



# **Course Companion for A Level Year 2 AQA**

Component 2B: Section A: Christianity

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# Teacher's Introduction

This course companion is written for the A Level AQA Year 2 Component 2B, Section A: Christianity specification and is designed to offer students a comprehensive introduction to the material within that academic course. The sections and topics, therefore, mirror AQA's specification headings, and every care has been taken not only to help students to understand the key concepts and ideas within the course, but also to sharpen their critical thinking skills.

Alongside the main bulk of the writing, there are also a number of other features to help students with their learning and revision. Self-guided and group activities are included throughout the writing to better engage students with the material, and I have also provided glossaries, textual references and information on key thinkers where appropriate.

I hope that you enjoy working through this resource and that it benefits both you and your students throughout the academic year.

*August 2021*





# CHRISTIANITY, GENDER AND SEXUALITY

<b>Patriarchy</b>	A system or systems within a state/society under which men hold the power compared to women.
<b>Misogyny</b>	A held prejudice against, hatred of or contempt for women.
<b>Marginalisation</b>	The treatment of a group or person, e.g. women, as insignificant.
<b>Oppression</b>	The prolonged or systematic treatment of a group of individuals that threatens their dignity.
<b>Discrimination</b>	The unequal or prejudicial treatment of individuals based on a particular characteristic, e.g. gender, race or age.
<b>Egalitarianism</b>	A term referring to beliefs, ideas and principles that promote equality.
<b>Feminist Theology</b>	A branch of theology which studies scripture and religious texts from a feminist perspective, aiming to uncover how and why women are represented in texts by faiths across the world.
<b>Liberal Theology</b>	A branch of theology that aims to examine religious texts in the light of modern scientific and ethical knowledge, with the purpose of reforming religion where necessary.
<b>Protestant Reformation</b>	A historical movement in the Christian Church whereby followers underwent a schism, separating from the Catholic Church to form the Protestant denomination.
<b>Biblical Criticism</b>	The methods and processes involved in analysing the Bible to understand its teachings and message.
<b>Apostolic Succession</b>	The unbroken lineage of the Catholic clergy, which they trace back to the original apostles.
<b>Fundamentalism</b>	A form of religion or belief, often found in the Abrahamic religions, that involves a strict, literal interpretation of scripture and adherence to its teachings.
<b>Feminist Hermeneutics</b>	A series of approaches of interpretation that encompass feminist principles.
<b>Hermeneutics of Suspicion</b>	A term used by Paul Ricoeur to describe the process of a critical interpretation of a text to understand the author's intentions or motives.
<b>Diachronic Exegesis</b>	The study of the Bible as it developed over time and history, observing it as it exists in the present.
<b>Female Ordination</b>	The practice of admitting women into the Christian clergy.
<b>Reconstructionist Feminism</b>	A field of feminism that argues granting women technical skills and education is sufficient to erase patriarchal elements of religion or society and to dismantle and reconstruct the patriarchal structures for permanent change and true gender equality.
<b>Radical Feminism</b>	Within theology, radical feminism is a field that either rejects gender equality within Christianity or argues elements of Christianity are required to dismantle patriarchal structures within society.
<b>Post-Christian</b>	Refers to beliefs or views on Christianity that encourage a move away from traditional principles, instead aiming to build new ones.
<b>Golden Thread</b>	A line of teaching of prophetic liberation that Ruether traces through Christian scripture underneath its various culturally conditioned interpretations.
<b>Accidental Maleness</b>	The term Ruether uses to illustrate how Jesus' gender is not essential to understand his teachings.
<b>Master-Slave Relationship</b>	Hampson's term for how male-dominated Christian theology has created an oppressive and non-egalitarian image.
<b>Celibacy</b>	The choice to abstain from marriage and sexual relations.

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# CHRISTIANITY AND SCIENCE

<b>Scientific Method</b>	The principles and empirical methods scientists use to study of the external world.
<b>Hypothesis</b>	A proposed explanation for a phenomenon that has not yet been proven.
<b>Theory</b>	An evidentially supported proposal or system of ideas that explains a phenomenon in the external world.
<b>Evolution</b>	The process by which organisms come to develop and change over successive generations of their existence.
<b>Big Bang</b>	A theory about the beginning of the universe which holds that it resulted from a rapid expansion of matter from an initial point or singularity at a high temperature.
<b>God of the Gaps</b>	A theological argument by which gaps in scientific knowledge are filled with evidence of God. However, it is typically used as a criticism where people rely on the ignorance fallacy to prove God.
<b>Ignorance Fallacy</b>	A form of fallacy where a statement is asserted as true simply because it has not been proven false, or vice versa.
<b>God Hypothesis</b>	The term Dawkins uses to describe what he views as a hypothesis for the existence or non-existence of God.
<b>Creationism</b>	The belief that the world was caused by an act of divine creation, in contrast to scientific theories about the origins of life and the world.
<b>Intelligent Design</b>	A religious (or pseudoscientific) argument for the existence of God based on the claim that complex characteristics of organisms are best explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process such as natural selection.
<b>Fine-tuning</b>	The view that certain elements and constants of the universe are so precisely set that they require explanation (by reference to God).
<b>Multiverse</b>	An untested hypothesis that posits that there are numerous universes outside of our own.
<b>Quantum Mechanics</b>	The fundamental study and theories of the physical properties of matter at the subatomic level.
<b>Providence</b>	The continuing support, care and intervention of God in the world.
<b>Gene</b>	A unit or sequence of DNA which is transferred across generations of organisms and determines specific characteristics of the organism.
<b>Genetic Engineering</b>	The direct modification of an organism's genetic material to make it change its characteristics.
<b>Gene Therapy</b>	The use of genetic engineering procedures and techniques to treat or cure medical conditions.
<b>Human Genome Project</b>	A large-scale effort, still ongoing in various guises, to map and identify all the genes of the human species, and determine the function of all the DNA in the human genome.

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# CHRISTIANITY AND THE CHALLENGE OF SECULARISATION

<b>Secularisation</b>	The process by which societies and cultures gradually become less religious.
<b>Secularism</b>	The belief that religion should be separated from politics and that all are equal under the law, with no special preferences given to any religion.
<b>Freedom of Religious Expression</b>	The belief that human beings have the right to practise their religion without undue constraint.
<b>Church in Society</b>	The belief that in any society Church and state should be separate, having no influence over the latter.
<b>Militant Atheism</b>	A modern form of atheism that is secularist in its outlook, claiming that religion is irrational and religion should play no part in public life.
<b>Humanism</b>	A philosophical stance, often atheist in nature, that emphasises human reason and holds that moral values can be found through reason and experiences.
<b>Faith</b>	The foundation of Christian belief in God and often the belief in something that goes beyond evidence.
<b>Memetics</b>	A theory describing how units of culture (memes) can be passed from person to person via evolutionary mechanisms.
<b>Fundamentalist Atheism</b>	McGrath's term for Dawkins' version of atheism, which has its own misgivings and is thus irrational and faith-based.
<b>Non-overlapping Magisteria</b>	Stephen Gould's term which he employs to show how different questions, concerns and ideas.
<b>Materialism</b>	The view that only matter exists; there is no spiritual or supernatural realm.
<b>Fresh Expression</b>	A new Christian movement that focuses on non-denominational worship outside of Church contexts.
<b>House Church Movement</b>	A new Christian movement that focuses on emulating the early church by locating worship inside individuals' homes and buildings.
<b>Liberation Theology</b>	A Christian movement that developed primarily in 1950s and 1960s which uses Marx and other political thinkers to develop a theology of justice and a preferential option for the poor.
<b>Preferential Option for the Poor</b>	A Catholic social doctrine which emphasises the importance of focusing on those who are marginalised and/or in poverty.
<b>Alienation</b>	A Marxist concept that described how people are separated from their work and the fruits of their labours.
<b>Exploitation</b>	The unfair treatment of someone so that one can benefit at the expense of another.
<b>Orthopraxis</b>	An area of theology that focuses on the right kinds of actions and practices in their lives.
<b>Orthodoxy</b>	An area of theology that focuses on the right kinds of beliefs and doctrines that should focus on in their lives.
<b>Latifundia</b>	The traditional semi-feudal system of agriculture that existed in Latin America until the modern age.
<b>Ecclesial Base Communities</b>	Semi-autonomous congregations or groups of Christians who meet in addition to meeting for Bible study, work to improve the lives of their communities.
<b>Catholic Social Teaching</b>	Catholic doctrines that cover issues of social justice such as human beings, economic distribution and poverty.

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# CHRISTIANITY, MIGRATION RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

<b>Multicultural Societies</b>	Societies, states or communities with more than one religion.
<b>Multifaith Societies</b>	Societies, states or communities with more than one religion.
<b>Secular State</b>	A state or society that does not grant any religion a special status and maintains a strict separation of Church and state.
<b>Migration</b>	The movement of people between different societies, states or countries.
<b>Globalisation</b>	A broad term used to describe the various ways in which societies have taken on global dimensions.
<b>Exclusivism</b>	The belief that only one religion is authoritative in teaching the way to salvation.
<b>Inclusivism</b>	The belief that while one religion is authoritative or true, others may have partial knowledge about salvation.
<b>Pluralism</b>	The belief that no religions have a claim to absolute truth and that all may have equally valid claims to knowledge about salvation.
<b>Anonymous Christians</b>	A term Rahner suggested for people who possibly share Christian values but do not directly affirm him or his teachings or absolute principles.
<b>Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus</b>	A phrase meaning 'outside of the Church there is no salvation', which the Church in allowing humans to achieve salvation.
<b>Solus Christus</b>	A Protestant belief, meaning 'by Christ alone', that holds that only Christ can achieve salvation.
<b>Universalism</b>	The view that all human beings will eventually achieve salvation and acts during their earthly life.
<b>Global Theology</b>	Hick's vision of a theology that fairly discusses and weighs all religions without the inherent bias towards Christianity or other religions.
<b>Evangelism</b>	The act of spreading the message of the Gospel to unknown audiences.
<b>Interfaith Dialogue</b>	Discussion, debate and engagement between different religions and differences of their teachings.
<b>Freedom of Religious Expression</b>	The rights of religious individuals to freely practise their religion and communities.

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# 1. CHRISTIANITY, GENDER AND SEXUALITY

## What you will learn in this section:

- The philosophical and theological discussion around Christianity and issues of gender and sexuality, including changes in the nature of biblical criticism and in society.
- How secular feminist thought has analysed and influenced feminist theology and beyond.
- The continuing debate around female ordination in the Christian Church, with England and after 1994.
- A critical comparison of the views of Daphne Hampson and Rosemary Radford Ruether to the question of whether the Christian religion is irredeemably sexist.
- The various Christian views on sexual issues such as celibacy, marriage and homosexuality, and a critical examination of Christian perspectives on transgender issues.

### Starter Activity:

Do you think Christianity is a sexist or misogynistic religion? Research and note what you believe the religion does not promote true equality between genders. Copy down your notes as you progress throughout this section.

### Key Thinker

Name	Daphne Hampson
Born	1944
Died	N/A
Key text	<i>After Christianity</i> (1995)
Why are they important?	Hampson is one of the most prolific post-Christian thinkers in Britain, having challenged the foundational principles of the faith and reconciled with egalitarian feminist principles.
Did you know?	Hampson left the Christian Church in 1980, despite helping the Church of England to allow female ordination.

### Key Thinker

Name	Rosemary Radford Ruether
Born	1936
Died	N/A
Key text	<i>Sexism and God-Talk</i> (1983)
Why are they important?	Ruether is one of the most important feminist theologians of the 20th century, only contributing extensively to reconstructionist thought but also addressing many different social issues as part of the Catholic Church.
Did you know?	Ruether has been a long-standing board member of the pro-choice movement and has been an outspoken supporter for gender equality throughout her life.

## Introduction – Gender and Sexuality throughout Christian History

It would be fair to say that throughout the history of the Christian Church, women have not enjoyed the same religious and social privileges as men. However, the reasons for this are complex and often unearthy. For a cursory glance at Jesus' ministry does not reveal many teachings that explicitly exclude women. In many places it is easy to identify moral principles that are broadly **egalitarian**, encouraging both women and men to participate in a spiritual life. So why has the Christian Church been so slow to ordain female clergy, and why has a considerable amount of Christian tradition and theology been built on a foundation of patriarchy?

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as **sexist** (discriminatory against women) or **misogynistic** (hostile to women)? The with in this section, with the aim of examining whether misogyny is something in or whether it represents a distortion of Jesus' teaching in the Gospels.

But first, let's take a look at some of the key terms that arise when we speak of sexuality. The academic field of **feminism** is generally concerned with examining women have been traditionally **marginalised**, **discriminated** against and **oppressed** throughout society, with the aim of encouraging change that can restore equality between men and women. Importantly, equality may not just be legal in nature, if women enjoy the same rights as men, they still may not enjoy the same privileges. A significant proportion of people hold perspectives which encourage stereotyping and hatred against women. It is likely that true equality might not exist in a society in which they are present. In the case of **marginalisation**, women might be denied the same opportunities or power as men, while in the case of **oppression**, they might be forced to subject to unjust treatment. Finally, in the case of **discrimination**, women must be subjected to prejudicial treatment on the grounds of their sex or gender. Thus, for society to achieve equality, it is at the minimum necessary for all sources of oppression, discrimination and marginalisation to be eliminated.

### Note on Sex and Gender

The difference between sex and gender is still a discussion across a wide variety of disciplines, and is too broad and detailed to be given within this companion. However, a rough distinction is often made, referring to the primary categorical division made between men and women based on biological functions, and gender as referring to the culturally and socially conditioned ideas and roles. Now, the issue of sex is naturally more complicated than that definition allows, especially about intersex and transsexual individuals. The same is true of gender and gender identity of non-binary individuals. However, for the purposes of this guide, we will primarily use the terms of those who identify as cis women, with a brief look at transgender individuals.

So how does this all apply to Christian faith? Well, when we look at the Church's practice, it is clear that these different phenomena have been present throughout history. First, the fact that for most denominations, women have traditionally not been allowed to be elected to the clergy. While there have been roles for women seeking a spiritual life, they have been routinely denied the same opportunities as men. This has resulted in the Church being a **patriarchal** institution, meaning that it is men who overwhelmingly hold the balance of power. As denominations now supporting female ordination, it is still a pressing issue in the Church of how women have been marginalised and discriminated against based on gender.

