

Unit 2: THE NATURE OF BELIEF

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

OVERALL

This Topic is concerned with the ways in which religious believers try to respond to God and to develop spiritually.

Private and public worship

Prayer, meditation and contemplation

The use of food and fasting as a response to God

Beliefs about the use of art, architecture and music to aid worship

The use of symbol to express belief in God

SPECIFICS

Worship in the church and at home;

Prayer and contemplation;

The use of food and fasting by some Christians as a response to God;

The architecture of the church; the use of music and art in Christian worship;

The ways in which symbols are used in Christianity to express belief.



JUST TICK THEM
OFF IF YOU THINK
YOU KNOW THEM

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)



UNIT TWO: THE NATURE OF BELIEF

INTRODUCTION

- Beliefs are abstract concepts and often difficult to explain clearly. The nature of Christian belief is best explained by considering the main means by which that belief is outwardly shown and expressed.
- These are:
 - *the architecture and internal contents of Christian churches*
 - *the key words, symbols and customs/activities used in Christian worship and ceremony.*

MAIN ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES OF A CHRISTIAN CHURCH

- Christian church buildings vary greatly in terms of style and size. They range from huge, elaborately shaped and decorated **cathedrals** which took centuries to complete, through very varied types of **country and city parish churches**, to tiny and lonely **chapels** with no art-work or decoration. The simplest place of Christian worship is exemplified by the **Meeting Houses** of the Quakers or Society of Friends.
- Roman Catholic and Anglican churches are traditionally **cruciform** – ie, take the form of a cross, reminding us of Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection. Many have a **steeple, tower, or spire**, symbolising the Christian's striving upwards towards God above the things of the earth. They also served to make the church **visible and dominant** across many miles of countryside and **their bells** announced the services and times of day when watches and clocks were not owned by everyone.
- Beside the main entrance in RC churches, traditionally at the western end of the nave, is a **stoup of holy water** in which attendees dip their fingers on entering and make the sign of the cross in veneration of Jesus and as a sign of self-purification when entering a holy place.
- Also often close to the main entrance in RC and Anglican churches is the **baptistery**, so placed to symbolize the fact that it is through being born again in Baptism that

members of the church first become members, whether as babies or adults.

- Churches of the **evangelical** tradition and culture may well have the baptistery placed **centrally** in the building, and designed to be deep enough to allow **total immersion**. This reflects their emphasis on reliance on **the Holy Spirit** and recalls Jesus's baptism by his cousin John in the River Jordan. The deep baptismal font also represents a tomb in which the candidates **dies to sin** and is "**born again by water and the Holy Spirit**" to new life in Christ.
- At the eastern end of more traditional Christian churches is at least one altar for the celebration of the Eucharist. This positioning recalls Christ rising with the first light of dawn in the east at His resurrection.
- In more modern/liberal churches the altar has now been either designed when building the church, or moved from its original eastern position, to be at the centre of the church. This makes it the focal point in a circular congregation of worshippers at the Eucharist, underlining the central importance of the Eucharist in that particular denomination of Christians. In general, the Eucharist and therefore the altar can be said to be of key importance to the RC and Anglican traditions, whereas the pulpit and/or lectern are the most important for evangelicals/Methodists/Baptists and the Salvation Army.
- Facing the congregation in many churches is a lectern (or 2 – one on each side of the altar – in most RC churches). This allows lay readers or the celebrant(s) to read extracts from the OT and NT as an important element ("the Word") of services.
- Traditionally, Anglican churches have a lectern carved in the shape of an eagle, symbolizing the Word of God being sent out across the whole world.
- A pulpit is to be found in most Christian churches, to allow those who preach/give homilies during services to be seen and heard. The pulpit (there may not even be an altar in some denominations of

Christian church) is the focal point for those churches which emphasise the importance of the word of God, and inspiration by the Holy Spirit.

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CHRISTIAN WORSHIP INTRODUCTION

□ Christian worship can be divided into 2 main types

- *Private/individual worship*
- *Communal/collective/congregational worship*

□ Both types are important to Christians, but some Christians may find one easier, more pleasant and more spiritually useful than the other. It is a matter of personal preference, and broadly speaking each type serves a different purpose.

