

Unit 4: DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE

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

OVERALL

This Topic is concerned with religious concepts of life after death.

Understandings of the distinction between 'body' and 'soul'

Understandings about the afterlife

The concept of reward and punishment

The ways in which funeral rites reflect belief about life after death

SPECIFICS

The ways in which Christians understand the distinction between 'body' and 'soul';

Understandings of heaven, hell and purgatory;

The concept of God as judge, the relation between moral behaviour and the afterlife;

Christian funeral rites, and the ways in which these reflect belief and aim to support the bereaved.



JUST TICK THEM
OFF IF YOU THINK
YOU KNOW THEM

General info as we begin -

For this topic you will need four things:

- a. This sheet and the following notes for reading and highlighting in and out of class.
- b. The independent learning A3 sheet
- c. The photocopies of the text book/student revision guide
- d. A plastic sleeve to keep it all together.

UNIT FOUR: DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE

- Christians believe human beings have 3 key aspects to their being which make them unique as individuals:
 - *mind (also termed intellect) – in some cases highly intelligent, in other cases not so*
 - *body – physical appearance, big, small, thin, fat, beautiful, ugly, dark, fair, blue-eyed/brown-eyed, strong/weak, athletic/clumsy, etc*
 - *soul/spirit (immortal, invisible, unlike any other living being such as animals and fish)*
- Christians believe human beings are unique among created creatures by being “made in God’s image”.

“God created man in His own image, the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” (Gen 1: 27)
- Christians have varying views of what being “created in God’s image” exactly means, but many believe it indicates that God put something of His own Divine and Eternal Nature into each person, which we call that person’s soul. Gen 2:7 describes how “God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” Although Gen 2:19 says the animals were also formed by God out of the ground, man is unique in having life breathed into him in this way by God. This is what Christians take to be man’s soul – not just physical life like the animals, but the breath of God
- As it developed in the years of the Early Church, Christian thought on the nature of man and his soul was much influenced by Greek philosophy, especially that of Plato
- Over the course of centuries Christian thinkers refined the idea of an invisible soul in man, which is immortal and thus does not die with the physical body. Christians believe that the soul makes each individual human being unique and sacred in the eyes of the Creator. The moment of creation of this unique and sacred person is said, by the RC Church, to be conception

and this is why that Church argues so strongly against abortion and experimentation with fetuses. This issue is addressed in more detail in Unit 7.

- Christian doctrine does not teach, on the other hand, that animals have immortal souls. For that reason, most Christians do not for instance that it is murder to kill animals humanely for food, or wrong to use them humanely for other purposes to serve Man in creation. For further details on this aspect, see Unit 7.
- St Paul the Apostle, a central figure in developing the Early Church, taught that the body and soul/spirit are often in conflict. (This use of the word “spirit” for an individual’s soul must not be confused with the Holy Spirit, the 3rd Person of the Trinity, sometimes referred to also as the Paraclete – from the Greek for one who pleads or intercedes for people accused of wrongdoing). The soul wants to be with God and do what is right, but sometimes the body’s desires of the body are in conflict with this. The body is interested in pleasure and comfort, in food and luxuries, and so the soul is prevented from achieving its aims.
- Jesus’ words of reassurance to the repentant thief on the cross show Christianity’s central belief in the life of the soul after death: “I promise you that today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23: 43)
- Paul also taught that the spiritual body/soul/spirit of an individual lives on after the death of the physical body, and that the individual’s resurrection is guaranteed by Christ’s

“For just as all people die because of their union with Adam, in the same way all will be raised to life because of their union with Christ.” (1 Cor 15: 22)
- Some Christians also believe in the “resurrection of the body”, freed from corruption at the Second Coming of Christ, for Christ’s faithful. They also base this on St Paul’s writings:

“This is how it will be when the dead are raised to life. When the body is buried, it is mortal; when it is raised, it will be immortal. When buried it is ugly and weak; when raised it will be beautiful and strong. When buried, it is a physical body; when raised, it will be a spiritual body.”
(1 Cor 15: 42-44)

- Whether they believe in the literal physical resurrection of a perfect version of our own earthly bodies, all Christians are agreed on St Paul’s insistence that our physical bodies will die but that our souls live on immortally through God’s power.

CHRISTIAN BELIEFS ABOUT HEAVEN

- Many Christians believe that the physical body becomes superfluous after death, and all Christians believe that the soul of a human being lives on forever.
- Christian Art and Literature have traditionally portrayed Heaven as a place in the clouds where angels play harps, but this is chiefly because the images are meant to convey peace and happiness far from the cares of this life, and also because there is no Christian teaching in any detail as to what the state of being we call Heaven will truly be like
- The Christian statement of key beliefs, The Apostles’ Creed, speaks of the Christian’s hope and expectation of life after death as an individual:
“I believe in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.”

This again reflects the Christian conviction and faith that, at physical death, the soul of a just person rises to a new and eternal kind of life/existence with God.

- Some Christians believe that, at the end of the world signaled by Christ’s Second Coming (also termed “The Last Days”),

people’s mortal bodies will also rise to uncorrupted and perfect life for all Eternity.