However, in the case of oppression of women, the influence of the Christian Church is more complex. As we shall see in the next section, the traditional view of the Church has been to assign different but complementary roles. While this in principle might not result in the oppression of women in practice, Christian theology has often viewed women as second in status to men, when men have been granted intellectual, political and spiritual roles while women are seen as mother or wife. Thus, many feminist critics have pointed out that Christian theology's traditional misogynistic beliefs about women and family do challenge the ingrained patriarchal structures historically present throughout nearly all Western societies.

Moreover, as you studied in the previous section, much of the religious language used to describe the insistence of monotheism holds that God is essentially genderless. Even if this is argued to be the case, the use of terms such as Father and Son, King and Lord all reflect a male perspective on the roles are emblematic of divinity.

Nevertheless, despite the relative simplicity of our initial analysis of gender in the Church, it is not necessarily an easy solution to many of these issues. Some more conservative Christians have argued that while it is important to dissolve patriarchal structures in the Church, it is also important to maintain the traditional roles of men and women.

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inherently sexist or misogynistic. Such scholars often contend that with a proper search it is possible to unearth a meaningful egalitarian message from Jesus' ministry, free of patriarchy, able to support the spiritual experiences of women across the world. On the other hand, the feminist theologians who have claimed such a project is impossible due to the Church's inherent misogyny are also misogynistic in a variety of ways, from its theological foundations to the historical actions of more radical scholars, any truly women-centred or egalitarian religion has to confront and challenge the fundamental beliefs in the Christian religion.

These competing perspectives will be explored in much more detail later in this section when we look at the work of Daphne Hampson and Rosemary Radford Ruether. First, it is necessary to look at the Church's teachings on gender and how modern secular feminist views have challenged these.



## Traditional Gender Roles in the Christian Church

As we mentioned in the introduction, traditional Christian teaching on gender has been that men and women are equal but possess different roles. Although this is embedded in the Bible, it can easily appear quite old-fashioned from a more modern cultural outlook. What are the different roles from men, and is it really egalitarian to view women as essentially different? Do they occupy important intellectual and spiritual roles? If women are truly equal to men, should they be essential parts of the intellectual, political and spiritual world? In order to answer these questions, the Christian Church has typically turned to the Bible, looking at the creation account, the roles of women during Jesus' ministry and the writings of key religious figures such as Paul. In this section, we can question whether all these different aspects should be held to the same standard. For the moment, we will adopt the approach we should adopt when critically analysing biblical passages. For the moment, we will look at some key passages that have influenced Christian thought on gender throughout history.

### Gender Roles in the Bible

To start, let's take a look at perhaps one of the most well-known passages from the Bible:



*'So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.'* (Genesis 1:27 NRSV)

The first central takeaway here is that both men and women are created in the image of God. For many thinkers, this is a clear indication that men and women share equally in the likeness of God and purposes, equal in status. Yet, this basic statement of equality has also not been enough to prevent speculation about other differences between men and women, holding that these differences also mean possessing equal roles. Partly this has arisen out of theological speculation, but also from the account in Genesis 2.

*'Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him."  
(Genesis 2:18 NRSV)*

*'So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs from the man he made, and closed up the flesh that was there. And the Lord God made a woman from the rib that he had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. Then the man said,*



*"This at last is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
this one shall be called Woman,  
for out of Man this one was taken."*

*Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.*

As you can see from the above, this chapter weaves a slightly different story about men and women. Moreover, it seems to define three varying roles for women: helper, wife, and one flesh.

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examining Genesis 2 alone, it isn't surprising that theologians throughout history have held these roles, especially as they are consistent with many traditionally patriarchal views. However, there are two important questions to ask here. The first is whether the Genesis account is a reflection of the cultural attitudes of its time, and the second is whether Genesis is the word or will of God? For a little more insight into this question, let's take a look at gender in the New Testament.

### The Roles of Women in the Gospels

In the previous part, we brought up the thorny issue of whether cultural attitudes influenced the writing of the Bible. In this part, we can acknowledge an equally thorny issue: the perspective of the reader. For while patriarchal beliefs may be just as easy as our more egalitarian perspectives to read too much into potential meanings of the New Testament. For instance, some researchers and writers have speculated that Mary Magdalene might have played a much greater part in Jesus' ministry, with the writers of the Gospels either unintentionally marginalising their roles. However, the ultimate difficulty with such evidence is that it is beyond studying scripture itself! Thus, although it is true that spiritually active women in Jesus' ministry may have been marginalised, it is difficult to find evidence can be found for such hypotheses.

This is an important point, for throughout the Bible it is certainly true that women are often portrayed at best. Despite there being some stronger female influences, such as Deborah in the Old Testament, either have diminished roles in biblical narratives or are portrayed in a negative light as seducers. Even when virtuous women are mentioned, they are often adopting male characteristics. Yet there is still a contrast between the women in the Old Testament and the women in the Gospels, who at times subvert them. In fact, Mary Magdalene and Jesus himself displays very little of what we might traditionally call misogyny. Most narratives where Jesus espouses quite progressive values (for the time!) about gender roles lead thinkers to suggest that there is an underlying egalitarian core to the New Testament.

For instance, in contrast to the simple division we noted in Genesis, Jesus speaks of roles between men and women. While this silence can be taken to be a tacit endorsement of patriarchal values of first-century Judea, it may also be that Jesus did not believe in a strict division of active spiritual and intellectual life. Hints of this potentially arise in Luke 10:38-42, where Jesus visits Mary and Martha. There Martha is concerned that her sister Mary has been spending time in prayer and worship, neglecting her household duties. However, against what audiences would have expected, Jesus tells Martha that Mary's spiritual life is of deep importance and that she should connect with God.

*'But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is only one thing Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."*

Moreover, while Jesus' 12 disciples are all men, it is regularly suggested that he had a close relationship with women within his ministry who occasionally take central roles in the narrative. This is seen in the women outside the empty tomb (in Matthew's Gospel, Mary Magdalene and two other women) and the minimum suggests that Jesus held it to be important to present himself to men and women alike. This is on the peripheries of the Gospels, but it is clear that Jesus adopts a much more inclusive view of gender than many of his contemporaries. This contrast can be seen in particular in the writings of Paul in the New Testament.

### The Roles of Women in the Pauline Letters

Despite Jesus potentially holding egalitarian principles about gender roles, it is clear that a more patriarchal view was influential within the New Testament on gender issues. However, for many scholars, this is largely regressive views on gender in the Church throughout Christian history. For instance, while Paul is often seen as an egalitarian, on the whole Paul reinforces the view that there are specific gender roles for men and women.

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many modern thinkers have come to see Paul's teachings as problematic, even if his message remains important. However, before we turn to these problematic passages, it is important to note that in which Paul does seem to promote some kind of gender equality.

*'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; all of you are one in Christ Jesus.'* (Galatians 3:28 NRSV)

See, in Galatians 3:28, Paul does seem to indicate that the various roles or duties assigned to each other are meaningless when thinking about the salvation offered through Christ. It is unclear how much this passage promotes true gender equality. In a sense, it is promoted in principle but not necessarily in practice. Hints of this come through other passages, where Paul seems to present the view that men occupy positions and roles of authority over women. For example, let us turn to 1 Timothy 2:8–15 for a moment.

*'Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, if she desires to continue in faith, love and holiness, with modesty.'* (1 Timothy 2:8–15)

There's a lot to unpack here, but from the outset it is easy to see why critics might see this as misogynist. The first part, 1 Timothy 2:8–10, talks about how women should dress and behave. The passage claims that women should be submissive, learn in silence and accept authority. The justification given for such views is that the first sin of humankind disobeyed God, ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and was the fault of Eve rather than her and Adam together. This is a common view throughout the Bible, the idea present throughout the Old Testament that women are dangerous seducers.

Thus, 1 Timothy reinforces the idea that the ideal women are modest and submissive, confined to the household only as wives or mothers. Many modern scholars dispute whether Paul's views are as extreme as he is portrayed throughout the other Pauline letters. For example, in Ephesians 5:22–33, Paul writes that 'wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord', strongly implying that men have a greater importance than women. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 11:7 where, in dealing with head coverings, Paul declares that 'woman is the reflection of man'. In matters of authorship, there are sexist and misogynistic themes running throughout the Bible, arguably reinforced problematic attitudes surrounding gender in the Christian Church. In this section, we briefly look at how these attitudes have manifested themselves in the work of major theologians.

## Gender Roles in Christian Theology

One problem we noted in the introductory sections was that even if the Bible has problematic views on gender (from our modern standpoint), these views have not been readily challenged in the twentieth century. In fact, throughout history there have been various efforts to promote women's rights, but they should be considered secondary in status despite both men and women being made in the image of God. Thus, we can take a look at a few major theologians and see how sexist attitudes may have manifested themselves in their theology.

### Augustine of Hippo

Historical discussion around Augustine's views on gender and the roles of women has varied greatly. Modern scholars, such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, have argued that he developed a strongly patriarchal theology which explicitly and implicitly laid the foundation for misogyny to proliferate in the Christian Church. However, others have argued that Augustine was more progressive than many of his peers and that he advocated a broad sexual equality unusual for the time. Of greatest issue is his discussion of the Fall and his literalist (though this was not unusual in the fourth and fifth centuries CE) interpretation of Genesis 1–3.

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For Augustine agrees with Genesis 2's presentation of Eve as a 'helper' for Adam created as part of God's plan for humanity to procreate and spread across the world. Moreover, he holds that the ideal virtues for such a helper are loving obedience and subordination, which were fully present in woman pre-Fall (although not post-Fall). In contrast, pre-Fall man was a deliberative being created for intellectual pursuits. Despite this difference, what is interesting in Augustine's writings is that he ultimately viewed man and woman as equal pre-Fall, with women created subordinate to man in order to love. However, post-Fall, when humankind began to be corrupted, Augustine argues that this subordination instead becomes through the body (not of perfect love), with man becoming 'master' over woman. This is, however, possible to partially reclaim the pre-Fall unity through marriage.

It is easy to see how such a view can be construed as misogynistic. Why should loving obedience and subordination? Ruether argues here that Augustine holds that women are only secondary in the image of God compared to men, who are the primary. There is no evidence to support such an interpretation. For example, Augustine states in the *City of God* that women together with her own husband, is in the image of God', implying that women are also in the image of God of marriage. For Ruether, this subordination is a classical expression of the patriarchy that pervades Christianity as a whole.

However, other feminist theologians have argued that Augustine isn't as pervasive. Genevieve Lloyd, for instance, contends that Augustine actually puts forward that women are only bodily inferior, in contrast to much of traditional Greek philosophy and the Christian Church. One supporting piece of evidence for this view is that Augustine's *City of God* peers, does not place blame for the Fall upon women (as we saw in 1 Timothy 2:11-15). It suggests some kind of spiritual equality in pre-Fall relationships. Nonetheless, Augustine's views on gender equality what we might think gender equality requires today.

### Thomas Aquinas

Aquinas in many ways built upon Augustine's views of gender and the roles of women, agreeing with him that woman's main purpose is as a helper. Yet Aquinas also can be construed as more sexist or misogynistic in many of his ideas. For example, Aquinas argues that it was appropriate for God to create man first, to give him the dignity as 'first principle'. As such, Aquinas also contends that women being created second assists them in adapting to their role by tying them closer to and complementing man's role as head of the household. Furthermore, in contrast to Augustine, Aquinas holds that women are also subordinate to men by intelligence; man, he argues, was created for a greater spiritual and intellectual purpose that means that he naturally has authority over women by his greater powers of reason.

One particularly problematic view of Aquinas' is his views surrounding how man's image of God. While he argues the *imago dei* subsists in the intellectual nature of man, he holds it exists in a secondary way in man beyond that of woman. For example, in his *Theologiae*: 'man is the beginning and end of woman; as God is the beginning and end of the world'. Similarly, another contentious saying in the same work is his well-known remark 'woman is made from man's rib, not from his head, so she is not equal to him, nor is she his head, as the church is Christ's body, which is his head, from which the body is built up'. Ruether argues this can be taken to a false account of woman's mind and body and exposed as a medieval misogyny. However, others have argued that this is understood in the context of medieval biology, when it is imagined that a man's seed produces a child. Regardless, it can easily be argued that Aquinas echoed the cultural attitudes of his time and did little to promote gender equality in Christian theology.

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## Martin Luther

Luther is sometimes held up to be more progressive than his peers, partly because Reformers sought to make to the Christian sacraments. Luther, for example, did not see celibacy as a sacrament and argued against celibacy, saying it simply made a person liable to incontinence. There are still a number of problematic teachings he advocates which have come under feminist criticism. Luther, like Augustine and Aquinas, still argues that the main purpose of marriage and procreation, arguing that they do not have a 'primary' of themselves. He argues that once women are married they have a duty to have sex and procreate. The idea of a completely celibate woman was 'dangerous'. Instead, motherhood was seen as the only role a woman could inhabit. In this sense, Luther does not radically deviate from his contemporaries in other areas of theology. Luther proposed quite radical changes. In some ways, Luther was more progressive than his peers. He subscribed to the view that it was Eve that bore the brunt of the fall, and it was she who deceived Adam, and this is the reason why women are more prone to sin.

Thus, in all the three thinkers we have analysed so far, many of the sexist or misogynist teachings in the Bible are either developed or maintained in their theology. Whether they should be updated to modern standards is a more difficult question to answer. One problem is that, as we have seen, the Bible itself has traditionally been viewed as sacred and inerrant (or infallible). This means that many have been reluctant to contradict its writings on gender issues. However, nearly all societies have been ruled by patriarchal cultures throughout history. Even if thinkers were not disposed to challenge the teaching, they were already likely to be thinking in accordance with societal or cultural norms. To be of secondary importance. Thus, the challenging of sexism and misogyny of the Bible is unlikely to come from within the Christian Church. Instead, it took the rise of secular feminism to challenge Church and Bible teaching on gender, and it is this more modern perspective we will now look at.

### Discussion Activity:

From the passages studied so far, do you believe that there are underlying egalitarian or misogynist values? Or is it still predominantly misogynistic? Which sex or groups are most affected?

