

Unit 9: RELIGION POVERTY AND WEALTH

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

OVERALL

This Topic is concerned with religious responses to moral issues related to poverty and the use of money.

The causes of hunger, poverty and disease

Attitudes towards the poor and needy, giving to charity

Teachings about the use of money (e.g. gambling, lending)

Moral and immoral occupations

SPECIFICS

The causes of hunger, poverty and disease;

Christian teaching about concern for the poor and about the right uses of money;

Giving to charity in Christianity;

Christian teaching about moral and immoral occupations.



JUST TICK THEM
OFF IF YOU THINK
YOU KNOW THEM

UNIT NINE: RELIGION POVERTY AND WEALTH

THE CAUSES OF HUNGER, POVERTY AND DISEASE

The major world religions, Islam, Judaism and Christianity all teach that we should be concerned for and try to assist the poor, but this has very often been interpreted to mean the poor who live in our neighbourhood, or town, or our own country.

Today through the mass media, however, we are aware of great poverty among millions who live thousands of miles away – for instance on the African continent and Indian sub-continent. We learn very quickly and receive direct images of disasters such as earthquakes and floods, which can kill many thousands and make the survivors homeless and starving.

Despite this knowledge of the wretchedness of some of our fellow-human beings' lives, there is a wide and still growing gap between the living standards and wealth of the developed, mostly Western, countries and the poor in many countries south of the Equator.

Many Christians now accept that they should be aiming to help not only immediate neighbours and fellow countrymen in distress, but that they should be contributing to a global effort to remedy poverty.

Many Christians understand that the way they purchase goods and the prices they are prepared to pay, together with the financial policies of the banks who handle their money, and the political parties they vote into power, and the way they themselves treat the environment can all affect the poor everywhere on earth.

THE NORTH-SOUTH DIVIDE/ GLOBAL POVERTY GAP

There is a marked gap between the rich, who mostly live in countries north of the Equator, and the poor, who mostly live to the south of it. There are some poor countries in the Northern Hemisphere (such as Albania, Mali, and parts of Russia/China and the old Soviet bloc) and some rich ones in the Southern Hemisphere, such as New Zealand, Australia and Japan. The expression North/South Divide is generally used, however, to describe the gap between most northern and western rich countries, and most much poorer southern ones.

Huge differences in lifestyle/quality of life/life expectancy and health characterize this "divide, as do great differences in literacy, diet, mobility, clothes, consumer goods, quality of housing etc.

The poorer countries have in the past been called the Third World, but other expressions such as Developing World are used by others, who say an expression such as 3rd World is insulting and implies inferiority to the rich North (technologically advanced democracies) and the Second World (countries which have some technology and are developing stronger economies – such as Russia, China and the old Soviet bloc countries such as Poland/Hungary etc).

Whatever terminology is used, it is clear that hunger/malnutrition besets many millions on earth. Also, 1.1 billion people have no clean and healthy water to drink, cook or wash in.

Many millions live in "shanty towns" or other unhealthy dwellings on the edges of big cities in the Developing World. Such houses are often constructed from richer people's rubbish (corrugated iron, wood, cardboard, old tyres, even old cars.)

Many people have had to flee their original areas and land because of genocide, that is attempts to wipe them out because they are not of the same religion/tribe, and are now refugees in neighbouring countries.

Many Developing World children get no education, and girls are disadvantaged more than boys, and often have nothing but a life of child-bearing and rearing in very poor conditions.

Health care is very often unavailable locally, making long and dangerous journeys to the nearest hospital/clinic necessary for the sick.

Easily curable diseases such as measles, diphtheria and cholera kill many of the poor in the Developing World because the people have no money for the necessary injections or antibiotics. Diseases become rapidly epidemic in such circumstances, especially where living conditions are insanitary. Cleft palates and cataracts go uncured in children because there are not enough surgeons and operating facilities, and become major disabilities in their adult life. In the poorest countries, 25% of children die before they are 5.

Poverty traps its victims in a vicious circle. Parents tend to have many children, since some will probably die in infancy, because they want to ensure there are enough people to work on their land to grow crops, etc. They also want to ensure there will be sufficient adult children to support them in their old age. If the crops fail, however, there is not enough to eat for the number of people the land is meant to support.

Drought, flood, earthquake and famine are all deadly, because people often lose all they own and have no insurance to cover it. Emergency supplies are often inadequate at the national level in poor countries, and have to be brought in by the United Nations or non-governmental aid agencies.

Despite some recent improvements for the poor in the agreements signed by the World Trade Organisation, the poor countries of the South are weaker by far in terms of negotiating power than the rich ones of the North. The North controls the world financial and economic system, and can for instance increase the interest to be paid on loans made to Developing Countries, or refuse them any loans for development at all.

The countries of the North can "freeze" or even cut the prices they are ready to pay the South for its commodities and raw materials, such as bananas, coffee, copper, tin. This makes it very difficult for Developing Countries to get out of debt and become technologically more advanced.

The reasons for developing world poverty are complex, but are undeniably due in large part to the self-interested (many Christians would say selfish) policies of the rich North, which maintains its very comfortable life-styles at the expense of the poor.

