

Students to work their way through and learn the information below.

Paper 2 – Themes

Theme A: Relationships and families

Contraception

Christianity: Many Christians think that contraception is acceptable in many circumstances, such as a couple unable to cope financially with having a child. They see this as a responsible use of the God-given autonomy that is part and parcel of being created in the image of God. Roman Catholic teaching states that artificial contraception goes against natural law. Every sexual act should be open to the possibility of creating life. This fulfils God's command to be fruitful and multiply.

Islam: Most Muslims accept its use within marriage. It should be for a good reason, such as financial hardship. According to the Hadith, Muhammad accepted the use of contraception for this reason. The Qur'an states that Allah does not place extra burdens on his followers. Some Muslims disagree. They see its use as going against Allah's plans and they believe that to use it shows a lack of trust in Allah. They interpret the Qur'an's teaching on infanticide as applying also to contraception: 'Do not kill your children for fear of want; we provide sustenance for them and for you'.

Sexual relationships before marriage

Christianity: Although he teaches that marriage is the appropriate context for sexual relationships, Pope Francis has stated that this is a matter for conscience rather than strict rules and recognised that financial and cultural issue might underlie cohabitation as opposed to marriage. In 'The Joy of Love' he said: 'In such cases, respect also can be shown for those signs of love which in some way reflect God's own love'. Many Christians believe that sex before marriage devalues the God-given gift of sexuality. It was intended by God to be enjoyed within the context of marriage. In the New Testament Paul said that those whose sexual urges were very strong should marry.

Islam: Islam opposes sexual relationships before marriage. The Qur'an refers to it as fornication and Shari'ah law prescribes flogging as a punishment. Pre-marital sex is seen as devaluing Allah's gift of sexuality. Muhammad stated that no man should be 'in privacy with a woman who is not lawful to him'.

Homosexual relationships

Christianity: Some Christians believe that the biblical denunciation of these relationships was part of the ancient culture and was concerned with the promiscuous excesses of fertility religions. Monogamous homosexual relationships reflect the same self-giving love that is encouraged by situationists and live up to the same ideals of fidelity and commitment that are a part of Christian marriage vows. Fundamentalist Christians believe that the biblical texts denouncing homosexual relationships are the word of God and so are valid for all time. They regard it as a form of fornication and Paul said that fornicators would not inherit the kingdom of God.

Islam: Islam condemns homosexual relationships as going against the natural order in which Allah created humans. It is therefore seen as a threat to social stability. The Qur'an describes how Allah destroyed a city for ignoring Lut's denunciation of their behaviour. Islam recognises that the diversity and richness of Allah's creation means that people are capable of different sexual orientations. The orientation in itself is not sinful. The Qur'an teaches that those with homosexual inclinations must control their instincts so as not to go against Allah's law.

Theme B: Religion and Life

Abortion

Christianity: In the Old Testament life is associated with breath, so before birth the embryo/foetus is a potential person. The embryo/foetus does not therefore have a right to life. Psalm 139 speaks of God seeing 'my unformed body', so from conception, the embryo is precious to God. Abortion is the wrongful destruction of a human being with potential.

Islam: Life is sacred because it has been given by Allah. To take it is therefore to go against Allah's plan. The Qur'an states that no one can die without Allah's permission. If Hadith 4 is taken as meaning that ensoulment takes place at 120 days, abortion before that point may be acceptable on certain grounds. Some Muslim scholars think that one ground for abortion is risk to the mother's life. They see abortion in this case as the lesser of two evils.

Euthanasia

Christianity: The Bible tells Christians to clothe themselves with kindness and compassion, and ending a life of intolerable suffering may be the most compassionate thing to do. Scripture states that death is better than a miserable life. Hospices enable terminally ill people to experience dignity and quality of life right to the end. They give the dying the sense that their lives are still sacred, whereas euthanasia denies that. Whatever their situation, all humans are created in the image of God.

Islam: Allah has planned the course of all lives, so the suffering of someone who is terminally ill may be part of that plan. Active euthanasia is therefore to interfere with Allah's will. 'It is Allah who gives you life, then gives you death' (Qur'an). Islam accepts passive euthanasia, which is allowing someone for whom there is no hope to die by withholding life prolonging treatment. Such treatment would in fact be interfering with Allah's will. 'It is Allah who gives you life, then gives you death' (Qur'an).

Animal experimentation

Christianity: The Catechism of the Catholic Church accepts this 'within reasonable limits' and providing there is no cruelty. Humans alone are created in the image of God and possess sanctity of life. The book of Proverbs teaches that a good man is kind to his animals. Some Christians believe that to inflict any suffering or discomfort on animals that is not in the animals' interests is not an act of kindness. It is exploiting animals' defencelessness for human benefit.