## The Challenge of Secular Feminism

Over the last few centuries, the traditional roles that women have been assigned have changed in many different ways. The middle of the nineteenth century saw the birth of modern feminism, with more women beginning to demand equal legal rights, including the right to vote. Some of these efforts eventually bore fruit in the early twentieth century, but even as women have come to occupy a more prominent space in working and political life, many thinkers perceive that there is still a long way to go. Even if women obtained legal rights, this did not eliminate the systematic cultural sexism that has shaped life. More troubling was the fact that this kind of systematic sexism was more deeply ingrained than wide changes in attitude from both men and women. This in turn required challenges to the ideas about gender that people held, ones which often prevented women from achieving their full potential.

For instance, we examined how scripture identified motherhood to be an important role for women. Outside of Christian tradition, this view is often upheld by societies and cultures. It is difficult to look too far to find an individual who holds that (for better or for worse) a woman's primary role should be motherhood. Yet there is no legal equality that can really challenge such perspectives. It would be wrong to tell women not to be mothers, in the same way it would be wrong to force them to be mothers. The rise of secular feminism naturally challenges this ingrained prejudice in many ways. What role should mothers have if they do not want to be mothers? Can women not enjoy a career without the pressure of motherhood? The secular feminist doesn't just challenge a theological perspective on motherhood. For while the secular feminist challenges some **naturalistic feminists** who do hold that there are certain 'natural' roles for women, such as motherhood, other more **radical feminists** have questioned whether motherhood is a product of patriarchal influence. For a brief look at such ideas, we can turn to one of the leading thinkers of the twentieth century: Simone De Beauvoir.

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## Simone De Beauvoir and Female Autonomy

Simone De Beauvoir provided much inspiration for second-generation feminists, especially with the publication of her 1949 book *The Second Sex*. She explored both historically and philosophically how oppression against women had manifested and become so prevalent in society. Famously, she identified how women are constructed as **the Other** by men's influences. The use of the term 'other' here refers to how women are separated and mystified as a class of people by men. This separation prevented men to perceive women altogether as fundamentally different beings, most commonly as more 'irrational', meaning that the idea of the feminine mystique was born as men falsely believed that women's thoughts were impossible to decode. But, as De Beauvoir points out, this 'Othering' is entirely misguided, the result of men failing to acknowledge the autonomy and rationality of women, instead defining them solely in opposition to themselves.

Now, De Beauvoir here acknowledges that, in a sense, everyone views and defines other beings in relation to themselves. This is natural considering our inner lives of psychological process just isn't applicable to gender. While there are various differences between men and women, none of them require denying women rationality, autonomy and human rights. Differences make women inferior. So the question remains why men have created the 'Other' and why this othering has required the mistreatment of and hostility to women.

We won't go into detail about the historical influences De Beauvoir identifies here, but her central thesis here effectively denies that essential differences between men and women exist, and that possessing different roles or purposes. Simply put, just because women can become mothers, they *should* or *have to* become mothers. In fact, De Beauvoir was often critical of the roles women were portrayed and envisioned in patriarchal societies. She held that becoming a mother was a 'body' and allowed her to be dominated by men, who wished to confine her to the domestic sphere. She conceded that there may one day be a world where women could have free choice and be supported in equal measure by men, in the present day, motherhood is a role of which they succumb to under this pressure, rather than through their own choice. De Beauvoir argued that women do not have an innate instinct towards being mothers. Rather, the value to a woman if it is through her own autonomous, rational choice.

### Applying De Beauvoir's Ideas to Christianity

So you can see how such ideas really hold Christian tradition to the fire. If De Beauvoir's ideas are a reason to oppose female ordination or prevent women from occupying the top positions in the church. Similarly, such ideas have led to a broad shift in thinking in many twenty-first-century societies. Now that women should not be pressured into motherhood or family life, and, in fact, a push to encourage women into perceived 'rational' subject areas such as science and technology. Greater attention is given to women who pushed beyond societal expectations in their careers and significant academic achievements. For instance, prior to the 1970s, many of the early computer programmers and coders were women, most of whom didn't get proper credit for their work.

Furthermore, such shifts in thinking have also led to many more rights being granted to women by governments. Whether it be the legalisation of abortion or the right to equal pay for women. These gender inequalities as phenomena to ultimately be eradicated, and laws are still being passed to address the roles of the sexes in everyday life. Such laws implicitly acknowledge that the state does not dictate the roles a woman should possess and that men and women should not be restricted by their gender. Similarly, such ideas have been reflected in corporate practice, where companies take steps to ensure there is no gender bias in their hiring of employees (although a long way to go).

Lastly, feminist criticism showed that if sexism and misogyny were cultural or societal issues, they could be explained and analysed simply on an individual level. For our culture shapes the way we view the world, and viewing any person as better or worse for holding misogynistic beliefs was missing the point. It helped shape those beliefs. As such, feminist critics pointed out that sexism and misogyny are embedded in the laws, principles and workings of society) and **systemic** (present throughout society, not just a particular part). If this was the case, then, despite increased legal changes, misogyny was a greater effort than simply aiming to change laws or minds.

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In any case, these developments in secular feminism naturally started to impact on one hand, the Christian Church came directly under attack by critics who accused misogyny. But, on the other hand, there were many theologians who recognised interesting ideas in the context of Christian thought. For if Jesus did argue for equality, we still view the Bible and Christian tradition as inherently patriarchal? Is there a Christianity from such criticisms? These ideas we will explore in the next three sections.

## The Development of Feminist Theology

We've seen so far how secular feminism posed a challenge to Christian tradition and the notion of essential gender roles. However, there are potentially two different ways in which this challenge is seen. In one sense, it has challenged the long-held trust in the Christian faith as a whole, especially concerning the Bible and misogyny. However, in another sense, it is important to recognise that the challenge has also equally led to a very positive growth in another distinct field: **feminist theology**. This section will explore the work of women within the Christian faith and analyse the Christian Church and Christian thought in light of feminist criticism, with the aim of eventually guiding Christian thought to more egalitarian outcomes.

For take your minds back to our previous examination of gender roles in the Bible. When we looked at aspects of the Bible such as its miracles and religious experiences, we might have seen how these aspects fit with our modern scientific world view. We might simply chalk up the more fantastical aspects to the writers' mythological world view and hold that the important part of, say, the message behind them. For instance, Jesus' healings might simply represent the idea of reconciliation. The same reconciliation is arguably not possible with gender issues. Here we are faced with the moral message of the Bible, and it appears to conflict with our modern-day ethical views. How can we effectively take out these problematic aspects without simply reading into the Bible our own views? This will be the focus of this section.

## The Changing Approach to Biblical Criticism

In the first part of this section, we will explore how Bible scholars, embedded in a modern world, now face the difficult question of how to reconcile more antiquated scriptural perspectives with the modern world. On the one hand, there is often the wish of scholars to practise **exegesis**, the critical interpretation of a text. More broadly, though, exegesis is often referred to as attempting to extract the real meaning of a text based on a variety of factors such as historical context and authorial intention. However, opposing that is **eisegesis**, often referred to as 'reading into' a text, which actively allows one's own views, biases and agendas to influence the meaning of the text.

Now, most biblical scholars do want to find the ultimate meaning behind the Bible, but they are cautious of allowing eisegesis to creep into their analysis. The same is generally true of theologians. While it is important to acknowledge the sexism and misogyny in the Bible, many theologians unearth (particularly in the figure of Jesus) a genuinely egalitarian set of moral principles that can inform their own views. Yet, as we noted in our previous examination of biblical criticism, this is not always easy. We don't know who most of the biblical authors were, so separating their personal views from the actual events they were writing about isn't a completely transparent or objective process.

Nevertheless, with advances in history, archaeology and textual analysis, this process can be carried out, arguably with considerable success over the last few hundred years. This led to the rise of **liberal theology** in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Liberal theology was a reform Christian teaching based on modern knowledge of science, ethics and history. It was part of the **Enlightenment**, a broader philosophical movement that emphasised the importance of reason and science. One example of liberal theology in action is the acceptance of evolution. Accepting the theories of evolution means naturally challenging the creation accounts in Genesis. But liberal theologians would argue that the theories of evolution and science have precedence over biblical accounts, and so attempt to reanalyse the meaning of Genesis in light of modern science. The same is very much true in feminist theology, which builds upon the foundation of liberal theology by examining potentially sexist and misogynistic passages in the Bible. Using knowledge of modern science and history, feminist theologians attempt to reinterpret these passages in a way that is more egalitarian and less sexist.

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which the authors were enmeshed, certain core philosophical ideas about God (such as methods of scriptural reasoning, feminist scholars attempt to strip the Bible of misconceptions chalked up to the ignorance of the writers. In other words, it accepts that ethical principles and sexuality, may have been made since the writing of the Bible, and attempts to uncover what that may be more representative of the will of a benevolent, compassionate God. We will look a little more detail by looking at a particular branch of biblical study known as **feminist hermeneutics**.

## Ruether and Feminist Hermeneutics

Now, this topic goes a little beyond what you are required to know as part of the course, but it is extremely useful for understanding the theology of Rosemary Radford Ruether, a theologian who is covering in more detail in the next chapter. For Ruether helped pioneer the use of **feminist hermeneutics**, which proved very influential across the last 50 years. Moreover, she held that engaging with the Bible was essential in reclaiming true Christian principles and morals from the corruption of the scripture at the time of its writing.

So what is feminist hermeneutics in the context of studying scripture? Well, the **hermeneutics** are the methodologies used when attempting to interpret a text. Most importantly, they are concerned with attempting to eliminate the different assumptions and biases we bring to the text when we interpret texts and how we can best understand the meaning of scripture. **Feminist hermeneutics** refers to the different methodologies feminists can use for interpreting the Bible, questioning whether the traditional methods used to interpret the Bible within Christianity perpetuate historical misogyny and sexism within.

For instance, as part of her analyses, Ruether adopts from Paul Ricoeur the **hermeneutic** way of analysing texts by considering how people might have previously interpreted it, and how they have personally gained from interpreting it in a certain way. In the case of the Bible, the interpretation throughout history has been primarily from a male perspective and has evolved in line with what benefits men the most. In a typically patriarchal environment, it is arguably justified considering the influence of male theologians, such as Augustine, who on the whole deviated from the text to a potentially very misogynistic interpretation of the Bible.

The **hermeneutic** of suspicion, however, requires more than mere scepticism; it requires a view of the Bible as a historical document, not the absolute word of God. What this means is that the Bible does not self-reveal any absolute concrete teachings. Instead, interpretations are always shaped by the perspective of the reader. Such, Ruether can point out that the legacy of patriarchal thought in Christianity is the result of male perspectives reading what they wish to see into the Bible rather than the Bible as any other historical source. Thus, in order to rectify this imbalance, what is required is a conscientious attempt to understand the Bible from a female perspective or context. One problem which you have already studied is the use of gender-specific language in the Bible. Ruether argues that it is partly the lack of female analysis and interpretation of the Bible that has made the role of God so prevalent and ubiquitous, and this in turn has led to a false symbol of 'female' in Christian thought, even if, in principle, it is held by Christian thinkers that God is not female.

One final important element of feminist hermeneutics worth noting is **diachronic** hermeneutics. How exegesis is the process of 'reading out', so what does 'diachronic' mean here? It refers to the aim of historians to understand a text through the differences in understanding it over time. Diachronic exegesis, therefore, attempts to understand the true meaning of the text as it would have been interpreted by ancient and modern audiences. Through this process, we can see how particular aspects of scripture would have been understood by those absorbed in the time of writing, as opposed to how they are understood now. What may appear normal to us today may have been received in vastly different ways by earlier audiences, and examining these differences is key to reconstructing a gender-equal theology within Christian thought. This is especially true when looking at how the 'God-male-female' hierarchy emerged over time and how a gender-equal version of Christianity might exist beneath embedded cultural attitudes.

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## The Challenge to Church Tradition

The last section was probably a little bit heavy, but it provides a key insight into how some people approach the Bible a little differently from most. Importantly, they take the four canonical texts and expand on its methods of interpretation by incorporating more female perspectives. They also critique the largely male interpretation of the Bible throughout history. However, despite these methodologies being embraced by many scholars, different feminist theologians have reached different conclusions. What Ruether gains from such methods is, as we shall see, a more radical approach than that of more moderate theologians such as Daphne Hampson. Nevertheless, some clear challenges to Christian tradition. In the next part, we will look at the specific case of **female ordination**. We will go a little further and look more specifically at how feminist approaches to the Bible challenge traditional views on gender roles. In particular, let us first consider a quick overview of modern Catholic teaching on the feminist issues we have so far analysed.

### The Catholic Church on Gender Roles

Although there have been hints of change within its walls in recent times, the Catholic Church arguably sets out its position on the roles of women in an apostolic letter called the *Mulieris Dignitatem*, written by Pope John Paul II in 1988. It covers a number of different themes but is primarily concerned with outlining the Church's position on gender roles in light of changing secular values. As such, it takes a broad look at the women in the Bible, analysing their place in Catholic tradition and drawing on the example of Jesus as a supporter of women's dignity and importance. One particularly important concept analysed is that of **Theotokos** (God-bearer) in reference to Mary. The *Mulieris Dignitatem* uses Mary as a key exemplar of the kind of virtues and roles women are supposed to embody since she is viewed to be one of the people who has been most intimately connected with God in human history. Moreover, she possesses a role that no other woman could have, and it symbolises the relationship with God that humanity should strive to achieve.

The *Mulieris Dignitatem* in particular analyses the position of Mary in light of Genesis 1 and 2. In creation, it holds that Eve's role was separate from Adam's. In contrast to many feminist theologians, it holds that Eve's creation from Adam in Genesis 2 was simply out of necessity, and that both men and women are equal in status and there are no contradictions between the two. However, the *Mulieris Dignitatem* also contains much more controversial passages. For example, it emphasises the importance of what have often been perceived to be regressive virtues. For example, it glorifies Eve for her role as a 'helper' for Adam and stresses the virtue of 'femininity'. Furthermore, it warns against the 'masculinisation' of women and the 'emasculinisation' of men. It also responds to modern secular criticisms of these roles, arguing that the Church should not be influenced by feminist thought. Critics, as we shall see, have contended that such passages perpetuate gender roles, even if the Catholic Church is in principle committed to gender equality and the dignity of all people.

