

# Unit 5: GOOD AND EVIL

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

## OVERALL

This Topic is concerned with the ways in which religions understand the nature and origins of good and evil, and the ways in which religious believers cope with problems of suffering.

*An understanding of ideas about supernatural forces of good and evil*

*Religious approaches to the question of why there is evil and suffering in the world*

*Understandings of ways of coping with suffering*

*Religious approaches to the purpose of moral behaviour*

## SPECIFICS

*Different beliefs about God and the Devil or Satan;*

*Christian responses to the problem of evil: the suffering of Christ;*

*Coping with suffering through acceptance and prayer;*

*Discovering the right way to behave through the Bible, the example of Christ, the conscience;*

*The reasons why Christians try to follow a moral code.*



JUST TICK THEM  
OFF IF YOU THINK  
YOU KNOW THEM

## UNIT FIVE: GOOD AND EVIL

### WHY DOES AN ALL-LOVING ALL-POWERFUL GOD ALLOW EVIL IN THE WORLD?

- The obvious and undeniable existence of many forms of evil in the world presents great problems of understanding and acceptance for many Christians.
- Some Christians do find it possible, or even easy, to accept as a mystery the fact that an all-loving, perfectly good, all-powerful (omnipotent) and all-knowing (omniscient) God nevertheless allows all kinds of evil to exist in the world He created.
- Many Christians, however, find it logically impossible to reconcile the idea of a God who loves and cares for us infinitely with a God who allows the helplessly innocent (even tiny babies) to suffer through *moral evil* ie crime committed by human beings against each other, such as economic exploitation and enslavement of the poor, violence and theft, etc
- Many Christians also ask the same questions about God's apparent tolerance of *natural evil* ie floods, disasters, earthquakes, famines, etc, which may arise out of the forces of Nature which God created. These events also cause suffering to innocent millions while God apparently simply looks on.
- Many Christians find it very hard to understand how God throughout human history has "allowed" the innocent to suffer and die, while the rich and powerful on earth can often be seen to live long, prosperous and apparently happy lives.
- Many Christians are troubled by the contradiction between their belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent but – most of all – an all-loving God, and the fact that He apparently chooses to do nothing to prevent genocide, the agonizing death of sick and/or starving children, tidal waves, etc
- This raises the question in the enquiring Christian's mind whether God also created Evil when he created His universe, and is thus "to blame" for all that goes wrong, as well as to be praised for the good things which happen.
- Some ask whether some other force is responsible for the creation of Evil and whether God is not after all entirely

omnipotent. This is because, if God is not **unwilling**, then He must logically be **unable** to stop Evil existing and evil events taking place. This leads on to discussion of Christian beliefs concerning God and the Devil.

### VARIOUS CHRISTIAN BELIEFS ABOUT GOD AND THE DEVIL

- Some Christians believe Evil exists in the world because of the Devil, also known by the name Satan and many other names – as the evil spirit in the man in Gesara tells Jesus in Mk 5:9.
- Some Christians believe the Devil exists as a person who is the enemy of God, who rules in Hell and constantly strives to tempt human beings to commit evil and to turn from God and goodness. According to this belief, the Devil's aim is the damnation of souls and their eternal exclusion from Heaven.
- According to early Christian teaching, the Devil was originally Lucifer the Archangel. He was created good but became jealous of and rebelled against God's authority, and was cast down from Heaven with his followers.
- In the story of Creation in Genesis, Adam and Eve were tempted to disobey God's commandment to them by a serpent, whom Christian teaching traditionally identified as Satan in disguise. Nowadays, many Christians believe that the serpent, like much of what is described in Genesis, is an allegory aimed at conveying a truth poetically, rather than literally the story of the Devil disguised as a snake to bring evil and sin into the life of Man.
- Temptation by the Devil to turn against God is also illustrated in the OT Book of Job. It is, however, noteworthy, in terms of the relative power of God and the Devil, that God **allows** the Devil to cast Job down from great prosperity into poverty (Job 1: 13-17) into family bereavement (Job 1: 18-20) and illness (Job 2: 7-8). Job steadfastly refuses to blame God for these evils and to die in despair (Job 2: 10). (It is from the conduct of Job that we derive the expression "the patience of Job" to describe someone who bears misfortune or even annoyance with calm determination.)
- When preparing for his ministry of teaching and preaching by spending 40