□ Christians say that private worship helps them develop their own personal relationship with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and to focus on and get help with ideas, issues and problems which are important in their lives.

□ Christians believe that communal/collective worship, ie in congregations or gatherings of the faithful, helps them realise their essential brotherhood/sisterhood in the family of Christ, and offers them the support of those brothers and sisters in joint worship and praise of God.

FORMS OF PRIVATE CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

□ Many Christians set aside special time for private worship such as:

- *Reading passages from the Bible, trying to understand their meaning (Bible Study), using a learned commentary on or analysis of a particular passage, and considering particular issues emerging from the text and analysis, and praying about the issues/lessons which emerge from studying the text*
- *Praying, silently or aloud when alone. Christians may pray in this way about matters of particular concern on which they seek God's help – the illness of a friend or family member, a difficult decision which the individual Christian has to take, financial*

worries, events in the news, etc. They may also pray or meditate in praise or adoration of God's Majesty, without having any particular help to ask from God.

□ Some Christians maintain that they gain a great deal from the effort of private prayer and study, and develop through these means a truly personal relationship with God.

FORMS OF COMMUNAL CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

□ Most Christians belong to a local church, and go there on at least some Sundays (or Saturday evenings, which in many cases nowadays count as Sunday attendance).

□ There are many styles and contents of Christian communal service, but the most common elements, some of which may be combined together in a single service, are:

- **Holy Communion** – *the celebration of the Eucharist (from Greek word eucharistia – thanksgiving), which is the most important service in RC and some Anglican churches*
- **Scripture Reading** – *passages from the OT and NT are read. Very often particular readings are done in a cycle, called the Liturgical Year/Calendar, according to the "seasons" ie Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Ordinary Time.*
- **Sermon/Homily** – *by a Priest/Vicar/Deacon in RC Church and CofE, or by a Minister/Pastor/Lay Preacher in the Methodist and other non-Confomist/Evangelical denominations.*
- **Communal Prayers** (= *prayers said by the whole congregation together*) – *these can be said silently but are most often in a set form, spoken in unison aloud and led by the celebrant eg the Our Father or the Creed*
- **Hymns**, which may also be considered communal prayers set to music, are either sung together by the congregation, or by a choir or soloist on their behalf. As with prayers spoken together, hymns are meant to enhance the congregation's sense of unity in Worship and Faith.
- **Continuity with the Past:** *In the mind of some Christians, singing traditional hymns and saying long-*

established communal prayers gives a strong sense of a comforting link with the faith of relatives and other Christians over many generations past.

- **Modern Styles of Worship:** *Some Christians, however, prefer more spontaneous prayers made up on the spot, and modern music – using guitars, drums and keyboards to accompany worship, to emphasise that Christianity is not an old faith or idea, but directly relevant today*
- **The “Grace” or Dismissal:** *At the end of Church services (and even in smaller Bible Study and Prayer Groups) the “Grace” will be said. Its purpose is to call down God’s blessing on those present and to dismiss or send them out to carry Christ’s word and example into the world outside*

FOOD AND FASTING AS CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO GOD

- In Christianity today, there are very few “food laws” telling believers what they must and must not eat, and when. Unlike Jews and Muslims, Christians do not have strict rituals for food preparation, and Peter was sent a vision to show it was permissible to go beyond the Jewish Law and to eat a wide variety of animals (Acts 10: 11-15)
- Jesus was allowed to eat meat as a Jew, but some Christians choose today to be vegetarian, although not because Christian belief dictates this
- Jesus understood the importance of food and drink, and put great stress on it in his preaching (Matt 25: 35) and miracles (Matt 15: 13-21 – Feeding of the 5000; John 2: 7-11 – Marriage Feast at Cana; Luke 5: 4-6 – The massive catch of fish on Lake Gennesaret)
- Some foods are used **symbolically** in Christian worship. Bread and wine are used in many Christian denominations to show the continuing living presence of Christ in the world. The bread and wine are blessed in many Christian denominations in memory of Christ, but are said to become the actual Body and Blood of Christ in the **consecration** in the RC Church and some sections of the Anglican Church. The RC Church teaches that Jesus left

His true presence in the Eucharist to be food for our souls’ sustenance on our earthly pilgrimage to join our Father in Heaven.