The key takeaway from the *Mulieris Dignitatem* is that the Catholic Church, despite the challenges from feminist theologians, does not hold there to be any significant contradiction between the Old and New Testament when it comes to gender. The Gospels, for them, still uphold the idea that men and women are equal but possessing different roles, a perspective now sometimes called **complementarity** in a biblical context. Moreover, the Catholic Church has resisted criticism of this perspective and has not endorsed complete equality. This has naturally resulted in some tension since, as we have seen, the Church still prevents **female ordination** – the elevation of women to roles of spiritual power. For example, women cannot become bishops, deacons, priests or even the Pope. In the Catholic Church, in contrast to other Christian denominations, which, in the last 25 years, has allowed for female ordination, though not without controversy.

The question remains, however, about whether female ordination by itself represents a significant challenge to the Church. In the next section, we will look at this topic in a bit more detail and use it as a case study for looking at Christian teaching on gender roles.

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#### Activity:

Read the *Mulieris Dignitatem* passages 18–19. Write down three ways in which the Church promotes true gender equality and three ways in which it might still perpetuate inequality. As a whole, do you believe the Church still perpetuates unequal gender roles?



## Female Ordination in the Christian Church

The ordination of women priests and bishops is likely to be an issue you have heard of. Among more liberal Christian denominations or those without an internal hierarchy, it is a much easier decision to make. Why shouldn't women be allowed to be in positions of spiritual authority if they were made equal under God? Yet, for more conservative branches of the Christian Church, it is an issue that still rages on until this day. For denominations such as the Catholic Church contend in response that they do not engage in concerted efforts to deny women a spiritual gift. Women are free to worship God in the same manner as men and can even choose to become nuns, joining a convent if they wish. It is simply the nature of the Catholic tradition and scripture, passed down since the beginning of the Church, that determines that it should be men who fulfil the primary role of spiritual authority.

For instance, we looked at the importance of **apostolic succession** in Year 1 and how the Catholic Church (among others) can arguably trace back the lineage of the clergy to the apostles themselves. Yet, since the apostles were also all men, it has often commonly been affirmed that even Jesus held that it should be men that hold responsibility for preaching the message of the Gospels. While many might push against such arguments, it remains the case that such a long tradition is difficult to break. The Catholic Church, which holds great stock in the importance of the Church and tradition. Pope Paul II declared in his apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* that the Church does not elevate women to roles of spiritual power, and this declaration is still maintained in documents such as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the canon law of the Catholic Church.

So why did the Anglican Church break away from tradition in recent years and allow women to be ordained? In the next part, we will examine in more depth the arguments and reasons we will examine in more depth in the next part.

### Ordination in the Anglican Church

The roots of female ordination in the Church of England can arguably be traced back to the 16th century. In Year 1, the Protestant Reformation introduced the notion of a new beginning, a break from the old. At the very least, that of the Church and tradition (or for some was the only true Church). Ideas about apostolic succession could easily be transformed and that Church tradition was not absolutely fixed. Although many still adhered to only male ordination, some Churches broke away and allow women to preach. Perhaps the most famous was the Quakers, who held that Christ worked equally through men and women. Thus, since its founding, the Quakers generally eschewed having any central Church authority and allowed women to minister alongside men.

Yet, despite this potential foundation for female ordination, it was not until 1994 that women were ordained in the UK as part of the Church of England. This had followed a trend of other churches in international countries ordaining women and thus pressuring the Anglican Church to achieve greater gender equality in the clergy. Yet, even the Act of Synod passed in 1993, which allowed for female ordination in the Anglican Church, was controversial as it allowed parishes to refuse to ordain women. It was thus seen by some as a half measure, allowing women to join the priesthood while still accepting sexist or misogynistic views within the Church itself.

Moreover, women still face more legal obstacles than men in joining the clergy. Even if they were ordained as priest, they were still restricted to certain roles and could not become bishops. There were various attempts in the 20th century but there was a lot of infighting within the Anglican Church as there were still many who opposed female ordination and did not wish for measures to be imposed on them without some form of protection from the Church. Even in 2012, the General Synod failed to achieve a majority to pass legislation allowing for female bishops, and it wasn't until 2014 that similar legislation was passed. The first woman bishop was ordained at the end of that year.

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The primary difficulty facing the Anglican Church was that even though the Reformation sacred tradition, there were still many so-called **traditionalists** who held that Church's secondary importance to be maintained in the case of female ordination. Such traditionalists believe there is a **divine order** present within the Church, similar to the beliefs of most Catholics. This order should be preserved for future generations. Another key issue was that many of the traditionalists had support from a significant portion of their Anglican congregations. One divisive point of contention for traditionalists as a whole did not want to see female bishops (or priests) overseeing ordinations, such that parishes could still have oversight from female bishops.

There are many different ways of looking at this problem. More radical feminist theologians argue that sexism and misogyny are still systemic within the Anglican Church. Even if granted, women will still face significant hurdles in becoming ordained and are still faced with sexist attitudes from parishes (which are accommodated by the Church). If this is the case, the Church arguably should not be acquiescing to sexist demands from parishes in re-ordaining clergy. However, more moderate feminist theologians might simply argue that the slow progress of ordination is simply a manifestation of slow progress. All change takes time, and historical misogyny and sexism within the Church in just a day. Moreover, they argue it is unfair to impose women bishops on those who feel uncomfortable by the lack of freedom of religious expression.

What the issue of female ordination exposes is the tricky balancing of opinions and will argue it is important to challenge sexism and misogyny but also to question what change. Maybe Christianity will always be irredeemably sexist so long as it maintains an imbalance of power towards men in the clergy. The issue of female ordination among many Christian theologians that women are secondary in status to men, not be equal under God. However, now we can examine these problems a little further through the thoughts of two important feminist theologians: Rosemary Radford Ruether and

## Modern Feminist Theology

In the last section, we looked at how many of the issues to do with historical sexism can be analysed within the context of female ordination. In this section, we will take a pertinent tack and look at how the thoughts of two modern feminist theologians provide significant insight on whether the Christian religion possesses an inherent issue that is commonly encountered by those seeking to reform or re-evaluate Christianity with the ways in which 'maleness' is embedded in the religion itself. From gendering the nature of Jesus, unpicking the patriarchal elements of Christian thought is a deep task, and some critics have contended it is ultimately impossible. Moreover, it is hard to determine if Christianity can accommodate such changes.

Yet, many still argue that change is always slow and it is key not to be fatalistic about Christianity and feminist thought. This kind of attitude is typically embodied by **radical feminist theologians**, who aim to dismantle elements of the religion in order to eventually replace them with more egalitarian principles. Therefore, while it focuses exclusively on the problem of sexism in thought, it does not endorse a wholesale rejection of the religion itself. The central tenets about Christ and God which do not incorporate an imbalance in gendered language and patriarchal focus on 'maleness' in Christianity's tradition. Thus, by changing the foundations of the faith, as well as the patriarchal structures of the Church itself, it becomes possible for female voices to be heard in the Church.

The counterpart to reconstructionist feminist theology is more **radical feminist** **Christian** perspective on the faith. Their views are often labelled 'post-Christian' because of their rejection of the essential elements of the religion, such as its male saviour in the form of Jesus or authority of the Church. As such, their arguments often focus on the ways in which Christianity is thought to be irredeemably sexist; that it is so couched in patriarchal influence as to

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impossible to reconstruct it according to egalitarian principles. Yet proponents of themselves as pessimistic. It's simply a natural consequence of 2,000 years of his religion finds itself in such an unsavable state. Rather, for post-Christian thinkers find new ways forward that build a new religion or spirituality from the ashes of one that accommodates genuine gender equality or at least truly empowers women.

To start, however, we shall look at reconstructionist feminist theology in the form of Rosemary Radford Ruether. We have already covered part of her thoughts earlier when we looked at the character of Jesus, and, as such, it may be worth going back to her work, including the companion on this topic, to the more tricky concepts we will now be analysing.

## Rosemary Radford Ruether

Rosemary Radford Ruether is a well-known American feminist theologian who has greatly developed critical analysis into the various patriarchal elements of Christianity (and onwards). While her early work drew upon liberal feminist traditions, she ended up with a more radical perspective and embodied what can now be thought of as classic reconstructionist feminism in the Christian faith. In particular, she pioneered the use of feminist hermeneutics, which sought to understand the kinds of cultural attitudes that both created and reinforced patriarchy throughout its history. Yet, Ruether does hold more optimistic views on the potential of religion as a whole. Much of her work is dedicated towards not only pointing out the problems of religion as it currently exists but providing a blueprint for how the religion might be reformed.

### The Historical Jesus and Messianic Expectation

So, previously we've looked at some elements of Ruether's methodology in biblical studies, where she employed a **hermeneutics of suspicion** when analysing scripture, as well as her use of diachronism when attempting to understand how biblical texts would have been written and received over time. In analysing her thoughts about the place of scripture in any future egalitarian version of Christianity, in contrast to the approach of many progressive Christians, Ruether analyses the figure of Jesus not as a day dogma but through the historical conception of the Messiah, which would have been a figure of comparison levelled against Jesus during his ministry. By analysing Jesus through this lens of diachronism, we are, in effect, comparing how Jesus would have been seen by his peers at the time. This is useful because we are to understand or accurately assess the views Jesus himself held. It is also important to also understand how they would have been progressive or regressive for the time. Simply put, did Jesus buck cultural trends during his ministry, or did he endorse the status quo?

What Ruether ultimately argues is that, in contrast to the male, warrior-type Messiah who was wished for or expected by the Jewish population to liberate them from Roman occupation, Jesus was a more radical and progressive figure. He led in what Ruether terms a 'prophetic' leadership, which was in the form of moral commands such as the golden rule, as well as criticism of legalism and the endorsement of broad egalitarian social norms. The fact that Jesus embodied this was not a surprise that he clashed with both religious and political authorities. This was quite scandalous to a largely patriarchal Jewish culture at the time, and key observations of his teaching, such as largely equal treatment Jesus gave his female followers and his encouragement of women to live their spiritual lives.

Ruether holds in particular that these teachings are the underlying authentic message of Jesus, the word of God within the Bible. However, with the biblical authors themselves being more enlightened than Jesus, his liberating morality ended up being dressed in the various Jewish expectations of the time of writing. Nevertheless, Ruether's important point is that Jesus was not someone who fulfilled male expectations, but rather was someone who sought to challenge the social order that also promoted the equality of women. The fact that Jesus was male means also that his maleness is **accidental** rather than **essential**. This might seem like a minor point, but what Ruether is claiming here is that Jesus' maleness is not an important part of his identity. It is not to refer to his maleness or masculinity when presenting his vision for the world, but rather to the differences or inequalities. In an important sense Jesus is **androgynous**; ambiguous in gender.

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Thus, the fact that Jesus so happened to be born a man ultimately cannot be used in teaching on gender roles or the place of women in society. In fact, any kind of church stand in contradiction to Jesus' earthly teaching!

The same, Ruether argues, is true of God. Most Christians will hold God to be genderless, but exclusively male terms such as Father, Lord or King when describing him. While to a certain extent, Ruether argues that the use of these male terms has contributed to the development of feminine perspectives in theology since power, wisdom and goodness are symbolic of masculine ideals. Furthermore, Ruether holds that the sole use of male language is a historical phenomenon that might be explained by going back further in history, there are other terms that were employed, one of which we will take a closer look at in the next part.

### The Role of



At the start of this section, it was broadly asserted that many of the terms used to describe God were male. However, Ruether argues that this is a convention with little precedent in early forms of Judaism and Christianity. This means that female terms may have been historically used to describe God but, over time, have been marginalised or lost through patriarchal influence. One particularly important term that identifies is that of **Sophia**, often thought to represent wisdom. Ruether argues that Sophia was used as a metaphor for the Logos before the maleness of Jesus led to a preference for male terms among scholars when describing the Trinity. In fact, Ruether contends that Jesus may have originally been a prophet of Wisdom in the vein of the teachings given by Proverbs and Solomon, mediating Sophia through his ministry. rival interpretations were put forward by followers after his death. Such an idea carries weight also if Jesus' maleness is held to be accidental rather than essential.

You might well see the focus of Ruether's thought coming together at this point. There is a **golden thread**, or a consistent set of themes, running throughout Christianity: the importance of **liberation**. Whether with the emphasis upon wisdom or the emphasis upon teaching, this golden thread connects both men and women and, as such, any interpretation that emphasises maleness fails to do justice to the role of liberation in scriptural teaching. It is implied to be as important or perfect or vital to the spiritual life than men. In fact, when we look at virtues, such as compassion or meekness, we find them exemplified in the earthly life of Jesus. In the language used to describe God, Jesus in the Gospels is not a warrior, king or ruler. Thus, despite the interpretations given by theologians throughout history, if we look at Jesus as reflected in the person of Jesus, we find that the female nature (as presented by the Bible) is Christlike rather than the male nature.

As such, while Ruether, therefore, holds that certain elements of scripture are important, much to be learnt from it still so long as this liberating theme is held in mind when using this critical lens upon literature allows God to be reconstructed with an eye upon liberation.

### Reconstructing God

So what is the way forward for modern Christianity? Ruether herself acknowledges that this is unconvincing to traditional Christians; it involves the rejection of certain passages of scripture, while discarding aspects that are overly patriarchal or misogynistic. It leads to the natural conclusion that aspects of modern theology should be adjusted to include liberating themes within it. The most obvious starting point is to start with the idea of God altogether. The reconstructionist theologian typically argues that gender-neutral language is preferred, while if gendered terms are used, they should be an equal mix of male and female. To some this seems radical, but theologians such as Ruether typically argue that God is genderless in principle, so the precedent for using male terms is not one that needs to be followed in theological discourse, especially if fundamentally inaccurate. Moreover, the move to neutral or female-leaning terminology can only have the upshot of encouraging experiences in the Christian Church.

