to as religious, might certainly lead a person to have faith in the reality of God. An experience might be as dramatic St Paul experienced on the Damascus Road, or much smaller associated with seeing a sunset over the sea, or the quiet experienced in a chapel or church. The Bible has many ways of describing how God calls people – Samuel's calling is particularly vivid – and this attempts to show that God, has a purpose for each of his creation.

The greatest yet hardest ultimate question a Christian faces is that if God is good and loving and has purpose for his creation, why does he allow suffering, and why does suffering often occur to those who do not deserve it? It is a question not easy to avoid and all Christians have to endure such probing questions without resorting to the stock answer of the mystery of faith. Job, in the Old Testament was confronted with undeserved suffering, and answered the question by suggesting that God alone knows why this happens. Jesus however, puts undeserved suffering onto a human scale and into human life. It exists and Christians must not only live with it but help to alleviate it, ultimately placing themselves in the position of those who suffer most.

## Religion and Science

Both religion and science are concerned in some way with how people can know what is real, what is true. Christianity makes certain claims about, for instance, the nature of God, and his 'miraculous' involvement in the world, and science makes other claims that either contradict the claims of Christianity or even denies that they exist. One of the great debates of the present age involves issues of controversy between science and religion and science and Christianity, in order to see whether there is a position where both can co-exist, or even grow from each other.

The controversy between science and Christianity began in earnest in the 19th century with significant discoveries in geology and then biology. Geologists began to establish that the world in which we live was many millions of years old and could not be just 4000 years old as suggested in the Bible. Charles Darwin then published his 'On the origins of species' which established that humans had evolved over many hundreds of centuries, and had not been placed intact into the Garden of Eden merely

thousands of years previously. What these two discoveries established was that the claims made in the Bible which people took to be literally true, were in fact incorrect from a scientific point of view. People therefore asked, if these claims are incorrect, how much more of the Bible is incorrect – including the central claims of Christianity?

It has been the task of modern scientists and Christian thinkers to tackle this issue. Some fundamentalist Christians refuse to accept the findings of science, and although still a powerful body in some churches, are viewed as extreme. Other, more moderate, Christians however, accept that scientific findings have demonstrated a need to re-interpret the Bible and that the claims made about the world and God are written in a language exclusive to religion. To interpret this language scientifically is therefore viewed as about as similar as trying to play football with a table tennis bat.

Religious belief requires a 'leap of faith' at some point in the thinking and perception of the believer. In the same way that an analysis of human emotions such as 'love' can only be fully appreciated only through experience, so science can only lead so far in explaining the nature of faith. Although studies in the sociology and psychology of religion offer scientific explanations of man's need for religion (e.g. Weber, Marx, Freud, Jung), many still feel that a life lived according to faith makes more sense and is more meaningful than a life without it.

Albert Einstein, although sceptical about a personal God, said, 'A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty – it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man'. However, many eminent scientists are deeply devotional and find the co-existence of faith and science is complimentary. It is possible for a scientist to say that the story of creation in Genesis Chapter 1 is a myth relating the relationship between God and humans and still hold that the cosmos was created 14 billion years ago in a Big Bang.

Conflict between scientific discoveries and faith – such as that made by Darwin and Lyle – are due to the conflict between world views upon which so much is invested. Some philosophers have coined the term 'paradigm shift' to explain that humans retain concepts of a by-gone age into the present and this results in an inevitable conflict.

Empirical language, or the language of science, is descriptive and analytical. Religious language is often emotive and poetic. It is important to understand the context within which language is used and apply rules that maintain clarity.

Christianity makes claims that suggest a reality beyond the empirical. Its beliefs about the self include a model of the 'soul'. Christianity also teaches about an after-life, or an eschatology. For Christians there is faith evidence to support this. Although science can attempt to deny them, it can also work to clarify them. That is the important role of science, to work alongside religion to make better sense of what humans talk about and consequently believe.

## Values and Commitments

Understanding how moral values and a sense of obligation can come from beliefs and experience;

Evaluating their own and others' values in order to make informed, rational and imaginative choices.

### Rules & Ethical Guidelines

Christian values are based upon the life and teaching of Jesus. Jesus' moral ethic is summarized in Matthew 7:12a "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you". In the Sermon on the Mount, chapters 5 – 7, a definition of Christian ethics is expounded by Jesus.

Bob Bowie writes – "there is a wide variety of approaches to Christian ethical decision-making. Catholic ethical thinking involves natural moral law, virtue theory and ideas about conscience. Other Christian denominations have various ethical approaches, from the very liberal protestant situationist approach to the more conservative absolutist understandings of biblical teachings. (See also Global Issues.)

For some Christians the primary moral authority is Church teaching, for others it is the Bible and for others again, it is individual conscience, or a combination of all three. This diversity means that it is very difficult to generalise about Christians when

expressing their beliefs about certain moral issues. Conservative Christians might oppose abortion, homosexual relationships, sex outside marriage, while liberal Christians may well take different views.

Some Christians take pacifist views on war and violence (such as Quakers and some non-conformist traditions) while others take a view that wars may be just (Aquinas' Just War Principles). Some American conservative Christians believe the death penalty is a justifiable form of punishment for a Christian community while others disagree. It is also important to note that not all Churches require their followers to adhere to all of the Church's statements of moral theology, while others maintain quite a strict view of how the followers should live. There are dissenting voices within single traditions."

In Luke's gospel Jesus says, "... Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you." (Luke 6:27-31).

Right and wrong for a Christian is to be viewed through this attitude to people – that of unconditional love. In I Corinthians 13:4-8a St Paul defines this further, "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

For a Christian, these words are the starting point for how a Christian arrives at an understanding of what right and wrong are.