This is because the North owns most of the factories (even if these are in the Developing World) and the multinational firms, shops and supermarkets which decide how much will be paid, for example, for flowers from Colombia or broad beans from Kenya.

Although a lot of Developing World debt was cancelled by the North at the millennium in 2000, the historical pattern has been that the South has simply ended up owing more and more and has been unable even to pay the interest on loans.

Aid Agencies, whose role/purpose/mission is to help the poor, often criticise the selfishness of the

North, calling on its electorates and governments to make fundamental changes in financial and economic policy to offer hope of foreseeable to the starving and destitute of the South.

CHRISTIAN TEACHING ON CONCERN FOR THE POOR

Christianity teaches that active concern and action to help the poor is a duty, not an optional "nice to have", for all believers, and indeed for any human being how claims to love God and his/her fellow man.

Much of the Bible, and Jesus' words and deeds above all, teach us how to treat each other, particularly the poor and needy.

Using the striking metaphor of the Shepherd dividing the sheep (the faithful) from the goats (the wrongdoers), Jesus shows (Mt 25: 31-46) the vital importance He attaches to kindness to the poor and helpless. His message is that this kindness will be richly rewarded in heaven if shown and severely punished if not.

OT Prophets frequently warned against mistreatment/exploitation of the poor, and Lev 25: 35-37 specifically sets out the duty to help poor neighbours in distress.

In Lk 4: 18-19, Jesus specifies that His "Good News" is intended in particular for the poor, the imprisoned, the sick and the downtrodden. All the Gospel writers, but Luke above all, drive home the message about the high worth of the poor in God's eyes.

John's First Epistle stresses:

"Rich people who see a brother or sister in need, yet close their hearts against them, cannot claim they love God... our love...must be true love, which shows itself in action." (1 Jn 3: 17-18)

Christians are now taught that members of all nations are their neighbours and brothers, and this message is enhanced by the mass media age of instant global communications, which make the world much smaller than in the past.

CHRISTIAN GIVING TO CHARITY

Some Christians set aside regular (weekly/monthly) donations to one Charity or several, often by arrangement with their bank. This has the benefit that Charities know in advance to some extent what money they can expect to receive in the

course of a year, or even a number of years, and can plan their projects to use it most effectively.

St Paul advised the Early Church at Corinth to adopt exactly this regular method of caring for the poor:

“concerning what you wrote about the money to be raised to help God’s people in Judaea. You must do what I told the churches in Galatia to do. Every Sunday each of you must put aside some money in proportion to what you have earned and save it up.” (1 Cor 15: 1-2)

Some Christians today also keep small collecting boxes at home and put in change or banknotes to help people in need, at home or overseas. People also donate goods such as clothing, unwanted spectacles, school equipment and toys, especially following natural disasters or at Christmas time.

Special Collections are taken annually in various Christian Churches for specific overseas and domestic Charities, for instance for CAFOD (Catholic Fund for Overseas Development) and the Catholic Children’s Society in Catholic Churches. Finance has also been set aside by other Christian Churches for charitable purposes, for instance the Methodist Homes for Children.

A number of Christians work for, as well as giving to, various Charities, for instance by manning their shops in the high street, or baking cakes for a charity stall, or knitting garments or driving goods to a charity collection point, etc.

Jesus taught that generosity of spirit, and the effort one has had to make to provide the gift are more important than the absolute size of the gift. (Mk 12: 41-44) (Lk 21: 1-4)

There are many Charities in the UK and elsewhere in the affluent world whose purpose is to help the poor and destitute, whatever the cause of their distress and whether in the countries of the rich North or the poor South. They may have a specific aim such as combating cruelty to children, or a particular disease such as leprosy. Others may have a wider overall aim, such as ending global poverty. This is the aim, for instance of Christian Aid, Oxfam, Save the Children, CAFOD and Tearfund.

CHRISTIAN TEACHING ON THE MORAL USES OF MONEY

Christianity, as well as the other major world religions, recognizes the practical need for money in order to feed ourselves and our dependants.

Christ (Lk 16:13 and Matt 6:24) and St Paul’s teachings (1 Tim 6:10) warn, nevertheless, against allowing money to become the central aim and desire of our lives. To do so would make us greedy and selfish, forgetful or uncaring about the needs of the poor and the wishes of God.

It must be recognized that Christians and Christian churches have through the centuries on occasion believed that wealth, material goods and earthly power are signs of God’s favour and approval, and are goals to be vigorously pursued. This has sometimes led in history to the poor and sick being despised or neglected. They have sometimes been treated as if they were to blame and being punished for some unknown wrongdoing on their part, or were inferior in God’s eyes to the rich.