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Similarly, overt references to Jesus' maleness should be downplayed if his maleness is more than essential. One is simply being more theologically accurate when one excludes narratives of his life that do not encompass his egalitarian and liberation-focused ideas. This proposal are perhaps more significant. Catholic ideas such as apostolic succession are undermined, and adopting such a reconstructionist feminist perspective towards the conclusion that there should be an equal balance of genders in all Church offices. The ability to be ordained is contrary to the golden thread of 'incarnation' which Ruether identifies. Are such aims too conservative? What if the patriarchal influences Ruether identifies are fundamentally irremovable? With such questions in mind, we can turn to the thought of Daphne Hampson.

## Daphne Hampson

So, in the previous section, we looked at how Ruether traced a **golden thread** of egalitarian principles and liberating themes through scripture, separating its historical misogyny from its underlying moral principles. In doing so, she argues it is possible to reconstruct a genuinely gender-equal form of the Christian faith. But what if such an attempt miss the point entirely? Why should we be looking to refashion a nearly 2,000-year-old piece of writing when developing our modern ideas about God and spirituality? This is a difficult question for modern theologians to answer. For even if we are attempting to deconstruct sexist traditions in the Christian faith, we are still holding firm to the idea that God revealed himself at a single moment of time, within a distinctly patriarchal set of cultures. The trouble may be that regardless of one's ambitions, Christianity is rooted in this moment in time and cannot be divorced from its patriarchal influences.

This line of thinking is the basis of Daphne Hampson's thoughts. She is one of the leading thinkers in the religious world today, having started off being confirmed in the Anglican systematic theology at Harvard. Yet, around the time that the issue of female ordination came under attention in Christian circles in the late 1970s she had a change of heart, despite her support for greater gender equality in the Church. She argued that the foundations of Christianity were fundamentally incompatible with feminist principles and a commitment to gender equality. Her work did not stop her from continuing (quite famously) to develop a vision for a post-Christian spirituality, born out of an ethical critique of the religion and a rejection of the traditional pitfalls theologians face when thinking with a feminist perspective.

Naturally, this led towards conflict with many feminist theologians still inside the Church. She entered a major debate with Rosemary Radford Ruether on the compatibility of feminism and the Church, with Ruether opposing Hampson's views from her reconstructionist perspective. However, out the way, though, we can begin to take a deeper look at some of Hampson's ideas about faith and Church, and examine her vision for a post-Christian spirituality.

## The Problematic Roots of Christianity

Hampson's critique of the Christian faith in her influential work *After Christianity* unfolds in three stages. First, she questions the truthfulness of the central historical claims made by Christianity. She looks at how Christianity is, by its nature, fundamentally concerned with these historical claims. She argues that Christianity, with such historical preoccupations, is fundamentally incompatible with feminist values. It is quite a simple argument at heart, but one which unravels with a deeper examination of the kind of reconstructionist approach employed by Ruether. For Hampson does not reject the examination of scripture, but she does have underlying scepticism for the very claims made by Christianity. This scepticism is expressed in her rather radical claim that Christianity must be rejected. What does this mean exactly? Well, Hampson notes that, at heart, Christians believe in the unique role of Jesus Christ. Jesus' life and 'unique' in an important fashion. To simply believe that Jesus was a man who communed with God is a viable theistic position, but it is not characteristic of the history of Christianity, people have converted to and adhered to Christian principles because they believed he was in some way divine or had a unique connection with the divine. This uniqueness, that the resurrection were plausible. Yet these claims of uniqueness, from our modern perspective, seem untenable. Looking back at scripture, we might posit naturalistic explanations for the events of the New Testament.

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performs or chalk up events such as the resurrection to overly enthusiastic or delusional interpretations of real historical evidence for Jesus' uniqueness doesn't pass muster, and we import any claims to divinity or divine powers. But, as Hampson notes, the claim that Jesus is God is central to Christian faith. So the problem occurs that believing in such claims becomes a matter of faith. In an important sense, Christianity isn't true; its claims are no longer consistent with the world as we know it.

Okay, fair enough. As we saw with Ruether, we don't have to accept the more far-fetched claims as long as we can unearth its underlying moral message. But here Hampson now argues that Christianity cannot be moral. For as we saw in the previous passage, Christianity (regardless of whether it is concerned with certain kinds of historical claims about the revelations of a single Jesus or is more rooted in scripture, which is not rooted in a cultural paradigm that is nearly 2000 years old) have ultimately failed. Throughout this section is that the cultural forces and values of modern Christianity expressed values that are fundamentally at odds with modern secular values. If, as a Christian, it is impossible to not have to continually engage with these outdated values, then the egalitarian principles becomes a matter of grappling with scripture in convoluted and often contradictory ways.

Hampson, as such, claims that theologians such as Ruether have to adopt a kind of pragmatism to belief and scripture, for most of the Bible isn't consistent with a modern feminist perspective. Claims that Jesus defended the integrity and equality of women, for her, are based on a misunderstanding that Jesus prioritised women in his ministry, having picked 12 male apostles, and institutions such as marriage, which have traditionally required women to submit to men. Thus, thus that with such problematic roots, the intuitive route when thinking about God is to reject it. To acknowledge that human beings have ethically and philosophically progressed beyond the Bible is to look towards new models of thinking about God and the world.

## History and God

Hampson's arguments here can be summarised as follows. Christianity is a religion that is inherently concerned with history. It is based on the belief that there is a God who chose to reveal himself at a particular time and place in time. Thus, it cannot be anything other than historical. At the same time, the revelation occurred in a fundamentally patriarchal and hierarchical world. Thus, Christians will always have to engage with scripture that is rooted in such patriarchal environments, and this in turn makes the Christian faith itself inherently rooted in patriarchal values. It cannot be reformed or updated, as reconstructionist theologians such as Ruether would like, because it is rooted in its historical, patriarchal foundations. Those seeking to reconcile the Christian faith and feminism are thus forever scrabbling to explain away its problematic core.

But Hampson goes a bit further here and talks about a future kind of theism, which she calls 'theism without baggage' of the Christian faith. For she argues that certain kinds of patriarchal core values of the faith, which are still unacknowledged by many theologians today. One easy example is describing him as a male patriarch. But even these problems are still seen as necessary to the very model of faith in Christianity, which is based around worshipping a transcendent God, the antithesis of genuine equality. For holding that God must be worshipped in a particular way is in effect promoting a master/slave relationship with God. There is a fundamental tension suggesting that human fate is in God's hands and that human beings are not on an equal footing. It is supposed to be loving and fair.

What Hampson thus argues is that anthropomorphic talk of God must be rejected. The problem ultimately arises because theologians have projected God in the male image, and this is both be grounded in experience and not be in contradiction with our ethical ideals. Thus, Christianity, by rejecting theism or spirituality as a whole. She simply argues that the problem is back by its preoccupation with history. If we look at any other discipline, whether it is science or not an equal fascination with historical claims, and so the same should be true of spirituality. Thus, the aim of post-Christian thought is to simply acknowledge the limitations of theism and build a new path forwards that accommodates our contemporary values.

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## Is Christianity Irredeemably Sexist?

In this section, we have looked at the contrasting views of two theologians. Ruether argues for egalitarianism at the heart of the Christian faith, which can be recovered with progress. She argues that Christianity's preoccupation with patriarchal history makes it irredeemably sexist. Can conflict play out in a real-world context?

Well, let's return for a moment to an issue we studied earlier: female ordination. Hampson simply argues that it is a dead end for feminism. Equality is not driven by rights, but by changing the very patriarchal foundations of Christian thought and practice. Under Ruether's thought, female ordination is an essential step towards realising the Kingdom of God. Once the Church is more open to women's experiences under God and women are in positions of authority, Christianity can be meaningfully reconstructed and women can become full participants in everyday Christian life. The difficulty for Ruether, though, as Hampson points out, is that the traditions are predicated on a point in time 2,000 years ago. Why not eliminate the past and start anew, away with the hierarchies that have oppressed women in religion for so long?

The focal point, as we can see, is on Christianity's relationship to its past. For this relationship is inherently problematic. Christianity's dedication to events that have passed the moment prevent it from making real progress. Even if we achieve gender equality, we are beholden to ideals that cannot be divorced from their historical, patriarchal context. There is something valuable to be saved and preserved in Christian history. Beneath its past lies the key to unearthing a genuinely valuable egalitarian set of moral principles. Reconciling the two ideals is naturally difficult. It depends partly on the way we view scripture and the role of the church. Theistic thought has the possibility to progress further outside of a Christian context. Let's look further when we consider other problems of gender and sexuality within Christianity in the final section of this topic.

### Discussion Activity:

Do you believe Ruether is capable of moving beyond fully reconstructing an egalitarian Christianity? Discuss in pairs.

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## Christian Perspectives on Issues of Gender and Sexuality

In this final section, we will grapple with a number of issues around gender and sexuality that challenge the tenets of traditional feminist theology. However, they also intersect with many of the concerns of theologians such as Ruether and Hampson. For if the Bible does need to be reinterpreted, then due attention needs to be paid to all the ethical dilemmas raised by this new cultural outlook. In some cases, this outlook will challenge traditional views around gender, while in other cases it will support new ways of looking at traditional Christian virtues such as chastity. The reconstruction of the Christian God, or a move to a different kind of theism, will need to accommodate a wide range of historically marginalised or overlooked perspectives. We now turn to our first issue on the topic: **celibacy**.

### Celibacy



To talk about celibacy might seem a bit strange these days, but within the Christian Church it has been commonly practised. Celibacy is the voluntary choice to abstain from sexual relationships. It has traditionally been upheld by the Christian clergy throughout the history of the Church. For many, it is seen as a noble pursuit, a sign of one's dedication to God and a spiritual life. However, for others, these perceptions are more controversial. For some, celibacy is simply another way of avoiding the pleasures of the flesh, the thought being that indulgence in excess pleasure prevents one from fully dedicating oneself to God. In early Christian communities, it is also sometimes thought that celibacy was undertaken as a sign that the kingdom of God might arrive at any moment and so starting a family was a pointless distraction.

However, the greatest reason given for the importance of celibacy historically is to avoid the temptation of capitulation to the more immoral aspects of human nature. For instance, passages such as 1 Corinthians 7 suggest that if one finds it impossible to be celibate, then marriage is the only acceptable alternative. Such verses were expanded upon perhaps most influentially by Augustine of Hippo, who argued that **concupiscence** (the desire for sexual pleasure) is a result of **the Fall** and represented the corrupted aspect of human nature.

*'But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be consumed by passion.'* (1 Corinthians 7:9 NRSV)

Thus, in the traditional Christian Church, celibacy was often seen as necessary for anyone seeking a life of holiness. This belief is still upheld today by the Catholic Church, which holds that no ordained priest or nun can engage in sexual relationships. Moreover, it maintains a generally positive outlook on celibacy, believing it is a respectable choice to give oneself to God. However, in many other churches, including the Anglican Church, it is not required for members of the clergy. In fact, many choose to get married, for which support is thought to be provided by 1 Timothy 3:

*'Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, hospitable, a good teacher.'* (1 Timothy 3:1–7 NRSV)

So what's wrong with celibacy as a concept? Well, the main problem (as we have seen) is the value placed on celibacy largely arises because sex, or the sexual aspects of human nature, are seen as immoral or to be avoided. This means that Christian tradition has often focused on celibacy as a way of avoiding the unnatural or evil, with marriage being an acceptable compromise between these two extremes. However, the idea that sex is immoral is not necessarily an uncontested view across all cultures. In many cultures across the world that place a firm emphasis on marriage, celibacy is seen as a great space in public discourse. Many have begun to question whether the traditional view of sexuality are misguided, seeing celibate actually more virtuous than engaging in sexual relationships. This view is often based on the idea that sexual relationships are somehow a distraction from one's spiritual life.

In particular, it can be pointed out that being sexually active is a thoroughly natural part of human life and brings happiness to a great many people. In fact, teaching that sex is immoral has led to the repression of people across the world, most notably women, who have typically been expected in tradition to be meek, modest and chaste. Thus, similar to the feminist criticisms of patriarchy, the value placed on chastity is simply a reflection of older cultural values and not necessarily a universal truth.

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God. At the same time, traditionalists might respond that the Church does not force anyone who wish to become ordained it is a free choice, and this should be respected by the Church in sexual relationships. However, this issue also goes a little deeper when we consider another important Christian institution: **marriage**.

## Marriage

Marriage is one of the most important practices in the Christian Church worldwide. In many denominations it is considered to be a sacrament, a religious ceremony that in some way demonstrates God's grace. In the previous part, you might have noticed a slight curiosity in 1 Corinthians 7:9, where Paul argues that marriage isn't exactly holy in itself. Whether it is a compromise for those who are unable to practise celibacy, marriage, in essence, is thus a lesser kind of self-control, reflecting but not fully embodying the kind of union that was present pre-Fall. This view has since been held up by a number of important theologians, including Augustine, and, like the value placed on celibacy, upholds the idea that sexuality is inherently immoral, only permissible when one gives one's life to another under the Church's guidance.

Modern Catholic doctrine still reflects these kinds of ideas. Since, for Catholics, marriage is a sacrament, the marrying of two people means that they both undergo a real spiritual change in the presence of God. This change is irreversible, and only in certain circumstances in which sexual love is acceptable. Accordingly, premarital sex is considered to be a sin against the dignity of human beings. Now, in modern times, the Catholic Church has softened its perspectives on sexuality and marriage have become more influential. But at heart, the Church remains particularly when it comes to the issue of divorce. The spiritual change and union cannot, in the eyes of the Catholic Church, be undone by human means. This means that divorce is not allowed, and those who do undergo a civil divorce (in the eyes of the state) cannot remarry in the Church.

However, this view is not upheld by other denominations. For instance, Protestants view marriage as a sacrament but do not believe that couples undergo a distinct spiritual change. Instead, marriage just signifies a couple's commitment to each other. This means that divorce is allowed, but only where there are significant circumstances that make the marriage commitment. This belief is maintained within the Anglican Church today. While they are dissuaded from divorce but are still allowed to separate and remarry in the right circumstances.

This kind of perspective is closer to many modern secular views on marriage. Marriage is seen as a spiritual change and simply view it as a way for two people to express their commitment to each other, relationship, and guarantee certain protections for themselves and their families. For those who question whether the concept of marriage should be given value at all, it can be seen as an expensive and painful, secular or religious, and it can be asked why those who are granted rights or privileges simply on the basis that they have undergone a particular ceremony. If there fundamentally isn't any religious importance to marriage, should we still value it? Especially when it is predicated on misguided ideas surrounding sexuality? Post-secularism might look to abandon the concept of marriage in any progressive form of future society.

