

Voices from religion and worldviews - Christianity

Over the last few years we have collated responses to questions about religion and worldviews from different perspectives. This resource provides personal answers to questions from lived experience and were written directly by believers.

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1. Why you do believe God created the world? If God made the world, who made God? If God is real, why can't we see him?

Christians believe that God is a Being in relation with human beings and creation (Muslims do too). Obviously, we can't really answer this question as we weren't there at the time, we are only able to take a view from the fact that the world exists. The Bible does talk about God's glory being revealed in the world, through creation, so it seems that this is the reason - in creating the world God was declaring God to be God, leaving something enduring to show this. Christians then go on to say that people were created to enjoy the world, God and each other.

God made God! If you think about it, you can keep asking 'who made the Thing that made God? And who made the Thing that made the Thing that made God?' and so on for ever! Sooner or later you have to stop and say that Something must just plain exist without anything else having made it: if you like, it made itself, or has always existed. Now, this means that that Something doesn't exist like you and me - born as a baby, and eventually dies - but exists as a different kind of being altogether, a timeless and uncaused one. So, God just plain exists, the starting point for everything else.

The New Testament talks about God being invisible:

Colossians 1:15 - The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

1 Timothy 1:17 - Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Hebrews 11:27 - By faith he [Moses left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.

Jesus also talks about the (Holy) Spirit being invisible 'The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.' (John 3.8)

The Biblical idea is that God is beyond materiality and physicality, except when choosing to make an appearance. In the Hebrew Scriptures this was through angels, miracles and 'Acts of God'. So, we cannot see him (or her, God has no gender), God is not a created being with a form. It might help to think of invisible energy beings that appear (or not!) in science fiction films.

For Christians, God has been seen in Jesus, the incarnation (made flesh) of God and in the theological idea that although Jesus of Nazareth was a man he was also the Son of God and therefore, just like/the same as God (the Father).

2. If Jesus died to save the world from sin and remove suffering. Why is there still sin and suffering in the world today?

There is still sin and suffering in the world because God respects our freedom, even our freedom not to believe in Him. However, freedom is a gift, and we should use it wisely! So, what was Christ's death & resurrection meant to achieve?

a) The 'atonement' achieved by Jesus Christ is not automatic, it does not over-ride human free will: it is up to Christians (and others of good will) to pray and act for it to affect more and more people, in other words to pray and act for God's Kingdom to come 'on earth as it is in heaven'.

b) God is preparing us for eternity, not just time in this world, and so fundamentally Christ's atonement is to effect life in His presence (heaven) rather than just patching up this world, As a Christian I see this world as something like a preparatory stage, the first Act in a great drama, and I am impatient to see what happens in Act 2! However...

c) A useful analogy might be the success of the D-Day landings: Germany did not immediately surrender, but fought on for almost another year, however, D-Day signalled the defeat of Germany, and after that the Allied forces were on the winning side, though there was much still to be done. It is like that with the victory of Jesus over sin, suffering and death: they are beaten but we have to apply that victory every day in our lives to the forces opposed still.

d) The end to sin and suffering will only be complete at the Second Coming (the subject of my next blog); it is up to Christians now to respond in faith, and receive salvation by that faith; we are to share the Good News of Christ's atonement so others may also receive it for themselves - that will increasingly bring about an end to sin and suffering. However, human free will, temptation, and just our own weaknesses mean we have not yet done a very good job overall. However, there are glowing examples of where churches have taken ground from the causes of sin and suffering, but rarely do they get much media attention!

e) Finally, another analogy: in a law court a defendant may be declared innocent, her record wiped clean, free to go. She can now choose what she does next - will she live a grateful life serving others, or will she perhaps choose to lead a bad quality of life, despite the innocent verdict? In the same way Christ offers the Christian the chance of a new life, but every day we have the choice how we live.

3. What do you think is the meaning of life?

As a Christian I believe there is ultimately only one meaning to life: to relate to its Creator and Saviour, God. To get in touch with the Creator, whom Christians believe to be Trinity, is to come to understand why we are here. So, I would also say that we are here not simply to get to know God, but to grow to our full potential as creatures made in His image but sadly all too quick to go our own way.