In fact, Jesus warned against over-concern and self-satisfaction with earthly wealth and possessions, and lack of trust in God to provide:

“why worry about clothes? Look how the wild flowers grow: they do not work or make clothes for themselves. But I tell you that not even King Solomon with all his wealth had clothes as beautiful as one of these flowers. It is God who clothes the wild grass – grass that is here today and gone tomorrow, burnt up in the oven. Won’t he be all the more sure to clothe you? How little faith you have!” (Matt 6: 28-30)

Jesus also urged his followers to remember eternity and the shortness of earthly life, rather than being fixated upon material matters:

“Then Jesus told them this parable. “There was once a rich man who had land which bore good crops. He began to think to himself, “I haven’t anywhere to keep all my crops. What can I do? This is what I will do,” he told himself, “ I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, where I will store my corn and all my other goods. Then I will say to myself: Lucky man! You have all the good things you need. Take life easy, eat, drink, and enjoy yourself!” But God said to him, “You fool! This very night you will have to give up your life; then who will get all the things you have kept for yourself?” And Jesus concluded, “This is how it will be for those who pile up riches for themselves but are not rich in God’s sight.” (Lk 12:16-21)

Seeing wealth as less important than service to God is recognized by Jesus as a very difficult thing for human beings to achieve:

“ a man ran up, knelt before him, and asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do to receive eternal life? I have obeyed all [the] commandments....Jesus looked straight at him with love, and said, “You need only one thing. Go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then come and follow me.” When the man heard this, gloom spread over his face, and he went away sad, because he was very rich. Jesus went on to say, “It is much harder for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.” (Mk 10:17-25)

Many Christians interpret Jesus’ words as an exaggeration aimed at making the point of what absolute devotion to him means and how hard that is to achieve. It is also clear from the passage that he understands the rich man’s dilemma and loves him as he struggles with it.

The essential point is that Christians must not become obsessed with wealth and easy living to the exclusion of loving God and their fellow human-beings.

Recognising what following Jesus absolutely means in terms of worldly wealth, holy men and women such as St Francis of Assisi and St Claire founded orders of priests and nuns who take vows of poverty and renounce all personal possessions. Members of such orders devote themselves to prayer, and often have a special mission to help the poor.

While most Christians do not abandon all possessions in this way, most do recognize that a key use of money should be to help other people. Many Christians try to limit to a reasonable amount what they spend on themselves, and to be generous in helping those who do not have enough. Definitions of what it is “reasonable” to spend on oneself vary widely, of course, from one individual Christian to another. What is deemed essential by one person (1 television, 1 car etc) is deemed inadequate by someone who can afford and has got used to using 3 televisions and 2 cars, for instance.

Sometimes, Christian churches are criticized for being major land and property and art treasure owners. Many rebuke both the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England on these grounds, saying they should sell all these and give the money to help the poor.

Others say it is appropriate for the churches to have beautiful buildings for the worship of God, and to own art which gives Him glory. They also argue that the Christian churches need proper facilities and resources just like any other human institution.

CHRISTIAN TEACHING ABOUT MORAL/IMMORAL JOBS

Christian Churches do not offer their members detailed lists of jobs which it is appropriate to do from a Christian ethical standpoint. Nevertheless, Christians do try to choose work/professions/jobs/careers which at least do not flagrantly contradict Christian ethical beliefs.

Christians can sometimes face difficult ethical issues, especially when unemployment is high and a wide choice of jobs is not available. Their choice may be limited when they are themselves disabled, or when they must support a family member who is and therefore need a job quite desperately. All these factors may tempt, or indeed force, a Christian to take a job they would prefer on conscience grounds not to do.

Christians may, if they have scope to make a career choice, opt for “caring” occupations, such as doctor, nurse, teacher, social worker, etc, all of which have the aim of helping others. Other Christians might consider that being a lawyer or even a policeman is also caring for one’s fellow-men, by playing a role in the prevention and correction of wrong-doing in society. Not all of these professions are, of course, poorly paid.

While Christians can therefore in good conscience pursue a wide variety of jobs, those involving activities such as pornography or prostitution or child exploitation would be considered immoral and unacceptable by the vast majority of Christians.

Pacifist Christians, for instance the Society of Friends (Quakers), would consider employment in the arms manufacturing industries or the Armed Forces and those civilians supporting them to be wrong. Many other Christians, however, see nothing wrong in such employment, providing armed force is used only as a last resort and in the cause of right.

Many Christians would not wish to work, for ethical reasons, for firms which do genetic experiments on human embryos or use live animals in product testing.

Many Christians would also like to be sure, when working for certain firms or organizations, that they do not, for instance, exploit workers in the Developing World by paying very poor wages. They might check on the Internet to see what the activities of a company are across the world. Equally, Christians would not wish to be employed by banks which make even the poorest Developing Countries pay crippling high interest rates on loans.

Both the OT and NT make very clear how seriously God condemns the exploitation of one's fellow-man:

"If you sow the seeds of injustice, disaster will spring up, and your oppression of others will end. Be generous and share your food with the poor. You will be blessed for it." (Prov 23:8-9)

"And now, you rich people, listen to me! Weep and wail over the miseries that are coming upon you! Your riches have rotted away and your clothes have been eaten by moths. Your gold and silver are covered with rust, and this rust will be a witness against you and will eat up your flesh like fire...You have not paid any wages to those who work in your fields. Listen to their complaints! The cries of those who gather your crops have reached the ears of God the Lord Almighty." (James 5:1-4)

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)