

# FACTFILE: GCE RELIGIOUS STUDIES

## UNIT AS 4: OTHER ASPECTS OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE



### Other aspects of human experience

#### The role of martyrdom within religion

The Greek word *martus* translates as 'witness' so the root idea of martyrdom is to testify to the authenticity of the faith. Commonly it is understood today as giving one's life because of one's faith. Jesus himself died as a martyr for the faith.

Martyrs have always been venerated within the church. In the patristic era a theology of martyrdom emerged in which martyrdom was regarded as a second baptism, ensuring forgiveness for all sins. Tertullian argued this case on the basis of Luke 12:50 and John 19:34.

Martyrdom is an active issue today. It is claimed that more Christians were martyred in the 20th century than all previous centuries combined.

#### Persecution of religious believers

Millions of Christians today live in a hostile environment. North Korea is often regarded as the most intolerant nation towards Christianity. In Nigeria Christians in the South and Muslims in the North often engage in violent clashes across an interface. In India attacks upon Christ communities have increased; cf. 1997 Gujarat, 2008 Karnataka and 2010 Orissa. Christians in Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Syria also live under threat of persecution. Similar pressure has been exerted against Coptic Christians in Egypt.

Organisations such as *Release International* and *Open Doors* monitor persecution worldwide and provide

resources for further investigation. *The Barnabas Fund* classifies persecution of Christians today under ten sub-headings. J Allen, *The Global War on Christians: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Anti-Christian Persecution* (New York 2013) also contains numerous relevant facts and examples of persecution.

#### Relevance of Initiation

Baptism marked the universal rite of entry into the church in the patristic era, usually following a two or three year period of training. Varying understandings of this sacrament have emerged since the early church. Sixteenth century radicals challenged the practice of infant baptism, arguing that it was unknown in the New Testament. While many Christians accept that at infant baptism the recipient receives the Holy Spirit, other Christians argue that it is only a sign of what may hopefully happen at a later conversion experience. The mode of baptism (sprinkling, effusion or immersion) can also prove contentious within contemporary Christianity.

#### Understanding of Eucharist

This sacrament is a universal rite within the world wide church. The symbolism of bread and wine representing the body and blood of Jesus Christ is a uniting factor within Christianity. Yet this sacrament has also been a source of division within the church.

In 1529 Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli famously disagreed over the meaning of Eucharist at the Colloquy of Marburg. Luther accepted the presence of Christ in the sacrament and emphasised the

word 'is' from Christ's words of institution, 'This is my body ...This is my blood'. Zwingli preferred to emphasise the words, 'Do this in remembrance of me' and therefore denied the real presence of Christ in the sacrament and focused upon the memorial nature of Eucharist.

Varying emphases and understandings of Eucharist persist within global Christianity today. Varying denominations, clergy and congregations can vary the frequency of Eucharist celebration and be more open or closed towards widening participation in the sacrament.

### Writers who defend religious faith

The early church apologists fulfilled an important role in helping explain Christianity to their contemporaries in a manner that made it acceptable and coherent. Writers such as Justin Martyr and Tertullian challenged the irrationality and unfairness of state persecution and also appealed to their readers to form their own opinion about Christianity.

There is always a need for writers who can explain the relevance and coherency of Christian faith and morals within contemporary society. Two examples with Northern Ireland connections are C.S. Lewis and Alister McGrath. Lewis was born in Belfast and became a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford where he wrote his famous *Chronicles of Narnia* including the first book in that series, *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. He was also famous for several radio talks in which he explained the relevance of Christianity. McGrath was born in Belfast and is currently Professor of Divinity at Gresham College, Oxford. In his research into the relation between science and religion and in his many publications and by public debate McGrath explores how Christian theology is relevant for our modern culture.

### The relevance of pastoral and theological issues

Christian Theology provides a framework for a system of belief which attempts to make sense of life. It addresses the big questions: Who are we? Why are we here? Where are we going? The message that there is a supreme Creator God who seeks a relationship with us is a monumental message for all humanity and theological issues are the fundamental issues of life.

Pastoral situations encompass all the complicated moral and ethical issues that arise frequently in modern life. Advances in medical science have resulted in new and complicated issues around the creation, maintenance and termination of life. Christian try to be guided by what God has revealed about principals of life.

### The importance of religious conversion

Religious conversion was a controversial topic in the early church era. Individuals were born into a nation and religion and to attempt to change either was regarded with deep suspicion. The idea of conversion to Christianity was often regarded as revolutionary and subversive.

Religious conversion is still regarded with suspicion in many areas of the modern world. Yet a foundational key word in Jesus' message was 'repent', meaning to change direction. Christianity can be portrayed as a subversive religion if emphasis is placed upon a personal religious conversion experience. Conversely, it can be argued that a conversion experience brings enthusiasm and commitment to a person's faith.

### The relationship between religion and state

Prior to the conversion of Constantine, Christianity suffered periodic bouts of state persecution. Constantine produced a new relationship; the marriage of church and state as partners in promoting the wellbeing of society. This concept of church and state in partnership has persevered in Western civilization until recent times.

Difficulties arise when church leaders and political leaders disagree regarding policies.

Contemporary debates regarding parity of esteem for all religions and the rise of secularism has resulted in a diminution of Church influence. Interesting conflicts arise when state legislation is perceived to be in opposition to traditional Christian teaching.