This meaning of life then gives hope and a sense of proportion – in the end, this world is not all there is, so my destiny lies with God, I trust, and I shall do my best to be an example to everyone around me of what God is looking for in us. No, I often fail, but my trust is in my Maker, not in myself!

We will never discover this meaning of life if we are blinded by social media, shopping, endless noise from our headphones, and by our own greed! We need time and space to begin this greatest journey of all.

4. How might modern Britain change or affect the way you practise your faith and what challenges or opportunities do you face as a believer in modern Britain?

Being a Christian in modern Britain - how my faith helps:

Firstly, it gives me a firm starting-point for my life: I believe we are God's creatures and should be treated as such; I believe we are responsible to God for our lives, and that He loves us, so it is not scary to believe this. The example of Jesus sets the standard for how I should live.

Secondly, it helps me to understand other people better, especially those of other faiths, because we have much in common: moral values, a commitment to how we understand God, the importance of religious actions such as prayer and festivals. I also understand how difficult faith can be, and I think that is important for growing up today in Britain, which now has most major faiths represented in every city.

Thirdly, I believe I should sensitively share my faith with others, live out Christ's command to love others, and so it gives me the motivation not to dwell on my own problems or live for pleasure, using God as a prop to cheer me up, but to reach out in love to all those around me, as Christians have always done. It means I value people for themselves, not as objects to use during the day. It means I want to see society improve and change for the better, rather than just see how much money I can earn for me.

Being a Christian in modern Britain - how my faith is affected:

The biggest challenges for me today are in what we call secularism: the belief system many people have which says there is no God, religion is a private matter and should not influence society, that unless something is 'proven' scientifically then it does not exist. Granted most such people seem quite happy and enjoy their lives, it is very tempting to join them and to give up the practice of my faith: surely it is easier just to go with the flow and live for pleasure as some, but not all do? In modern Britain there is so much 'pleasure' to be had 24/7 that it blots out any deeper considerations.

However, I have never found that way of life satisfying. It ignores big questions such as, 'just what is our purpose?', 'If there is a God, how does that affect me?', and 'Why bother to be good, if there is no life after death: why bother with anything?' It also ignores an educated understanding of science and of the way Christianity is firmly rooted in provable facts!

Being a Christian in modern Britain - the opportunities?

Increasingly I am finding people who want answers to the questions I have just written above. The media may try to drown out any deeper thought, but so many people now seek a spiritual approach to life, they seek wellbeing and a renewed relationship with the world around them, wanting a positive motivation to lead a more fulfilling life. Maybe it takes time to reach that realisation but reach it most people do!

The other opportunities are many, but one in particular stands out: there are so many different churches, some very modern indeed, that it is possible to find a church that suits most people - the media 'Mr Bean' stereotype of church is far removed from most churches! It would be worth doing a web search locally to your school and finding out more about the different expressions of faith in your area.

5. Are you concerned about the environment? If so why?

I am concerned because we have failed as stewards, we are ruining the future of not just many other creatures but also of ourselves, and we have desecrated God's world - He will hold us responsible I'm sure in some way.

I'll give my view on the environment, which is the generally held Christian view; there are some other views which I'll mention at the end.

'The environment' means the world God created for mankind especially – Genesis chapters 1 – 3 contains the well-known stories about this. The key idea here is 'stewardship': we humans were made to be caretakers, managers and guardians of this world, which is ours responsibly to enjoy and develop. Adam and Eve (don't take them literally, they just represent all mankind) were specifically told to 'till and keep' the Garden of Eden (this world as God sees it) – these are old-fashioned words for farming/developing it and looking after it.

The Old Testament gives many commandments about these two words (till and keep) which basically say not to exploit it for profit or deprive the poor of their rights to live from it (e.g. Leviticus 23.22); they even had to leave fields fallow for a year, by rotation, every few years to prevent damage to the soil.

If we take those ideas, we can see that a Christian cannot exploit, or damage the world around but should be looking after and developing it in ways that are beneficial. For example, sheep-rearing requires much preparation of the land and environment to eliminate pests and poisons – that is 'developing' the land. Organic and non-factory farming are Christian necessities.