Although many Christians would hold to the principles of the 10 Commandments as a guide for living, many would interpret these according to the pressures upon their own lives.

Thus attitudes to finances, sexuality, family and so on would be seen through the way in which the Golden Rule ("Do to others as you would have them do to you") is applied to both individual and community.

## **Moral Exemplars**

Commitment to the Christian belief in Jesus as the template for living a modern life entails responsibility to other people. The many stories in the gospels of Jesus assisting people who were under-privileged, sick, distressed or outcast, illustrate that modern Christians must respond to these same needs. Society generally and the world specifically, is still stricken with these problems. Some Christians might say the world is sinful and only through the action of Christian work will this be healed. By bringing about a state unconditional love is the ruling principle, will the needs of all be catered for.

Although this is an ideal to which many Christians aspire, others have worked practically to make this a reality. Christians such as Martin Luther King Jr., Blessed Mother Teresa and Father Kolbe all tried to live their lives according to the Golden Rule. Other examples range from John Howard the prison reformer, Abraham Lincoln president of the United States of America and a committed abolitionist, to Lord Shaftesbury's role in improving the working conditions of poor children in the nineteenth century, Father Damien who helped lepers in the South Seas and Dr Barnardo who established homes for orphaned children. Present day reformers include Christian groups who assist sufferers of HIV / AIDS, those with alcohol and drug related problems, children and adults with mental health issues and working to provide hospice care.

## **Individual & Social Responsibility**

Christians have always seen their social responsibilities as part of their faith. The Christian Social Movement of the 19th century founded by FD Maurice gave its support to improving the appalling conditions of working men of Victorian England. In the 21st century, there are still many unresolved problems, and Christians continue to find ways to play a central role in this.

Christianity has always had a strong commitment to alleviating social injustice. Jesus was concerned for the poor, sick and outcasts of society and St Paul, Jesus' theological interpreter, gives many instructions about how to respond to those in need.

In modern times, many Christians ranging from William Wilberforce (1759-1833 slavery), Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845 penal reform), William Booth (1829-1912 alcoholism & poverty), Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965 under-developed nations) through to Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968 civil rights), Fr. David Randall (1947-1996 HIV/Aids) and Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1931-apartheid activist) have felt inspired to respond to the Christian message of applying unconditional love to all humans.

## The Environment

Christianity has not had such a long history of involvement with environmental issues, but because of the belief in a creator God (Genesis 1) who has a relationship through his creation with humans, Christians have become more aware of environmental issues in the past two or three decades. Although Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) is often considered the precursor to environmental Christianity, it has only been in recent years that Christians have taken seriously the concept that humans are stewards of God's creation, not masters of it. Most Christian leaders and organisations have responded to the need to include environmental issues in their debates – and churches with solar panels are not uncommon.

James Lovelock's Gaia ethic explains that the human species is dependent on planet earth and left unchecked, humanity will bring about events which will lead to the diminishment or destruction of human civilization, if not the species itself. Although not a religious theorist, Lovelock has enabled the debate about these issues to come to a wider audience and his views are considered relevant by many Christians.

Roman Catholics have recently agreed with the idea of the value of creation in its own right (because of its sacred status as made by God), rather than the more traditional notion of humanity having dominion over all. The World Council of Churches is developing a new theology of nature in line with 21st century Christian views on the environment.

Historically, Christians have tended to use the Creation Stories in Genesis chapters 1 and 2 as the justification for many attitudes to the world, to the environment and to the animal kingdom. This is based upon the premise that God created all things, but that humans have dominion over the resources of the natural world, including animals. In modern times, these attitudes have been questioned and the concept of stewardship has replaced that of ownership. Because Jesus was concerned for the poor and outcast of society, healed the sick, and made certain statements in both his life and teaching about various ethical situations, Christians have guidance on many moral matters.

However, as there are many Christian denominations holding views on the nature of Jesus, on the Bible, and how the Church should interpret this, there are many Christian answers to ethical and moral questions. Aid programmes to developing nations and responses to the plight of those living in less economically developed countries are often led by Christian groups. The proper use of wealth and philanthropy has been pioneered by Christians, for example, the Cadbury and Sainsbury families. Attitudes to animal rights and the environment feature large in the thoughts and actions of church leaders today.

## Ethical Decision Making

Although naturalistic theology is still extremely influential throughout the Churches, there is significant debate about the philosophical and theological justification for ethical issues. Bob Bowie, senior lecturer in RE at Canterbury Christ Church University writes, 'It is important that students understand that there is a wide variety of approaches to Christian ethical decision making. Catholic ethical thinking involves natural moral law, virtue theory and ideas about conscience. Other Christian denominations have various ethical approaches, from the very liberal protestant situationist approach to the more conservative absolutist understandings of biblical teachings. For some Christians the moral authority that is primary is the Church teaching authority, for others it is the Bible and for others it is individual conscience, or a combination of all three. This diversity means that it is very difficult to generalise about Christians when expressing their beliefs about certain moral issues.'

'Conservative Christians might oppose abortion, homosexual relationships, sex outside marriage, while liberal Christians may well take different views. Some Christians take pacifist views on war and violence (such as Quakers and some non-conformist traditions) while others take a view that wars may be just (Just War Theory). Some American conservative Christians believe the death penalty is a justifiable form of punishment for a Christian community while others disagree.'

'It is also important to note that not all Churches require their followers to adhere to all of the Church's statements of moral theology, while others maintain a strict view of how the followers should live. There are dissenting voices within single traditions.'

Christians nevertheless believe in the sanctity of life and the place of the world, as God's creation, as the stage upon which life is acted out. By placing God, rather than humans, at the centre of these issues, Christians are able to reflect upon controversial issues before forming a conclusion.

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