- days and nights in the desert, even Jesus allowed Himself to be tempted by Satan. As fully human as any man, He was tempted with hunger (Luke 4: 1-4); with worldly power and wealth in return for worshipping the Devil (Luke 4: 5-7); and with pride in His status as God's Son (Luke 4: 9-12). The fact that He rejects the Devil's temptations is taken by Christians as an inspiring example that they must try to do the same.
- Some Christians believe that all temptation, suffering and wrongdoing in the world has the Devil as its root cause. Some suppose the Devil to have power cause natural disasters as well as to corrupt men and women into evil deeds and thoughts. This image of the Devil is reflected in his traditional portrayal in religious and other Art as being black or red skinned, with horns, cloven hooves like a goat, and the horns and even the head of a goat in certain portrayals.
  - Other, more modernist Christians do not view the Devil as a real person, and say his Biblical and traditional personification is just a dramatic way to show how strongly people are attracted by evil. Such Christians would argue that this evil actually comes from within men and women themselves, who often sadly choose to commit deeds which they know are wrong.
  - Whatever the various Christian beliefs about the reality of the person and power of the Devil, this does not explain the co-existence of Evil and God entirely logically. If God is Almighty, as Christians believe Him to be, He must have power to destroy Satan and prevent any and all evils which occur in the world, but apparently chooses not to. Why this is so cannot be wholly explained.

### **VARIOUS CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO THE EXISTENCE OF EVIL**

- Above, we have seen that many Christians find it impossible to explain logically the existence of Evil, or certain types of Evil, in the face of their belief in an omnipotent and all-loving God. The only thing many Christians feel they can do is rely on their Christian Faith and accept this contradiction as a mystery not to be understood during our earthly lives.
- Some Christians say Evil came into the world, which God wished to be perfectly good, because Adam and Eve misused the Free Will God had given them to disobey rather than obey Him. This spoiled God's originally perfect Creation, and brought evil and suffering into the world. Christian teaching calls this Man's "Fall" or "Original Sin".
- But, again, this does not explain the existence of Evil in a completely logical sense. If Adam and Eve were part of a perfect Creation, they must themselves have been perfect, and as such would not have chosen to disobey God. Also, an omniscient God would have known what their choice (and Lucifer's before them) would be, and could have prevented it, but evidently did not.
- One Christian argument or teaching is that evil and suffering are in the world to test us – as Job and indeed Christ Himself were tested.

### **THEODICIES**

- Theodicies are pieces of philosophical reasoning which attempt to explain or reconcile the existence of dreadful evil with that of an all-loving all-powerful God. Some of the most famous theodicies go back to the early Church Fathers. Christians from the earliest centuries were clearly therefore aware of the paradox or contradiction between their beliefs about the nature of God and the existence in the world of dreadful evils of all sorts.
- Bishop Irenaeus of Lyon (CE (Contemporary Era) 130-202), an Early Church Father, developed the argument that Man is tested by God through the difficult choices many individuals have to make and the sufferings often endured earth, sometimes quite unjustly. According to this reasoning, evil is necessary in order for Man's "soul-making", or growth in spiritual development, to take place. Irenaeus taught that Jesus was a Second Adam, who came to conquer the temptations and fears to which Adam had yielded. He also taught that Mary was the Second Eve, who this time obeyed and trusted God by agreeing to become the Mother of Christ.
- The Free Will or ability to choose which Man has been given by God often brings

suffering to Man, as do events which arise from natural evil (such as earthquakes). These are potentially fruitful events which present Man with the challenge to be good towards others, brave in the face of peril, generous in the face of poverty, patient in the face of his own suffering.