So also, is preserving and caring for the natural habitat both because it is the 'lungs' of the world, and because we share the world with innumerable species of other creatures. Our big problems here are brutal exploitation of natural resources and over-population: the more of us there are, the more resources we need, and we cannot just let millions starve or live in poverty just because we want to preserve things as they are. So Christians are at the forefront of alternative energies, vegetarianism, low meat consumption and simple, non-acquisitive lifestyles: we have to do these things to honour God whose world it is (it is NOT 'our' world), but we have to balance this with caring for the people in the world, finding new medicines, reducing waste and plastics (a very modern problem) and improving crop yields. Difficult balance!

So I always try to buy free range, consume as little as necessary, use public transport where possible and recycle – it's the little I can do to show I do not believe in the exploitation and destruction of the environment, whilst giving thanks to God for this beautiful world.

I said I'd mention a couple of other views:

Some fundamentalists think we should exploit the world for our benefit because we are God's most important creature and God will look after the consequences of our actions – after all, we look forward to life after death, so this world scarcely matters;

Others go to the opposite extreme, become vegan, only buy second hand items and refuse to own a car or use anything that might cause unnecessary damage and recycle absolutely everything: they believe our stewardship duty is paramount and we have no right to leave a footprint on the earth.

As you gather, I have a view somewhere between these two and believe that when the New Testament says God has given us all things 'richly to enjoy' then we should enjoy our lives in this world without feeling guilty we bought a new pair of shoes, though we should check whether any exploitation or cruelty was involved for workers or animals, or the environment around (chemical waste?) in the shoes' manufacture.

6. Do Christians think that War is a necessary Evil?

Christian Views on War

Historically, during the first three centuries, Christians in the Roman Empire were markedly reticent about the army and military service. Some (usually non-pacifists) believe Christians were particularly suspicious of the Roman army because of its practices of idolatry and emperor worship. Others (usually pacifists) assert that it was because Christians could not accept fulfilling military functions, that is, to kill.

For many Christians the teachings of Christ categorically excluded the possibility of shedding blood, even in the case of war or legitimate defence.

Tertullian: "We may not do evil even when it might seem justifiable." (De Patientia, Hornus, p. 216), "in our doctrine we are given ampler liberty to be killed rather than to kill." (Hornus, p. 214)

Origen: "Concerning the Christians... we say that they have been taught not to defend themselves against their enemies... they have received from God that which they could not have succeeded in doing if they had been given the right to make war..." (Hornus p. 148)

What Did Jesus Say?

In the Beatitudes, Jesus tells us "blessed are the peacemakers" (Matt. 5:9).

Elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount he tells us "if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matt. 5:39). This is actually a statement of defiance!

"You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Mt. 5: 43,44 Thus some have concluded that Christianity is a pacifist religion and that violence is never permitted.

But Jesus elsewhere acknowledges the legitimate use of force, telling the apostles, "let him who has no sword sell his mantle and buy one" (Luke 22:36)

St Paul follows Jesus' lead: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil.... Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath... If your enemy is hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good." Ro. 17: 12

The Just War Tradition

As time went on, mistrust of military service became blurred, primarily for two reasons: the conversion of the emperor Constantine and the fact that Christianity became the official religion of the Empire the menace of foreign invasion and the end of the "Pax Romana".

In a period of about two hundred years, one went from a situation in which a Christian could be excommunicated for participating in military service to one in which only Christians could be part of the army. Hence:

'Jus ad bellum' – just cause for war. Is it declared by a legitimate authority? Is the cause just? Have all means of reconciliation been used?

'Jus in bello' – just within war. The means must be proportional to the ends, the war must be able to be won, and the lives of the innocent must be spared.

Implications of Just War

War is never seen as good or glorified, violence as a last resort must be justifiable. The normal position for Christians is Christ's teaching of nonviolence.

Even after the acceptance of the just war theory, killing during war was still considered a sin. "the Church continued to impose penance on those who killed a man in war, even in a just war." (Hornus p.175) Just war theory implies the right to conscientious objection.

The Church often played a positive role in times of war through negotiation, threats of excommunication and institutions as "the Peace of God" and "the Truce of God".

Nevertheless, Christians have tended to justify most wars most of the time, even when Christians were on both sides.