For there are potentially greater problems with a stricter Catholic-like view on marriage. If the Church and tradition fail to acknowledge natural reasons why two people might require a divorce, it makes it more difficult real-world situations under which divorce might be of grave importance. Divorces are real, and individuals need to be able to divorce if their partner has been abusive or unsafe. Can we remarry someone who has been married to such an individual? What if there are dangers present to the children of such members? Strict talk about the sanctity of marriage seems fundamentally incompatible with a realistic outlook on individuals trapped in unhappy and unsafe marriages, and potentially even domestic abuse. However, marriage poses an even greater issue when we consider same-sex relationships, the subject of the next part of this section.

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## Homosexuality

In the UK, same-sex marriages became legal in 2014, although not without controversy. In England still opposed this move, and parishes and churches still reserve the right to perform marriages, similar to how they can refuse the right to be governed by female ministers. Furthermore, same-sex marriage is banned for members of the Anglican clergy; they can have same-sex relationships but must remain celibate. Thus, although some sections of the Church have a more liberal attitude to homosexuality, there are many who still hold conservative views and see the act of the same sex engaging in a sexual relationship as sinful.

Still, this progress is important to many in the Church, for it has traditionally regarded homosexuality as sinful. In fact, the Catholic Church has continued to maintain an opposition to same-sex marriage, although there are signs that it is relaxing its position when it comes to the ordination of gay ministers. Nevertheless, the Church has traditionally opposed homosexuality on the basis of natural law. Since natural intercourse cannot lead to reproduction, it cannot be ordained by God since, as a man and woman up so that they could be fruitful and multiply. Similarly, others argue that homosexuality is a threat to the ordering of society and undermines the sanctity of marriage. Thus, while the Catholic Church often takes pains to make it known that it acknowledges the existence of homosexuality, its position has not changed on the immorality of homosexual relationships.

Yet, with increased secularisation in the Western world, this position has been questioned. Many have turned to natural law for their moral beliefs, and many questioned the right of the Church to interfere in private lives. This means that throughout the twentieth century, many began to see that homosexual relationships were both natural and far from immoral, and pushed back against the Church's position. Those who possessed the authority or right to officiate on what people should do in their private lives. As a result, the Church's position on homosexuality began to look like a bit of a relic, and many have argued that some Christian denominations such as Catholicism to accommodate same-sex relationships has been a failure.

What's most troubling perhaps is that throughout its history, the Christian Church has been involved in discrimination against and oppression of homosexual individuals. Although it professes to be based on principle, in reality this has often not been extended to practice. Around the world, there have been many instances of discrimination against and oppression of homosexual individuals, often on the basis of Christian teachings. From various biblical passages (e.g. Leviticus 18:22, 20:13, 1 Corinthians 6:9–10), the Church has often claimed that homosexuality is a sin and that recommend punishment for those caught in same-sex relationships. In discussions on misogyny, it can be questioned whether the Church's poor historical record has changed when it still draws from homophobic scripture.

However, there are those that do argue that the Church can be reformed and that some Christian denominations that seeks to reconcile Christian teaching with modern attitudes surrounding same-sex relationships. In the case of these difficult passages, one scholar, performed by Ruether, identifying which passages can be seen to reflect cultural attitudes rather than the will of God himself. Through such forms of interpretation, it may be the case that the conservative attitudes within the Church of England, for instance, can be overturned and more liberal attitudes towards homosexuality become normal among its members.

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## Transgender Issues

While for the last three issues we've discussed, there are some references in scripture that is particularly difficult to discuss in a Christian context. For although transgender has been throughout history, there are no biblical passages that discuss their role or status. The fact that medical procedures such as hormone therapy were not available to them at the time was being written, but also because, culturally, the notion that an individual could change from the one they were assigned at birth was not widely considered. Even now, the reasons why individuals experience transgenderism and the associated issues are poorly understood. In the last decade that the transgender community has begun to come more widely into public view.

Thus, it might be a little surprising to expect progressive thought from the Christian community. However, in recent years, at more mainstream denominations are acknowledging the position of transgender individuals within the faith. At the same time, scripturally there are plenty of passages that define the roles and identities of men and women, and it is true that, in the past, various Christians have persecuted transgender individuals, either conflating their existence with issues such as homosexuality. The belief that one's sex and/or gender is fixed at birth and cannot be changed.

So how can Christian thinking change or progress on this matter? Well, just as with the liberal approach can shine a light forward. One important initial factor to consider is not just the phenomenon of individuals identifying as a different sex or gender, is not just the fact that cultures and societies in the past and present have recognised that the gender of individuals is not necessarily truly accurate. Moreover, there is already evidence that transgender individuals have psychological foundations, even despite scientific investigation into the phenomenon. Sex and gender are complicated issues and a person's genetics don't always generate a specific gender. While sex is usually assigned at birth based upon visible reproductive organs, a significant number of individuals born genetically intersex and probably many more whose gender identity falls into neat categories.

All these factors, alongside the general lack of scriptural discussion on the topic, make it difficult that Christian thought around gender should pay attention to the shifting scientific and cultural understandings of transgender issues. However, conservative Christians are likely to argue that the Bible is clear on the roles of men and women. However, it is also not exactly firm on whether one is necessarily a certain gender based on biological attributes. It may be that God created individuals who do not conform to the social expectations of gender, and, with a liberal reading on scripture, such a view could be supported. While there are some differences, it is possible to explore and reflect upon transgender issues in the way we have explored the issue of gender as a whole in this section. In the next section, we will take a deeper dive into the relationship between Christianity and science, exploring how they may perhaps even complement, each other.

### Discussion Activity:

Which of the issues to do with gender and sexuality do you believe is most pressing for the church to address? Or should they all occupy an equal space? Discuss in pairs or small groups.

### Quick Quiz:

1. What is misogyny?
2. Give one biblical passage that not only supports an egalitarian or feminist view of the New Testament scripture.
3. Who authored the verse (condemned passage) in the Bible: 'Let a woman learn as the Lord loves the church, to present herself to himself, to have authority over a man'?
4. What is a feminist hermeneutics?
5. What major denomination still opposes female ordination?
6. What did Ruether call the theme of liberating, egalitarian tradition that she identified throughout Christian scripture?
7. What kind of thinker is Hampson often described as?
8. Give one biblical passage that supports the importance of celibacy for Christians.

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## 2. CHRISTIANITY AND SCIENCE

### What you will learn in this section:

- The philosophical and theological discussion around Christianity and science, including:
- The various ways science has historically influenced Christian thought and how
- The basic methods of scientific enquiry and where they clash with or challenge
- The challenge of Darwin's theory of evolution and the different Christian responses, with particular reference to creationism
- Philosophical arguments presented in favour of a scientific perspective on the Christian understanding of 'God of the gaps' reasoning.
- The arguments of John Polkinghorne concerning how Christian and scientific perspectives on the world are fundamentally compatible.
- The different responses of Christians to contemporary scientific issues such as

### Starter Activity:

Do you think theological ideas about the creation of the world are compatible with a scientific perspective? Write down your thoughts and compare them to your studies throughout the year. Has your opinion changed by the end?

### Key Thinker

<b>Name</b>	Charles Darwin
<b>Born</b>	1809
<b>Died</b>	1882
<b>Key text</b>	<i>On the Origin of Species</i> (1859)
<b>Why are they important?</b>	Darwin is one of the most important biologists and geologists of the nineteenth century. He was one of the main contributors to the development of the theory of evolution, which is at the heart of modern biological investigation into the history of life on Earth.
<b>Did you know?</b>	Although a great biologist, Darwin was also a member of the Victorian Society dedicated to eating unusual animals. During his expedition to the Galapagos, he studied a number of the animals he studied, especially the giant Galapagos tortoise, which played an important role in his works.

### Key Thinker

<b>Name</b>	John Polkinghorne
<b>Born</b>	1930
<b>Died</b>	2021
<b>Key text</b>	<i>Exploring Reality: The Intertwining of Science and Religion</i> (2009)
<b>Why are they important?</b>	Polkinghorne was one of the most well-known voices speaking about the relationship between science and theology and was an academic background both in theoretical physics and theology.
<b>Did you know?</b>	Polkinghorne wrote that he sometimes considered himself an atheist. But when this thought arose, he changed himself to say 'agnostic' [Christianity]. He also wrote that this was something he was

### Introduction – The Historical Development of the Scientific Method

For a long time throughout history, there wasn't significant opposition to a religious perspective on the world. Whether one was Christian or any other religion, one generally (with some exceptions) viewed the world as the result of the action of a creator God (or gods). Yet, over the last 500 years, a new perspective emerged: that of **science**. Now, even until the twentieth century, most people were religious. In fact, until about 200 years ago, the term 'science' wasn't even commonly used. Rather, these activities were subsumed under the

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However, this doesn't mean that important scientific discoveries across the last 100 years have completely replaced the assumptions behind a religious perspective on the world. For what is called the **scientific method** to emerge as a systematic way of observing, experimenting on and understanding the world, the scientific method routinely began to generate new knowledge for people who questioned the religious perspective that had been taken for granted throughout the history of the Western world. One of the key periods of the **Enlightenment**, an intellectual movement in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, emphasised the primacy of reason when thinking about the world and brought the scientific method for understanding natural phenomena into the mainstream.

For, at heart, the scientific method is an **empirical** activity. It relies upon use of our senses to gain knowledge of the world around us, while many acknowledge the importance of faith in Christianity. However, some have developed arguments such as the **teleological argument** to argue that the existence of God (which draws on sense experience), the Christian faith also relies heavily on the idea of revelation. This is the distinct belief that God has directly communicated to human beings and this is recorded in some fashion in the Bible. Moreover, this communication is to an extent one-sided, as it is beyond human understanding, meaning that it is required for human beings to have faith in a process that extends beyond using our sense experience.

So, to start, we can maybe intuit why scientific and religious perspectives might conflict. If knowledge derived from our sense experience and reason conflicts with the revelation of God? What if religious experience, faith and revelation aren't reliable ways of gaining knowledge? These questions will be looked at in this section, but first we must cover the scientific method.

## The Scientific Method

There is still extensive philosophical debate as to what the scientific method is and how it relates to defining what science is (compared to non-scientific or 'pseudoscientific' disciplines). Roughly, however, you can say that the scientific method broadly encompasses the features in the diagram opposite.

Researchers usually begin with a **question** about a feature or thing in the world, which they seek to understand. They then might conduct some prior investigation into the question, seeing what past scientists have discovered before coming up with a **hypothesis** about their chosen question. A hypothesis is, as it sounds, a proposed explanation for some phenomenon that has not been **verified** or **falsified** by study.

Once a researcher has a hypothesis (or even hypotheses), they aim to experiment in order to test whether it is true. These experiments may well raise further issues in understanding the question, in which case researchers may revise their approach or even the question. But eventually the goal is to get reliable experimental data that allows them to develop a conclusion. This conclusion might be a singular explanation or a theory that allows them to develop answers to multiple questions at once. It is important to note that in scientific lingo, a theory is not hypothetical (like a hypothesis). Instead, it is an established explanation or law that is confirmed or verified by existing experimental data. Theories can certainly be proved to be wrong but they also may well describe real states of affairs in the world.

Despite this being a simplification, it is clear to see the general focus of scientific enquiry. It is to establish certain truths or facts about the world before investigating questions and verifying them through rigorous observation and experimentation. This also means that scientific questions are about the meaning or purpose of objects, unless contained within a specific phenomenon. As we noted, it is generally an **empirical** endeavour, looking at what can be observed from sense observations and reasonable extrapolation.

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As such, it by and large views the world as a series of interrelated material objects. Those objects have for human beings, except as things to be used for other material purposes, a perspective, as we will note, is very different from a religious one, and we shall be asking questions those who are religious tend to ask.

## The Religious Perspective

To summarise the religious world view in a few paragraphs is inevitably an oversimplification, but it is not as if those who are religious tend to ask different questions and accordingly look for different explanations. For one, there is no distinctive 'religious' perspective. In the case of Christianity, people arrive at their beliefs in many ways, whether it be reading the Bible, having a religious experience or thinking about the world. Yet behind all these processes is often the idea that material explanations are incomplete or inadequate in explaining why things exist the way that they do. There are important questions behind why human beings possess life and consciousness or why the world exists.

It is fair to say that some people don't question the world in this manner and therefore religion is no better at providing answers to these questions than science. Moreover, some people who simply deny the validity of the scientific method altogether! Yet many people do not. The world holds that their faith in a particular deity, person or belief system gives meaning to life, something scientific enquiry can't. Some even hold that there is a kind of spiritual dimension to the world which can only be investigated through religious means. This is not to say that religion is opposed to scientific enquiry but that it potentially has different scopes and answers. Some might be ethical in nature, such as the teachings Jesus gives his ministry, or they might be explanatory in nature, such as a creator being the explanation for why the universe exists at all in the first place. To note is that, for the religious individual, there are often important reasons why they believe in their faith and why, from their perspective, scientific enquiry may be inadequate at providing answers.

Perhaps most importantly, it may not be necessary for Christians to reject scientific knowledge if they conflict with scripture. You might recall that in our examination of feminist theology, we looked at **liberal theology** during the enlightenment period, which held that biblical teachings should be interpreted in light of scientific knowledge. Many Christians nowadays subscribe to different forms of liberal theology. Some recognise that certain parts of the Bible, such as the Genesis creation accounts, might be metaphorical rather than literally true. If this is the case, then the special revelation contained in the Bible does not conflict at all with scientific knowledge. However, reconciling science and Christian belief is not always straightforward, nonetheless and, in the next section, we will analyse some of the main obstacles to this.

## The Challenge of Science to Christian Belief

In the introduction, we looked at some broad ways in which religious and scientific world views differ from the way they arrive at knowledge about the world to the kind of questions they ask. However, in this section, we shall explore some specific scientific theories that have challenged the Christian perspective on the world, notably the **theory of evolution** and the **Big Bang**. Both are incredibly influential to science as a whole and both have significantly shaped how we view the world. At the time of their proposal, each seemed to contradict many of the core teachings of Christianity and highlighted the kind of conflicts that can emerge between religion and science.