- Because of this belief, some Christians prefer burial to cremation, which the more traditional believers feel in some way casts doubt on the “resurrection of the body”. Many Christians believe nowadays that cremation is perfectly acceptable, either because they interpret references to the resurrection of the body as symbolic rather than literally true, or because they argue that God must have the power to reconstitute a perfect body for someone even if there was no trace of their body following, for instance, a major disaster.
- To sum up, Christian beliefs about Heaven are very difficult to articulate, since Heaven presupposes an existence unimaginably different from and superior to earthly life even at its most joyous. All Christians agree, however, that the evils, sufferings and death which characterize the worst parts of life on earth will be wholly absent from Heaven. This is a prospect from which many Christians constantly seek to draw comfort when confronted with the sorrowful flaws of this world.

ROMAN CATHOLIC BELIEF ABOUT PURGATORY

- Roman Catholicism teaches that Purgatory is a place or state of temporary separation from God after death, where the soul of a believer resides until it is completely free from sin and can enter God’s presence. On this account, Catholics on earth pray for souls who may be in Purgatory, that they may swiftly be cleansed by suffering their sense of separation from God and be allowed to enter Heaven.

CHRISTIAN BELIEFS ABOUT GOD AS JUDGE

- Christians believe that God sees into men’s hearts more clearly even than they do themselves, and will judge them justly as “the Lord, the righteous Judge” (2 Tim 4: 8
- Many Christians believe that God will judge them regarding their conduct to their neighbours, meaning other people in the widest sense, and particularly the poor and the weak. There is emphasis on this in

many of Jesus' teachings and parables. Clear examples are:

- *the parable of the rich man, Dives, and the beggar Lazarus – Luke 16: 19-31*
 - *the Final Judgement – Matt 25: 31 -46*
- Christ's description of the Final Judgement contains dramatic teachings/warnings about the certainty that God will set the "righteous people" on His right hand side "to possess the kingdom which has been prepared for you ever since the creation of the world" (Matt 25: 34) and the "others" on His left to be sent to "the eternal fire which has been prepared for the Devil and his angels." (Matt 25: 41)
- More progressive Christians now tend to believe that this dramatic language was used to impress Christ's listeners, but not to deny the essential nature of the Christian God as loving and forgiving even of the worst sinners who repent, and that probably everyone is given a last chance to repent at the point of death which they accept.
- St Paul, writing to the Early Church in Rome, stresses Christ's forgiving power:
"There is no condemnation now for those who live in union with Christ Jesus. For the Law of the Spirit, which brings us life in union with Christ, has set me free from the law of sin and death."
- Christians believe, from all the teaching of Christ and His Apostles, that there is a connection between the goodness or evil of our actions on earth and life after death, and that God expects good deeds from us.
- Christians also believe, however, in God's infinite mercy and capacity for forgiveness (absolution) towards those who repent (repentance/contrition), even of the most wicked deeds, provided they are determined to try to put right the wrongs of the past ("reparation") and not to sin again ("a firm purpose of amendment").
- Christians believe that God's own sacrifice of His Son, and that Son's obedience to the will of His Father, has wiped out the sin of disobedience by Adam and Eve and given us all the possibility of forgiveness.

CHRISTIAN FUNERALS

- Christians, like all human beings, feel a sense of sadness/loss/bereavement at the death of close family and loved ones.
- A Christian funeral service acknowledges and sympathises with the inevitable and natural grief of bereavement, but aims to comfort the bereaved by stressing that the deceased has not simply ceased to exist, but lives on and has been (or will be) raised to eternal life in Heaven. The key words in many Christian funerals are those of Jesus to Martha just before He recalls her brother Lazarus to life:
"I am the resurrection and the life...all those who live and believe in me will never die." (John 11: 25-26)
- Christian funeral services vary quite widely, depending on the particular denomination involved. In most cases, there is a short service in a church or chapel, or at the chapel adjoining a crematorium in some cases. The principal elements are likely to be:
- *At least one Bible passage will be read, again stressing the Christian hope of eternal life*
 - *Prayers asking God to comfort the bereaved relatives and friends of the deceased*
 - *Prayers of thanksgiving for the life and contribution of the deceased*
 - *A short talk (or eulogy) about the person who has died, describing the deceased personality and achievements*
 - *The singing of one or several hymns - about resurrection or the comfort God offers in times of distress and loss, or hymns which were particular favourites of the deceased*
- Throughout, the person leading the service, whether priest, vicar, pastor, preacher or lay-person will try not to allow it to become too gloomy, but will stress the good things about the deceased life, and encourage those present to celebrate that

life and the hope of resurrection in a positive way.

- Following the funeral service, the deceased may be buried or cremated. The person leading the service will say more prayers at the graveside or before the curtains are drawn, asking God's mercy on the soul of the departed, and reminding attendees that all life comes from God, who alone decides the moment to take it away.

- Bereaved families often offer refreshments to attendees following a funeral. This gives an opportunity for those invited to express their condolences again, to offer further emotional and practical support to the bereaved, and to speak affectionately and respectfully of the deceased.

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)