If just war is viable, it must mean that there are wars that should not be waged or wars that it would be better to lose. If the only way to win a war is to commit war crimes, it would be better to lose.

7. How does Christianity affect/direct your life?

Religion is often seen as a set of beliefs for our post-Enlightenment societies in the West. We try to establish the truth of beliefs before we are prepared to commit ourselves to them (fair enough!) and then apply them rationally to our existence. St Paul recognised this, though, way back in Romans 12.1 when he refers to our 'logical' or 'rational' service, rather than spiritual.

It is better to see religion as 'belonging' to a community, a way of life which includes a set of beliefs, for me the Body of Christ. Therefore, first of all my Christianity means I must be engaged in the Christian community – church fellowship, supporting each other in prayer and material means, looking for opportunities to share the Gospel more widely, partaking of the sacraments, and so on.

Secondly, my mind needs to be renewed to think and respond in a Christian way – Romans 12.2 refers to this. So, my thoughts, judgements, political affiliations, contribution to society and career should be, as you say, directed or affected directly – even what television I watch! This is certainly the case, and my career in teaching has involved a great deal of trying to lead young people towards more wholesome and helpful lifestyles, even if not specifically religious (no indoctrination!). Being a good colleague has always been important: you'll get to understand this when you start teaching – there are numerous ways of being a reliable friend in the staffroom rather than just intent on your own career, though you'll find some who only look out for themselves. Christianity affects my leisure time, of course, in that I try to prioritise what is positive and helpful rather than self-indulgent. It has at times meant I need to seek prayer and advice from others, and from the scriptures, when unsure or unsettled over experiences in life.

Thirdly – I'm trying to keep it short! – money: teachers may not be the best paid public employees, but the income is regular and the pension good. I have always tried to allot my money in a Christian way; though tithing has been rather a challenge, I hope I have nonetheless been generous and considerate, thinking of others in my family and beyond before myself.

All of this means I should, I hope, actually be a better neighbour, a more loyal friend, a more sensible voter, a more thoughtful person – these are good for society – and a loyal husband and father.

8. In which ways do you think Jesus was an ordinary person and in which ways is he 'God on Earth'?

Jesus was a perfect combination of the divine and the human. We see in the New Testament, especially the Gospels, that he started as a baby and grew older, that he was intelligent (very argumentative when he was 12!), that he learned the carpentry trade, that he probably taught himself to read the scriptures and learn large parts of them, that he could be hungry, tired, frustrated, yet also patient, loving, popular, strong-willed and determined. He did not marry or have his own family, but he was at ease associating with both men and women, and was a stern critic of the religious authorities, whilst having a reputation for befriending the outcasts.

His divine nature showed throughout also: he prophesied Jerusalem's downfall and Peter's denials, he healed the sick, cast out demons, controlled nature and raised the dead, all acts attributed to the Holy Spirit's power within him, but done on his own authority – it was this sense of authority that shocked the religious authorities. He also believed himself to be the Messiah, come to save people, not to condemn them. Where do you believe Jesus was born and why?

Personally, I believe that Jesus was born in Galilee, it makes more sense as that is where his family was from. Christians generally believe that he was born in Bethlehem, as the Gospels say, in fulfilment of prophecy, as the son of David. The Gospel writers wanted to present him as the Messiah, though the earliest Gospel, Mark, has no birth story.

9. There are more things for Christians to do than go on pilgrimage, Do you agree?

The statement makes an interesting point about 'doing' rather than believing - but in my mind there has always been a very important link between believing and doing. So, if a Christian believes something - e.g that God exists, that God deserves worship, then it is for the believer to do something about it.

The statement is certainly true, as there are certainly lots more things a Christian does than go on pilgrimage. A Christian worships at home individually and in family; and in a church, congregationally. A Christian