Perhaps most troubling to those wishing to reconcile Christianity and science is the challenge posed by atheists that these various scientific advances demonstrate the inadequacy of Christianity. They argue that meaningful knowledge about the world can only be gained through science. Simply put, the success of science for such a long time in explaining the world and the success of Christianity in explaining the world are mutually exclusive. Such arguments are often presented as evidence that religious beliefs are irrational errors which should be abandoned. Such arguments are often presented as a way for limiting the influence and practice of religion in the public sphere, as promoting religion is seen as (or actually) harmful to the flourishing of society, progress and culture. These kind of arguments are explored in topic 3 (**Christianity and the Challenge of Secularisation**); however, we will look at the views of Richard Dawkins, one of the major figureheads of a movement often termed 'New Atheism'. At this moment, though, we turn first to Charles Darwin and the theory of evolution.

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## Charles Darwin and the Theory of Evolution

Charles Darwin was a nineteenth-century biologist who while researching in the Galapagos Islands noted that across the different islands organisms possessed characteristics that made them well suited for surviving and reproducing in their respective environments. This observation wasn't new, and prior to Darwin, biologists had often noted that all beings seem to be broadly **adapted** to the environments they lived in. Yet, Darwin was one of the first to connect the dots between three key observations of living organisms. The first is that among any offspring, different traits or characteristics emerge with respect to their physiology and behaviour (for instance, in mammals, beings, different colour eyes). The second is that these different traits either contribute positively or negatively towards the survival of the organism, while the third observation is simply that these traits are passed from one generation to generation for any organism. Added together, Darwin developed what is commonly known as the **theory of evolution by natural selection** in his landmark work *On the Origin of Species*.

The theory of evolution, at its heart, describes how organisms come to be adapted. It is noted, among the offspring of any organism, there will be a variety of different characteristics through mutation and variation. Those offspring with characteristics more advantageous to their environments are more likely to reach sexual maturity and reproduce. This means that over generations, one is more likely to find characteristics that are adapted in a specific environment, and as such species can change over time if new advantageous characteristics arise. In effect did with one theory was to explain how all living things came to be the way they are. The original proposal, evolutionary biology has greatly expanded, charting the stages of evolution of species and tracing them all back to the **last universal common ancestor**, the point from which all life today descended.

Moreover, the evidence for the theory of evolution itself is undeniably strong. Various beings have often taken advantage of its principles, whether through breeding animals or taking cuttings of plants which display desirable characteristics. There are now ways to trace the development of certain characteristics, such that researchers now know that ancestors moved from the water to dry ground. However, the greatest source of evidence for the theory of evolution came with the discovery of genetics and DNA, biologists have been able to show how combinations of genes during reproduction lead to different characteristics and behaviours. In many ways, evolutionary biology is a classic use of the scientific method to develop an overarching universal theory from a number of interrelated observations.

### The Difficulty of Evolution for Christianity

It is difficult to deny the truth of evolution with such a mountain of evidence, and while it was not taken hold in the scientific community, by the twentieth century it had become a central part of the problem was that it seemed to contradict many religious assumptions that had been held in imagination until that point. Perhaps most importantly, it questioned the traditional view that God directly created all life on Earth and the idea that God specifically created human beings for a specific purpose. Rather, human beings appeared instead to be the product of blind chance. Whatever capacities or characteristics we possess, they simply arose due to being well suited to the environments we lived in.

Such conclusions are naturally difficult for Christians to accept. Even if (as evolutionists would argue) accounts in Genesis should be interpreted as metaphor or allegory, the idea that God created life seems to directly conflict with the notion that God was personally involved in our creation. The undermining of this belief significantly affects all areas of the Christian religion, from the view on salvation. As we shall see, although there is certainly the possibility of reconciling evolution, at the minimum evolution, throws up a lot of difficulties for this, it should be noted that there were a significant number of liberal theologians who accepted Darwin's discoveries. For instance, Charles Kingsley held that evolution may simply be the process through which God created the world, a view that, as we shall see, has gained more acceptance over time.

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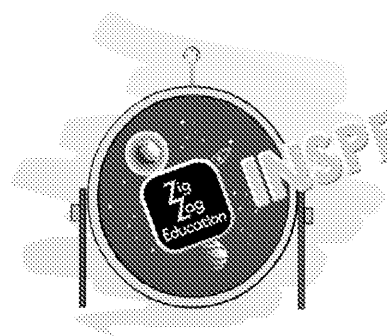




### Discussion Activity:

Do you think it could be right to call the theory of evolution an 'intelligent principle' of what evolution is in the context of the natural world?

## The Big Bang Theory



The Big Bang theory is perhaps one of the most that has challenged the foundations of Christianity. It does not support a Christian understanding of creation. It proposes that the universe began around 13.8 billion years ago at a time singularity – a point of immensely small size – and suddenly expanded outwards to form the matter and galaxies in the universe today. Most importantly, it initiated the beginning of both space and time; anything prior to the Big Bang, and the laws of physics, did not exist before that point.

What's perhaps most interesting is that the Big Bang theory came to be proposed as a result of observations, some intentional and some not so intentional! The first evidence came from the observation of the movement of various galaxies in the universe. Despite the forces of gravity, researchers found that most of the galaxies in the universe were redshifted, meaning that they were all moving away from us. The most likely explanation of this phenomenon was identified to be an expanding universe. However, it was uncertain how this expansion was occurring. The most direct evidence for the Big Bang came from astronomers using highly sensitive radio telescopes began detecting background radiation, which was attributed to any ordinary object in the universe. In fact, it was so unusual that for a while, scientists thought something was wrong with their equipment! However, it was later discovered that the 'noise' became known as the 'cosmic microwave background', and provided landmark evidence that the universe was an almost uniform state of matter and energy, the result of the universe resulting from a singular event – the Big Bang.

### The Difficulty of the Big Bang and Christianity

The difficulties with the Big Bang are a little more subtle than evolution. The greatest difficulty is that the universe had a fixed beginning and before that beginning time and space did not exist. At the moment of the creation, many of the known laws of physics break down in the theory. Scientists today are still working to understand how the Big Bang can be reconciled with the laws and principles that govern the behaviour of objects in both the macroscopic and microscopic worlds. However, the factors don't affect the problem for Christians that the Big Bang, at least at first glance, does not provide a religious explanation for the existence of the universe. While Christians might have believed that God created the universe, using evolution as an intelligent principle, the Big Bang theory presents a scientific explanation for the creation of all matter, not just human life.

Now, Christians have often simply replied, 'well, what caused the Big Bang?' and argued that the theory, despite first appearances, actually supports Christian beliefs. Does the Bible claim that the universe was created ex nihilo? What fits better than a singularity, in which time and space came into existence? Such speculation is still popular, and the Big Bang theory allows for the reconciliation of Christianity and science. Yet, the trouble is that one day there will be a scientific explanation for the cause of the Big Bang. Isn't it ironic that the theory itself is continually finding its own beginning outdated by the latest scientific discoveries? In the face of what many have called 'God of the gaps' style arguments, a potentially fallacious argument, we will explore this in a new part.



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## Richard Dawkins and 'God of the Gaps' Arguments

Before we get into the details of what 'God of the gaps' means, it is worth taking stock of the difficulties we have analysed so far. For, on the surface, there appears to be the issue that the advance of scientific knowledge has led to Christian view playing a greatly reduced role in explaining elements of the natural world. Thus, it seems fair to ask the question: is Christianity simply outdated? Why should we look towards religion for answers when science seems much more up to the job? At heart, this is the kind of view that atheists such as Richard Dawkins argue for.

One key text to analyse here is *God Delusion* (2006), Dawkins' best-known work on the conflict between science and religion. While it addresses the questions given above, it has a much broader scope than these issues, addressing a variety of criticisms of the religious perspective. However, at heart, Dawkins wants the reader to question what he holds is the underlying foundation of all religious belief: faith. He contends that faith involves '*blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence*', and since rationality is predicated on proportioning one's beliefs to nature fundamentally irrational. Yet, in a scientific world where we can explain things with empirical evidence, why should we still look towards religion for guidance? In essence, the tension between what he views as the rational enterprise of science and the irrational enterprise of religion guides his approach to various philosophical and theological issues throughout the book.

Perhaps the most important is Dawkins' reframing of religious discussion into scientific terms. He argues that belief in God should be construed instead as the **God hypothesis**. Simply put, if there is a God, then this claim should be put to the test, in a similar way to any other claim that makes testable predictions about objects. Moreover, the God hypothesis should be tested against other hypotheses. For example, proposals about how the complexity of the universe can arise from more simple beginnings. Dawkins ultimately argues that such a process is essential. If God is to be a meaningful hypothesis, it can in effect suppose any imaginary creature to exist, such as a 'flying spaghetti monster'. For if faith is all that is required to believe in God, then one could have faith in any number of improbable entities and be justified in one's own belief. So, to summarise, that faith is ultimately irrational in nature and unjustifiable in light of the rational enterprise of science.

### The God Hypothesis and Its Gaps

Despite Dawkins arguing that religion is ultimately irrational, his central argument is not that there is no God. This is important to remember, for Dawkins is not intending to say that it is impossible for God to exist. In his view, it is perfectly possible that there is some miraculous state of affairs whereby God exists. However, as he is arguing, as noted in the last part, is that the existence of God is **improbable**; that God does not exist. This is largely due to the continued success of science in explaining things. The lack of success by the religious individuals proposing a God-type character. And since a rational person should proportion their beliefs to the evidence, or what is more precisely, the rational person to believe in the existence of God. Simply put, if you believe in God, you should be an atheist! Otherwise one is subscribing to an infantile faith response and is not being rational.

Thus, there isn't really a liberal theological perspective that can meaningfully exist. If one wants to fit the Bible to a scientific world view, then one is tacitly admitting that the scientific world view is the religious one. Let's tease this apart a little more, though. How can Dawkins argue that science is more successful than religion in explanation? Well, Dawkins contends there has been a gap in scientific knowledge. Before the scientific enquiry came to the fore, God was used to explain things that science could not. In the natural world, lightning, comets to floods. Yet, now increasingly science explains things. Theologians have had to back away and claim that God instead now exists in a realm currently off-limits to scientific knowledge. At first this might seem OK; can God not explain things such as natural laws, cosmological constants and the universe itself? Yet Dawkins would argue that this is the 'God of the gaps' style argument. In other words, the gaps in scientific knowledge are filled by God. Even if a comprehensive scientific argument for these gaps might be possible in the future, it would still be a gap in the current state of knowledge.

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'God of the gaps' arguments are potentially guilty of what is sometimes called the *God of the gaps* fallacy. In other words, they assume because we are ignorant about some gap in our scientific knowledge, that the explanation must be supernatural in origin. Yet the very same thing has been said in the past for many theories (for instance, evolution), so why should we assume that simply because we don't know something, God is the best explanation? Dawkins ultimately holds that the success of scientific explanations based on simpler, more basic principles is greater than the success of religious explanations. The creation of the universe, it is erroneous to suppose that because science hasn't explained it, God is a more probable explanation. In fact, it is the opposite!

Moreover, the 'God of the gaps' argument employed by theologians suggests that the legitimate explanation provided by science, whether it is a hypothesis that under the weight of evidence is discarded. Scientific enquiry, whether the religious world view is discarded or not, drastically reduces the role God plays in religious thought, including Christianity. This is directly at odds with science, but for Dawkins it is ultimately rendered irrelevant. The gap between the two is fostered only by religious people who refuse to accept this reality and cling to their faith in probability. Throughout *The God Delusion*, Dawkins also makes a humanist case for a world view holding that morality can be built upon biological ideas without reference to a creator. He argues that religion is not giving up on a meaningful life, and instead is the product of a healthy, rational mind.

However, is this really the right picture of how religious belief functions? Do Christians believe in a hypothesis, designed to explain certain parts of the universe, or is the reality very different? Does it deeply affect the validity of Dawkins' arguments; for if the religious world view is not based on a hypothesis with scientific explanation, then Dawkins' proposals might well be misleading. From a religious perspective really that successful when it comes to the important questions discussed in this topic: the meaning of life or the ethical principles we should follow? Doesn't religion potentially offer a better answer than science? These problems we will actively cover in the next sections with our responses to the challenge of science.

### Discussion Activity:

Do you think Dawkins is correct in characterising modern arguments for God as 'gaps' style reasoning? If so, does this fail to acknowledge the complexity and validity of religious arguments?

## Christian Responses to the Challenge of Science

Now, throughout this topic, we've mostly explored how science appears to challenge religion. But what if this is the wrong way to look at it? If scientific knowledge has brought a new understanding of the natural world, shouldn't we view science instead as a kind of stimulus to Christian thought? There are many avenues for the faith to progress as a whole? As we saw in our studies on feminism, how the tradition can bring about exciting new ideas and changes in the beliefs of Christians. Science, in essence, despite Dawkins' protests, Christianity may just be losing a battle to become a properly modern religion. Nonetheless, such an approach is difficult to implement, as it often ends up that instead have taken aim at science itself. First, therefore, let us take a look at how Christians have responded to the challenge of science: **creationism**.

### Christianity and Creationism

It is perhaps inaccurate to describe creationism as a modern Christian perspective. Many Christians propose views that many Christians throughout history would agree with. Despite this, modern creationism is typically defined by its insistence that many of the scientific facts are false and that biblical accounts of creation are true. Now, there are many different views and not all believers can be lumped together. Some hold that the creation account is true and that believing that God created the world in six days, while others hold more moderate views. Some believe the theory of evolution does not give the whole picture and that God had a significant role in the process. Either way, modern creationism is typically marked by a distrust of scientific knowledge.

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The main reason given for this distrust is often a complete faith in the inerrancy of the word of God and contains no errors, then its teachings must be true, and any errors made by scientists themselves! Naturally, such thinking is often derided as but there are significant numbers of so-called **fundamentalist Christians** who reject liberal interpretation of biblical texts. Thus, it is not uncommon to see Christians believe the universe is under 10,000 years old, a belief of 'young earth' creationists that derive apologists such as Henry Morris or Ken Ham. Moreover, for such creationists, theories such as evolution or the Big Bang (e.g. for billions of years or background radiation) such evidence is misleading or even placed in the context of faith by God.