- The “fruitfulness” of suffering and evil is not, however, accepted by all Christians as valid in all circumstances. Such Christians will make the point that the suffering of a tiny baby is not “fruitful” since that baby is too young to understand and accept its own pain as spiritually beneficial. In the same way, the suffering of animals cannot be said to “improve” their spiritual strength and worth, or to teach them any valuable lessons. Undeserved pain can, according to this way of arguing, just as easily make people angry and bitter rather than improving their spirituality.
- In what is now termed the Augustinian Theodicy, Augustine of Hippo (CE 354-430) argued that God had given men and women genuine free will to choose to do evil, and that Adam and Eve introduced evil into God’s earthly creation by disobeying Him. Some religious philosophers even argue that this first misuse of free will brought not only moral but natural evil into the world, such as famines and earthquakes, and human illnesses and deformities.
- While Theodicy goes some way to explaining the origin of Evil, there is no fully coherent and universally accepted teaching among Christians about the problem of Evil. This is why many Christians find it a perplexing and worrying issue, and only those who rely absolutely on Faith rather than reason and logic are likely to be untroubled by the apparent contradiction of a Good God allowing Evil to occur in such profusion.

### **HOW CHRISTIANS TRY TO COPE WITH SUFFERING BY ACCEPTANCE AND PRAYER**

- Many Christians take the view that, ultimately, the reason for and origin of suffering and evil in the world are a mystery, which can at best be only partially understood by humans, and wholly only by God.
- Some Christians say that the incomprehensibility of much suffering in

the world makes them realise how dependent on Almighty God they are. They pray to and put their trust in God when they suffer personal illness or grave difficulty because they believe only God can “get them through”. Such Christians say this does not always lead to a cure of illness or resolution of the difficulty, but this means one simply has to go on trusting in God’s caring plan for us, even though we do not know exactly what that plan is.

- However, all Christians do believe in a compassionate God who does care about people when they suffer.
- Christians believe Christ to be the Son of God, and that God knows what human suffering is like precisely because of the agonizing and unjust death of Jesus on the cross. God has shown that He does not ignore our human suffering, but is ready to share it through His Son to redeem us. For this reason, many Christians say they “know” (that is, they have a very strong faith and trust) that God is listening and helping them when they pray in trouble and distress.

### **HOW CHRISTIANS JUDGE BETWEEN RIGHT AND WRONG**

- Christians believe, as part of their faith in and duty towards God, that they should strive to do good and avoid evil. In doing so, they are attempting to follow the way of Christ, who was without sin, and to become as much like Him as possible.
- Christians use various guidelines and teachings to differentiate between good and evil, with the aim of choosing the first and rejecting the second.

### **CONSCIENCE**

- Many people feel there is a sort of “voice” inside them which tells them whether a certain deed, idea or intention is right or wrong. This is most often termed the “voice of conscience”.
- Conscience makes many people (not only Christians) feel guilty or ashamed about certain deeds and thoughts they have, even if no one else will ever know about them.
- Conscience is capable of preventing us carrying out certain deeds and rejecting certain thoughts, even if we find them attractive, because we feel they are wrong

and would make us unhappy in the long run.

- Some Christians consider conscience to be in some way the voice of God, speaking to us and guiding us, especially if we pray about a decision of which we are unsure and are seeking the right way.
- Non-Christian sceptics, who doubt the validity or nature of conscience, argue that it is much more to do with “conditioning”. They insist that we have been brought up from birth by our parents and wider society to behave in certain ways, and to avoid/reject other forms of behaviour. According to this non-religious way of thinking, we become used from childhood to acting as if a parent or authority figure were directing our actions, even when such a figure has long since ceased to be physically present. In other words, they say, we are conditioned and there is no such thing as a conscience implanted in us by God.

### **THE BIBLE AS A SOURCE OF MORAL GUIDANCE**

- In addition to personal conscience, many Christians look to the Bible for moral guidance. They study its teachings and ponder, in private and in discussion with fellow-Christians, how they might apply to the challenges, problems and decisions they face in their own lives.
- The 10 Commandments (OT Ex 20) and Christ’s Sermon on the Mount (NT Mt Ch 5-7) are considered by all Christians, and many non-Christians, to set out essential and eternal truths about right and wrong, good and evil.
- The guidance in the Bible as a whole is not always straightforward, however, since the NT was written several millennia, and the OT many millennia, ago. The Bible was clearly written and first read by people of a very different age and culture/civilization from modern society and circumstances. Many Christians, as well as non-believers, therefore consider that much of what the Bible says cannot be applied literally and directly in our time.
- Some teachings, such as “You must not kill (murder)”, “You must not steal”, clearly mean the same now as they did when written. Others, such as on slavery or animal sacrifice, seem irrelevant to our times and difficult to understand. Some

Christians believe that these parts of the Bible are not to be followed, just as more progressive Christians take the story of Creation to be figuratively/symbolically rather than literally/scientifically true.