celebrates the family by having baptisms and weddings and recognises death in funeral services. A Christian enjoys festivals such as Christmas when Christians believe God gave his son Jesus as a gift to the world, and Easter when Christians believe that Jesus gave his life as a supreme and unique example of unconditional love for humankind. Christians also have attitudes to people and a moral sensitivities about honesty, virtues and love. Thus, the Christian 'package' is a lot more than merely pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage itself is an interesting concept for religions. As you probably know, in Islam it is an obligation of the religion. i.e. That means you have to do Hajj or Pilgrimage to Makkah at least once in your lifetime. In Hinduism, pilgrimage to the River Ganges is seen as contributing to create good karma for you... or good deeds enabling your next rebirth to be beneficial to you. In Sikhism, the Golden Temple in Amritsar should be visited as the spiritual home of the Khalsa or brotherhood and in Buddhism you would expect a Buddhist to visit at least once one of the key places in North Eastern India that is recognised as important to the life of the Buddha, Siddhartha Gotama. Jews, of course, want to visit the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem as this is the last remnant of their great Temple, which was destroyed in 70 CE, because the temple was always regarded by Jews as the most sacred place where God (YHWH) resides.

So, if you consider some of these reasons why religious people go on pilgrimage you can start to see some of the reasons Christians go on pilgrimage. However, we should not forget that many pilgrimage places for Christians and others of faith, originally had a site-seeing aspect to them, and it is likely that many places of pilgrimage began as tourist attractions for the faithful. But alongside this, was a deeply held conviction that by visiting a place associated with holiness, with the founder, with a person of holiness, beneficial results would come your way.

If you take the main Christian places of pilgrimage - Jerusalem and Bethlehem in the Holy Land (Israel). Rome in Italy; Lourdes in France; Santiago de Compostella in Spain; Knock in Ireland; Walsingham and Canterbury in England - these all suggest an effort on behalf of the person of faith to do something about visiting them. 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, tell me that it is a wonderfully uplifting and spiritually worthwhile effort to walk the hundreds of kilometres necessary to gain the 'compostella' or certificate to say you have completed the journey.

But 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 raised from death by God, to be an educationally important matter to experience, and a spiritually uplifting experience to place you beside the most important thing in your life.

Christians of some denominations, such as 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 your devotion to your 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 such a healing, and such sites as these 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 us 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. And that's not such a bad thing.

10. Why do Christians wear a sign of torture to show their faith?

It's difficult to understand the symbolism of the cross unless you understand a bit about the background that Christians believe makes the execution of Jesus the most important event in world history.

Christians believe that when God created the universe, he made it perfect and put his creation under man's control, but at the same time he gave humans free will. They could choose to either love God or rebel against

him. Humanity chose to rebel. They liked the idea of being their own gods, and so rejected God as their creator. Since God had already given man authority over the Earth and the rest of his creation, humanity's rejection of God broke the creation's connection with God's life, and so introduced sin, death, and evil into the world. God's world, that he first made perfect, was now spoiled by hate and destruction. The Bible says this grieved God's heart.

How could this be rectified? Could God, who is holy, simply just change the rules he'd first laid down, and cancel out people's free will and the chaos that mankind's choices had created? No, he could not. Christians believe that God himself is bound to respect the authority structures laid out at the beginning of his own creation and, being holy, he cannot simply ignore sin.

Seemingly there was nothing God could do.

That was until Jesus, the Son of God, came along. Because Jesus was a man, but had not sinned (i.e. he was still in connection with God), he was able to pay the price for our sin instead of us and wrest humanity and creation back from the downward spiral of sin and death and restore our relationship with God. He freely chose to die our death in our place and in doing this, it allows all of us to be restored to a close and personal relationship with God. So, that is what Jesus did on the cross.

You are indeed right to say the cross is a sign of death and torture. Jesus died a cruel and painful death nailed on the cross, but that is not where the symbolism ends. What was a symbol of death became for the Christian a symbol of life. Its meaning got changed or inverted – because by dying Jesus overcame the power of death. Have you seen the *Matrix*? Neo has to enter into the system in order to defeat it. It's a bit like that. Christians believe that on the cross, a place of utter darkness, the light of God is revealed most powerfully. That is where death, sin and evil were defeated by the imperishable, incorruptible love and life of Jesus. That is why he rose again – death couldn't hold him.

So, when I am in church and I see the cross in front of me, it reminds me that God's love for me is very great. He doesn't stand aloof from me but is even prepared to suffer in my place that I may know his joy and life and peace. Ultimately the cross is a symbol of love, a love that is greater than death.

A man once asked God: 'How much do you love me?'

'This much', said God, and stretched out his arms and died.