Islam: Animal testing is permitted to meet human need where there are no alternatives. The Hadith states: 'Whoever kills anything bigger than a sparrow without just cause will be accountable to Allah'. Islam teaches that human welfare takes priority. Animal testing to develop medicine is justified as being for the greater good. Animal testing for cosmetics is not permitted. This would be purely to satisfy human vanity and would conflict with the concept of being a khalifah. Animals are created by Allah to help humanity, not satisfy trivial desires.

Theme C: The Existence of God and Revelation

Visions

Christianity: The transformation in people's lives shows that religious visions are genuine. For instance, Paul's vision on the road to Damascus transformed him from a persecutor of Christians to a Christian evangelist who died for his faith. Because they are so personal, it cannot be proved that visions are genuine. It may be that some visions have a medical explanation, e.g. Hildegard's descriptions of her experience sound like the symptoms of migraine.

Islam: Muhammad's vision in the cave is central to Islam. In this vision he received his call to become a prophet. This was something that he received from Allah, not something that he sought.

Miracles

Christianity: The very thorough medical and Church investigations into the claims of cures at Lourdes are strong evidence for the genuineness of those declared to be miracles. They are signs of the love of God. Miracles are a psychological phenomenon, showing the power of mind over matter. People are sometimes cured because of their absolute conviction that they will be. Jesus said to many of those whom he cured, 'Your faith has cured you'.

Islam: Allah alone can perform miracles. The greatest miracle is the Qur'an. This contains Allah's complete self-revelation.

Nature as general revelation

Christianity: The Old Testament says that the heavens declare the glory of God. His presence can be detected in the wonder of the world that he created. It shows his omnipotence. God reveals himself solely through the Bible, which is the infallible word of God. Nature was corrupted by the Fall, so it does not provide a reliable guide to the nature of God.

Islam: Nature is one of the ways in which Allah reveals his majesty to his creation. The beauty of the world shows the beauty of Allah. One of Allah's 99 names is 'The shaper of beauty'.

Theme D: Religion, Peace and Conflict

Violence

Christianity: Violence may be justified as a last resort. It may be the only way to get rid of a corrupt regime and restore justice. In protest at the misuse of the Temple, Jesus overturned the merchants' tables. Jesus taught that violence is counter-productive. Violence encourages retaliation and so makes the situation worse. At his arrest he said to his disciples, 'Put away your swords. Those who live by the sword die by the sword.'

Islam: Islam is a religion of peace. A Muslim's greeting is 'Peace be upon you' and so violence is to be rejected unless there is good cause for it. 'Hate your enemy mildly; for he may become your friend one day' (Hadith). Violence is accepted in defence of oneself, one's community or Islam. In such cases war is a duty so violence is inevitable. The Qur'an teaches: 'To those against whom war is made, permission is given to fight'.

Weapons of mass destruction

Christianity: The possession of nuclear weapons is justified on the grounds of deterrence and protection. Governments have a duty to keep their citizens safe. Protection of the vulnerable is a key biblical teaching. The potential for indiscriminate killing and injury to thousands of innocent people, e.g. at Hiroshima, can never be justified on any grounds. These weapons create terrible long-term misery and their use does not show 'love of neighbour'.

Islam: The amount and extent of destruction caused by these weapons contravene the rules of lesser jihad so their use is impermissible. They kill innocent civilians and harm the environment. Grand Ayatolla Javadi Amoli: 'Scholars believe that possession and development of atomic weapons and WMDs are not permitted'. Pakistan is a Muslim country and possesses nuclear weapons. It sees these as a deterrent against India. It is prepared to use them in self-defence. It would then be justified as lesser jihad.

Pacifism

Christianity: Martin Luther King taught that hatred could only be driven out by the force of love. He achieved civil rights for black Americans without ever responding to violence with violence. This refusal to use force fulfilled Jesus' command to turn the other cheek. 'Blessed are the peacemakers' does not always prohibit some use of force and a war that follows the rules of the Just War theory may result in lasting peace. Bonhoeffer accepted that sometimes regimes are so evil that only the use of violence will overthrow them and restore justice.

Islam: Lesser jihad is a duty for Muslims. It is wrong to allow the practice of Islam to be suppressed or injustice to prevail. The Qur'an instructs Muslims to fight in the cause of Allah and of those who are ill-treated and oppressed. Some Muslims are pacifist. Islam is based on the principles of peace. The Qur'an teaches that reconciliation and peace are a better way of fighting than war. 'Paradise is for those who curb their anger and forgive their fellow men' (Qur'an).