### **CHRIST’S EXAMPLE**

- Many Christians throughout history and still today have sought to identify right courses of action or thought by asking what Christ Himself would do/say/think in a given situation. They do this because they believe Christ, as Son of God, was perfect and never committed sin in His life.
- In particular, many Christians remind themselves of how Christ treated children, social outcasts, enemies, the weak and sinful – lepers, tax-collectors, the Samaritan woman, Roman occupiers, the woman caught committing adultery, the thief on the cross. Accounts of Christ’s behaviour in these circumstances, which Christians would strive in some way to imitate, are as follows:
  - *children – Lk 18: 15-17*
  - *the sick – Mt 4: 24*
  - *lepers – Lk 17: 12-19*
  - *tax-collectors – Mk 2: 13-17*
  - *the Samaritan woman – Jn 4: 7-15*
  - *the Roman officer – Lk 7: 1-10*
  - *the woman caught in adultery – Jn 8: 3-11*
  - *the poor – Mk 12: 41-44*
  - *the repentant thief on the cross – Lk 23: 32-43*

### **WHY CHRISTIANS TRY TO FOLLOW A MORAL CODE**

- Christians believe God to be perfectly good and that Man is “made in His image” (Gen 1: 27). This means that Man is capable of sharing in God’s goodness and having a nature to some extent similar to God’s
- Christians, like Jews and Muslims, are “ethical monotheists”. Christians they believe in the existence of a single God who is source of all goodness, and who is directly concerned about/interested in how human beings behave, especially towards each other.
- Christians believe God provided key and essential moral guidelines in the Bible, which he inspired its authors to write.
- The first 5 Books of the OT are termed the Pentateuch. They comprise Genesis (Gen), Exodus (Ex), Leviticus (Lev), Numbers (Num) and Deuteronomy (Deut). Ex

- contains the 10 Commandments brought down by Moses from Mount Sinai. Ex, Lev, Num and Deut contain the Torah, or overall Law of Moses, comprising teachings, examples and instructions and the events which led to them being issued.
- The stories of the lives and recorded teachings of the OT Prophets also illustrate, for many Christians, the way God wishes believers to live, and what human behaviour pleases God, and what angers and saddens Him.
  - As seen in the previous section, many of Christ's deeds and teachings in the NT make clear His concern for morality – a code to distinguish between good and bad or evil behaviour and thoughts, especially as expressed in the treatment of others.
  - Jesus used many *parables* – stories with a moral message – to illustrate what He judged to be good and bad human behaviour:
    - charity and kindness regardless of race/religion/personal danger and cost in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10: 25-37)
    - forgiveness/charity/lack of jealousy in the Prodigal Son (Lk 15: 11-32)
    - the confidence believers should have in the patience of God (Lk 13: 6-9)
  - As noted earlier, many Christians consider the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5: 1-12 and Lk 6: 20-23) to contain key teachings as to moral behaviour such as:
    - *the need for spiritual humility in order to be saved*
    - *God's comfort to those in sorrow*
    - *obedience to God*
    - *the obligation to be merciful*
    - *the obligation to work for Peace*
    - *faithfulness to the Word of God/Christ in face of persecution*
  - Many Christians believe that Christ in particular taught that the good or evil a person does in earthly life affects the ease with which that person will enter Heaven and the reward God will give the person there.
  - Fewer Christians believe nowadays, however, that even serious wrongdoers will necessarily be condemned to eternal punishment in hell.
  - Hell tends to be viewed by many Christians today not as a terrifyingly real place but as a poetic/symbolic way of expressing the human soul's distress if separated from God.

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)