- The Eucharist, and the words used during its celebration, recall Christ’s Last Supper with His Disciples before His Crucifixion (Luke 22: 17-20)
- Other traditional foods, such as hot-cross buns in Holy Week in Britain and the “galette des Rois” on 6 Jan in France for the Epiphany are symbols of a particular Christian feast or season.

FASTING IN CHRISTIAN BELIEF AND LIFESTYLE

- Fasting – going without food – is believed by many Christians to have a role in increasing firmness of religious faith and correct perception of God’s Will. Fasting does this by encouraging self-discipline, reducing selfishness and greed, and reminding people that all good things such as food are a gift of God.
- Most Christians do not fast frequently or for long periods, but many give up luxuries/treats such as chocolate/cigarettes/alcohol during part or all of the 40 days of Lent. This recalls and honours Christ’s own fast in the desert, and prepares individuals to celebrate Holy Week and the Resurrection in a more worthy spiritual state.
- In centuries past and in certain cases today, Christians fast in Lent and at other times as a **penance and atonement** for their own sins or those of others
- Many Christian Orders of Monks and Nuns eat a very simple diet – some excluding meat except on special feastsdays – as part of their Rule of Life, with the aim of renouncing earthly comforts and concentrating on worshipping God

ART AND MUSIC IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

- Art and Music have for many centuries been important tools for/aids to worship in the Christian tradition
- Different Christian denominations use (visual) Art in different ways: the RC, Orthodox and – to a lesser extent – the Anglican Churches have traditionally

- decorated their churches richly, with statues/icons/paintings/stained glass/gold and silverware for sacramental vessels/ richly embroidered vestments and banners
- Christian Religious Music has historically at times been very elaborate, with all the major composers writing Sung Masses, such as Requiems. Mighty organs are to be found in the major historic cathedrals of Europe, designed to render these works majestically, in support of extensive choirs.
 - Religious music today is very varied, some people still preferring the solemnity of the organ to use of folk-song style guitars and keyboards. Many churches try to offer a variety of services nowadays, with organ and traditional choir-led hymns for certain services, and lighter instruments and songs for young families.
 - At the Reformation, reformist Christians in Western Europe denounced these elaborate practices as obstacles to or distractions from true worship. They smashed statues as idolatrous, and replaced stained-glass narrations from the OT and NT with plain glass. This, they insisted, would allow the individual to concentrate on working out his/her own relationship directly with God.
 - The Society of Friends, often called the Quakers, are non-violent and do not criticise other forms of Christianity, but exemplify the simple view of direct contact with God through His Word in the Bible by worshipping in very simple undecorated Meeting Halls
 - The final letter of the Greek alphabet, omega (Ω), often follows or is superimposed on the first, alpha (Α), to signify God as the beginning and end of all things and as pre-existing and surviving all other existence.
 - Early Christians often used the sign of the fish (☩) as a coded symbol of their religion and its founder by which fellow-believers would recognize them. Today the sign can often be seen on the cars of Christian believers, or as a symbol in jewellery/artwork. Some say this symbol was chosen because the letter Greek word for fish (ichthys) are also the first letters of the phrase, in Greek: "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour". Others say the symbol recalls Jesus' miracles of the loaves and fishes and abundance of fish caught at Lake Gennesaret.

KEY SYMBOLS USED IN CHRISTIANITY

- The universally recognized symbol of Christianity is the cross (the shape without Christ's figure on it) or the crucifix (with Christ's figure on it). As noted earlier, many Christian churches are laid out in the form of a cross.
- The Greek letters Chi (Χ) and Rho (Ρ) are the first letters of the word Christ in Greek, and are often superimposed (☩) to signify Christ in religious pictures or jewellery.