

# Unit 6: RELIGION and HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

**Checklist - tick these off if and when we cover them:**

## OVERALL

This Topic is concerned with religious responses to ethical questions raised by human relationships.

*Understandings of the roles of men and women within a family*

*Issues related to marriage and divorce*

*Marriage ceremonies and the ways in which they reflect belief and provide guidance*

*Issues related to sexual relationships and to contraception*

## SPECIFICS

*The roles of men and women within a Christian family;*

*Christian marriage ceremonies, and the ways in which these reflect and emphasise Christian teaching about marriage;*

*Christian beliefs about the ethics of divorce;*

*Christian beliefs about sexual relationships and contraception.*



JUST TICK THEM  
OFF IF YOU THINK  
YOU KNOW THEM

## UNIT SIX: RELIGION AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

### MARRIAGE

- ▶ All Christians believe that Marriage, at least in the ideal situation, should be for the rest of the couple's life.
- ▶ Some Christian denominations insist that, save for the most exceptional and compelling circumstances, Marriage must be for life. This means that, even if a married couple argue and separate, they cannot under this teaching obtain a divorce and marry someone else. This is, in particular, the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, but not of many other Christian Churches such as the Anglicans and Methodists.

### THE CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE CEREMONY

- ▶ Most Christian marriages can vary considerably in style and length, most of them contain some common features:
- ▶ The **Greeting/Welcome** – here, the celebrant or leader of the ceremony greets the congregation and explains the purpose of the wedding and that presence at it. The purpose is the joining together (=marriage) of the engaged couple in a relationship which is intended to mirror the union between Christ (the groom) and His Church (the bride). The congregation are there to witness the marriage vows as a Christian community of relations and friends.
- ▶ The bride and groom are called upon to make a **declaration** that they are willing and free to marry each other. They solemnly promise (or vow) to love and honour (=respect) and be faithful to each other, to support each other “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health” until death parts them on earth.
- ▶ The bride and groom **exchange rings of precious metal**. This symbolizes their willingness to share any wealth

they may have on earth, and the circular shape of the rings symbolizes the unending and self-sustaining nature of the love they offer each other.

- ▶ There are often Scripture readings appropriate to the ceremony, on the theme of Love or recounting the Marriage Feast at Cana and the special honour Christ did to the couple by changing water into wine.
- ▶ The bride and groom will sign the legally binding Marriage Register, which must be legally witnessed by 2 guests.
- ▶ Often, the bride will wear white to symbolize the purity of her love for her husband, and will have bridesmaids helping with her dress, veil and flowers during the ceremony. In some countries, confetti or rice is thrown over the couple; sweets may be distributed to guests; money may be pinned as presents to the bride's dress.
- ▶ Other wedding customs may vary in detail, according to the particular Christian culture and denomination concerned, but the basic common features reflect Christian beliefs about Marriage. These are that:
  - ▶ the union of a man and woman in a married couple was the purpose of God from the beginning, as recounted in Gen 2: 18-24
  - ▶ a man and woman must undertake marriage of their own free choice, and not because forced into by their families, for instance
  - ▶ marriage is meant to be *monogamous* ie between one man and one woman only
  - ▶ marriage is meant to be for life
  - ▶ marriage is the traditional basis of the family and is believed by Christians to offer the best framework/situation in which to bear and nurture children (Christians often point to the Holy Family as an ideal of family love.)

## ROLES OF MEN AND WOMEN IN A CHRISTIAN FAMILY

- ▶ Different Christian Churches, and individuals within those Churches, have varying views about the roles that men and women should play in the Christian family.
- ▶ Some Christians believe that the roles of men and women in a family ought to be very different, and that this difference is what God wants, even though God values both men and women equally
- ▶ Genesis relates that Adam was created first and Eve soon afterwards because God realised that it was “not good for the man to be alone”. Accordingly, God decided to “make a helper suitable for him” (Gen 2: 18). On this biblical basis, some Christians take the view that women are meant to be the helpers of (and therefore subordinate to) men. For those who believe this, the tasks and interests of the man come first, and women must support men in them, because they argue that that is what God clearly wanted from the beginning of Creation.
- ▶ Others go so far as to say that because, in the Genesis story, Eve was the first to suggest disobedience to God, women are weaker willed and more likely to do wrong than men. Traditionally, some Christian Churches have suggested that men should be very careful about all but the most correct of women, since they can be temptresses attempting to lure men from the path of virtue. This attitude is much less prevalent now, but still occurs from time to time.
- ▶ The kind of arguments mentioned above are combined by certain Christians who like to insist that men should have the final authority and power of decision in a Christian family.
- ▶ Peter, in his first Letter (1 Pet 3: 1) to the Christians of Northern Asia Minor, says “you wives must submit to your husbands, so that if any of them do not

believe God’s word, your conduct will win them over to believe.”

Conservative Christians point to this kind of phrase to insist that women must be subordinate to men.

- ▶ More progressive Christians insist, however, that this passage was written for a particular era and culture, long since rightly replaced by much fuller equality between the sexes. Also, more modernist Christians quote Peter’s instruction to husbands in the same Letter, regarding their conduct to their wives “Treat them with respect, because they also will receive, together with you, God’s gift of life.” (1 Pet 3: 7) More liberal Christians say that this passage very clearly stresses that men and women are equal in the sight of God.
- ▶ At one end of the spectrum, therefore, are conservative/traditionalist Christians who say that the relationship and relative status of men and women is fixed for all time, with a subordinate role for women, particularly in Marriage. In this view, at its most extreme, women should look after children and have no job or profession other than that, or at least only employment which can be dropped if the husband’s career interests or wishes so demand, for example if he has to move job location.
- ▶ Many other Christians believe that times have changed, and that women are now fully the equals of men in every sense, and that ideas of their subordination inside the home or out in the world of work belong to the past. They say the modern interpretation of the Bible must be one of equality from the first, both men and women being created “in the image of God” (Gen 1: 27). This means that men and women should share as equally as they can such duties as childcare, and careers should be looked on as the right of both

partners, according to their abilities rather than their gender. Christians with this view might quote St Paul's Letter to the Galatians:

- ▶ "There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3: 28)

### **SUMMARY OF ROLES**

- ▶ In some Christian households, and depending on which country and cultural tradition are involved, mothers may well still take the major role in childcare and housework, and may support their husbands as the primary breadwinner. In more liberal countries and Church denominations, men and women have now come to have much more similar, if not exactly equal, roles and responsibilities.

### **CHRISTIAN BELIEFS ON THE ETHICS OF DIVORCE**

- ▶ All Christians who face the facts recognize that some marriages do not turn out as well as everyone expected, or at least hoped, on the day of the wedding. Couples may end up making themselves and each other very unhappy, either because of the faults and behaviour of one or both of them.
- ▶ Christians have widely differing views as to what can and should be done about marital discord. All agree that *reconciliation* between couples in conflict is the best outcome and should always be the first aim. If that proves impossible when tried, some Christians believe that *separation but not divorce* may well be necessary and can be justifiable.
- ▶ The Church of England has, however, since 2002, allowed divorced people to remarry in church at the discretion of the clergy involved. The Roman Catholic Church, by contrast, never allows divorce, insisting that Marriage is a sacrament which can never be undone or repeated with anyone else while both partners live.

- ▶ Roman Catholicism does, however, allow for the ending of a marriage by *annulment* under certain strictly limited conditions. A marriage may be annulled in the the Catholic Church if:
  - ▶ either partner can be shown not to have understood the wedding vows or was forced (coerced) into making them
  - ▶ if either partner has lied when making any part of the vows (eg they can be shown subsequently never to have intended having children)
  - ▶ if either partner was mentally unstable (and thus not to be held responsible when taking the vows) at the time of the marriage
  - ▶ the marriage has never been consummated (the couple have never had sexual intercourse).

### **CHRISTIAN BELIEFS ABOUT SEXUAL RELATIONS**

- ▶ Within Christianity, and as with so many other facets of Christian belief, there is a wide spectrum of beliefs and teaching concerning sexual relationships and sexuality.
- ▶ Many Christians state the belief that sex is only appropriate/permissible between a man and a woman who are married to each other. In this view, sex before marriage and extra-marital sex (ie with someone other than the husband or wife) are wrong, as are homosexual relationships and acts. The more traditionalist Christian of this sort might well point to numerous pieces of OT and NT Scripture to justify this stance:
  - ▶ "If a priest's daughter becomes a prostitute, she shall be burnt to death." (Lev 21:9)
  - ▶ "if the charge is true and there is no proof that she was a virgin...the men of the city are to stone her to death" (Deut 22: 20-21)
  - ▶ "If a man is caught having intercourse with another man's wife, both of them are to be put to death." (Deut 22: 22)
  - ▶ "your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.....honour God with your body." (1 Cor 6: 19)

- ▶ “keep [yourselves] from sexual immorality” (Acts 15: 20 & 29; Acts 21: 25)
- ▶ Traditionalist Christians might also say that God created sex, man and woman, for procreation ie the continuation of the human race, and to strengthen the bond between a couple so that they truly become “one flesh”. They would say that the use of sex just for selfish pleasure demeans and diminishes its true importance as the act of ultimate union between a married man and woman.
- ▶ More liberal Christians tend to view this approach as old-fashioned, and insist on the main message of Christianity not being punishment for impurity but selfless Love and Mercy. Such Christians might say a relationship can be justified in God’s sight provided it is truly loving and committed, whether the people concerned are married or not. Heterosexual love before marriage is not severely condemned by Christians holding this kind of view.
- ▶ Some liberal Christians nowadays say that the “loving commitment” principle extends to people in homosexual relationships.
- ▶ Most Christians would, however, condemn and deplore promiscuity – that is frequent sexual relations with no loving commitment – even though they would not advocate the vicious punishments mentioned in the OT quotations above.

in humans primarily to bring children into the world to continue the human race, and that use of contraception contradicts God’s will.

- ▶ Many Christians, including many Roman Catholics, disagree with this teaching. They argue that artificial contraception is justifiable, especially to avoid bringing children into the world who will not be members of a loving and adequately prosperous family, and that God cannot possibly want children to be born into poverty, illness and abandonment.
- ▶ By contrast with official RC teaching, the Church of England and Methodists say contraception is not only justifiable but the most responsible course of action. They state that people must be allowed as individuals to decide when to have children, and all children should be positively wanted by their parents. Careful family planning, and artificial contraception as a part of that planning, is therefore encouraged by these churches.

### **CHRISTIAN BELIEFS ABOUT CONTRACEPTION**

- ▶ The RC Church teaches that artificial contraception (the use of condoms/ coils/birth control pills) is wrong, but that natural birth control (restricting intercourse to times when the female is biologically least likely to conceive) is acceptable. This official teaching is based on the view that God created sex

These notes are based on the hard work that Mr Antonio D’Onofrio put in over his time at Sion School. Many thanks to Mr Starkey who typed up these notes and donated his efforts to the common good of our GCSE students. These notes are not being endorsed in any way - please use them if you want to. The main help is through the booklet which costs £10 and can be found on the GCSE page. (JR 21/9/7)