Instead of the theory of evolution, creationists instead propose a set of views often called intelligent design. The central idea of this is that there is an inherent complexity to certain organisms that cannot be explained by evolutionary forces. One common example of proponents of intelligent design argue is too complex, well designed and precise to have evolved by natural selection. Now, there are different versions of intelligent design proposed by young-earth creationists is more encompassing and involves a complete rejection of evolution. However, there are certain kinds of moderate intelligent design proponents that God simply had a hand in the direction of evolution or fine-tuned evolution.

Despite these differences, critics often point out that the trouble with any idea of intelligent design is fundamentally unscientific. The evidence they often point towards involves identifying gaps in evolutionary progression. Yet such gaps do not mean that evolution did not occur, just that scientists have not precisely identified the stages. As we noted in the last section, such thinking very much falls into a 'God of the gaps' fallacy, certainly guilty of the ignorance fallacy. Furthermore, intelligent design is, by its nature, not on making independent observations of its own but instead relies on ideas of design to justify a rejection of one of the most evidence-based and supported theories in science. It will often point out that although intelligent design presents itself as a scientific theory, it is not adhering to the conditions or principles of science on the basis of the scientific method.

However, it is important not to make creationist accounts as the only serious attempt at reconciling religion and science. Among academic theologians, many more coherent attempts have been taken to reconcile scientific theory and Christian principles. In the next section, we will look at one of these theologians, and examine how he approaches the challenge of science and religion.

## John Polkinghorne

John Polkinghorne was a British theoretical physicist and Anglican theologian, who throughout his academic career often focused on outlining the relationship between religion and science. Thus, in contrast to many religious scholars, he had a distinctly scientific background and used this to inform not only his religious beliefs but also his concerns about the conflicts between a scientific and religious perspective. Yet, one important starting point for Polkinghorne is his contention that, although different in outlook, both religious belief and scientific enquiry are driven by a motivation or wish to understand the world as it truly is. In other words, both look to go beyond the mere observation of the world and gain knowledge of the underlying forces that govern the laws and behaviour of objects in the universe.

This can be considered quite a controversial proposal. We've looked already at how scientists do generally use evidence and observations for phenomena, even if their approach to gaining knowledge is different. But Polkinghorne points out, in contrast to atheists such as Richard Dawkins, that the intelligibility of the world is not an easily settled matter. What he means by this is that questions about why human beings have evolved in such a way that allows them to understand the subatomic world and the underlying laws of the universe itself (e.g. Einstein and quantum mechanics) isn't easily relatable to evolutionary forces. Our ability to perform complex mathematics is an increased chance of survival in the same way that other physical or mental abilities are.

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This means the fact that human beings are capable of scientific investigation into the world is for granted. Contrary to Dawkins' suggestion, the success of science raises deep questions about why human beings are capable of observation and reasoning about this order. For all we know, the world may well just be chaotic, obscured or simply unintelligible to human mind. However, if the claims of science are correct, science cannot easily answer questions about why the universe appears to follow mathematical laws and why human minds are capable of discovering these laws. We can explore this further by looking at Polkinghorne's views on the **fine-tuning** of the universe itself.

### Fine-tuning and our Universe

So, we've seen how Polkinghorne points out that there are deeper philosophical questions about how we have come to be able to observe an apparently ordered universe. Polkinghorne's line of thought is summarised up in Gottfried Leibniz's ultimate question 'why is there something rather than nothing?' In other words, the existence of the universe is a kind of puzzle, beyond the obvious answer. Moreover, its ordering is another puzzle layered on top of that. This kind of thinking leads to different versions of what are commonly called **fine-tuning** arguments. These arguments suggest that the universe, or the universe itself, seem to be tuned to allow for the occurrence of life.

For instance, the **cosmological constant** is a value that describes the ratio of the dark energy to the critical energy density of the universe. It is an incredibly small value that has practical consequences for observable structures closer than a billion light years across. Yet if this constant were slightly different, theorists have claimed that the universe could not exist as it does. There are many other constants which combined allow for a relatively stable, ordered universe to exist. Thus, in some ways, the universe is to be 'fine-tuned', perfectly formed in order for life to eventually emerge in a universe. This is about a theory we've already studied, the Big Bang. Scientists have pointed out the specific conditions in order to produce our universe as it is today. If there was a different rate of expansion or the rate of expansion was different, it might have produced a universe thorough

So why are fine-tuning arguments persuasive? Polkinghorne in particular favours the **fine-tuning** argument. The question for him is not just why the universe allows life to exist, but why the parameters have allowed life to exist at all. The fact that we can comprehend the nature of these parameters is potentially approaching the question of fine-tuning arguments, however. One is more statistical than the other. If the universe is so unlikely, it requires explanation via another cause or agent. In other words, what Polkinghorne points out is the natural anthropic fruitfulness of our universe. It's not because of its extraordinary sense or appearance of purpose. It's not logically necessary that it exists but in a sense it is **ontologically necessary**; required to explain why things exist.

Polkinghorne contrasts this perspective with that of the atheists, who he claims offer a different perspective on the world, only being able to assert that the world exists, not why it exists. He argues to embrace the kind of thinking performed by **natural theology**, which seeks to understand the world through the natural world. Religious insight might simply be able to explain or complement what scientific enquiry is not able to. Moreover, science might be able to reveal ways in which God is acting within the world that enable more fruitful religious thinking. One example is quantum mechanics, which we shall analyse next in greater depth.

### God, Providence and Quantum Mechanics

Quantum mechanics is a theory of physics that arises from researchers studying the behaviour of particles of the universe. This means analysing the behaviour of particles at the smallest scale, and how this behaviour fits in with the observations of macroscopic objects. At the beginning of the 20th century, this became possible with the creation of scientific instruments capable of observing the quantum world, and as a result, researchers came to find that the quantum world exhibits some very different properties. One particularly strange finding was that the behaviour of certain elements of the quantum world is not describable by deterministic scientific laws. In particular, electrons can change state without being observed, and in any experimental situation, learning something about the state of an electron makes other states of it unknowable. The changing of these states also appears to be random, with the behaviour of electrons only describable by probabilities. This has led to the quantum world, with one being that it is fundamentally indeterministic.

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You can imagine the ramifications this has not just for science but also for philosophy. Polkinghorne suggests that God may not intervene in the world at the macroscopic level. In doing so, God may sustain the universe by bringing together macroscopic events. This is naturally quite a controversial suggestion but, for Polkinghorne, it is a key piece of knowledge that can bring about advances in religious discourse. For the potential independence of science provides a way for understanding how many different theological ideas might operate. **free will** to supernatural acts by God. Moreover, such a framework may make sense of how God could influence the world without making his existence clearly transparent to humanity.

For Polkinghorne throughout many of his writings expresses the importance of the notion that God cares for his creation. Providence is necessary for the relationship between God and his creation. God himself to be worthy of worship. At the same time, God cannot interfere with important aspects of human life, such as free will and religious freedom. In particular, for Polkinghorne, is a key bit of evidence for God, being so ubiquitous. God in quantum terms both preserves these important aspects of human life and how God continues to act and sustain the universe.

Now, it is likely you already have your own objections to these ideas, and it is important to consider them. Thus, in the next part, we will both look at the weaknesses of Polkinghorne's arguments and ways theologians have approached the conflicts between religion and science.

### Discussion Activity:

Do you believe that Polkinghorne's arguments for the compatibility of science and religion? Or do they fail to justify the relevancy of theology in the modern era?

## What's Wrong with Polkinghorne's Views?

As we analysed, Polkinghorne's argument can be divided into two rough proposals. The first is that science cannot offer meaningful explanation of the existence of an ordered universe and the second is that we cannot comprehend this order. The second is that, contrary to critics such as Dawkins, science is not a stimulus to religious faith, allowing it to deepen our understanding of the world. The first is that we have not proposed without some pushback, and we shall analyse some of the criticisms.

Examining Polkinghorne's first point, there are few different ways to critique his proposal. One is to point out that while it's not self-evident that science can provide answers to the mysterious questions of existence, it is evident that it can't! It's certainly true that science right now struggles with a number of (often existential) problems, but that can also be chalked up to our incomplete scientific knowledge. As Dawkins points out, shouldn't the success of science so far be an indication of its ability to solve problems? Polkinghorne proposes? This might be particularly pertinent when we think a little more about the arguments. For human beings have no real knowledge about universe creation or the nature of the universe altogether. Maybe cosmological constants can only arise in a very specific way, and only occur in the way that it did. Polkinghorne's thoughts about fine-tuning are an example of this.

One example of this is some theorists' proposals about the existence of a **multiverse**. The idea that a universe may simply be one of many, popping in and out of existence constantly, is a popular one. It is generally based upon mathematical reasoning or modelling rather than empirical evidence. It does offer a potentially coherent, partial account of how the universe may have arisen, but it doesn't explain why the laws appear so fine-tuned. Now, Polkinghorne doesn't outright reject multiverse theory, but he is critical of it based on how we currently conceive of the scientific method, they are quite unscientific. It is speculation, nothing else. Yet, we also noted that Polkinghorne's proposal is equally speculative! If this is the case, maybe it would be better for human beings to focus on what science reveals now, rather than arguing about theories beyond the possibility of current science.

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Taking Polkinghorne's second proposal, similar criticisms can be made. For one, a God intervening on a quantum level simply more 'God of the gaps' style reasoning in infancy and there are still many theories about the quantum world that claim it is deterministic). Could it not be possible that in half a century, many of these mysterious aspects of Polkinghorne's proposals refuted? It might be that all Polkinghorne has done is found scientific knowledge and inserted God to explain these gaps. While this claim might have certain limits to science (see Polkinghorne's first argument), if this claim is in fact contested that Polkinghorne's second argument is much more susceptible to a 'God of the gaps' style reasoning.

Moreover, it is questionable whether Polkinghorne's proposals about the quantum world are a rich concept of providence. Many theorists still question the degree to which quantum mechanics intersects, and it can be easily argued that Polkinghorne is not providing any significant evidence to back up his claims. Thus, we can see how scientific knowledge has aided religious discourse. Rather, it may be that Polkinghorne's trends in science to justify age-old theological beliefs! Despite this, Polkinghorne has provided an avenue for the reconciliation of science and religion, and in the final part of this section, a few other influential religious scholars have developed such a line of thought.

### New Avenues of Religious Discourse

Polkinghorne's central ideas have been echoed in the works of numerous other theologians with a different focus! Religious thinkers have often talked about the inability of science to answer certain questions, which religions such as Christianity are able to reckon with. Yet, without locating exactly what these issues are. For there may be some questions which a scientist could argue can never be answered in the first place, making religion more relevant. On the other hand, as we have seen with Polkinghorne, attempting to slot religion into a scientific enquiry potentially runs the risk of 'God of the gaps' style reasoning.

Now the first avenue of thinking here stretches back much further than Polkinghorne. Theologians have often talked about existential questions of meaning that stretch beyond scientific perspective. Paul Tillich, for example, is well known for his proposition that God is not a question, something that cannot be categorised or discussed as a distinct thing or object. Instead, God is the ground for all being; the existence of all things in the world is dependent on God. God is the ultimate answer. As such, attempting to even talk about God as a specific entity leads to inherent paradoxes and contradictions (which we can observe when we try to speak of God in this sense, Tillich draws a line in the sand between religion and science. They are ultimately don't really intersect. Science discusses knowledge of material things and the world, while religion deals with big existential questions about why things exist and why we are here.

Tillich, therefore, shares both similarities and differences with Polkinghorne. He agrees with modern scientific theory but arrives at similar conclusions. On the other hand, the Swinburne who take a much more complementary position to Polkinghorne. Swinburne argues that specific features of the world, such as laws in nature, to which scientific enquiry cannot provide a satisfactory answer. While science can identify laws and explain the behaviour of the world, it cannot explain why such natural order exists in the way it does. Instead, we need a divine agent (God) who has created that order and continues to sustain it.

These alternative viewpoints are not intended to detract from Polkinghorne's ideas. They simply do not represent the entire spectrum of theological thought on the reconciliation of science and religion. There might be multiple ways in which both fields overlap and differ from each other. We will have to wait and see how they develop in the coming years. In the next section, however, we will look at how religious thought today has to grapple with contemporary, and quite pressing, modern scientific discoveries.

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## Christianity and Modern Scientific Issues

Throughout this topic so far, we have primarily looked at broad questions around reconciliation) between science and religion. However, there are smaller-scale issues that get overlooked. For science does not simply document the world, it helps develop it. It has the possibility of both helping and hindering the flourishing of the human race. Particular advances have greatly shaped how we think about human life. Just 100 years ago, many diseases were effectively untreatable, and it was only the advent of antibiotics that enabled doctors to treat debilitating illnesses within the human population.

At the same time, medical technologies have advanced now to the point where we can manipulate the very biological building blocks of human beings. While such technologies promise to help with certain conditions, they have also questioned whether they also pose a threat to human welfare. We are effectively playing the role of God and altering how we think and behave. There is a risk of destabilisation if we allow the proliferation of technologies that could make us more like machines. All the questions primarily arise out of the field of **genetic engineering**, which will be explored in more detail as we analyse how Christian thinkers and figures have attempted to grapple with it.

### Genetic Engineering

Genetic engineering is the manipulation or editing of an organism's **genes** using biotechnology. A gene itself is a sequence of DNA that governs how particular cells function and how an organism's offspring comes to inherit the traits of its parents. Thus, in the most basic sense, your genes dictate why you possess the biological characteristics and traits that you do. Some of these are visible, such as hair or eye colour, while others are invisible to the eye, such as your blood type. In any case, the ability to change genes gives rise to the possibility of changing all the visible and invisible traits and enabling human beings to potentially improve the health and functioning of individuals worldwide.

Why is this the case? Well, the possession of certain genes can lead to health problems. For instance, some genes can be categorised as **risk factors**. Simply having certain sequences of genes doesn't lead directly to health problems, but the way they express themselves and interact can lead to a greater risk of conditions such as heart disease. However, for others, the possession of certain genes leads to specific **genetic disorders** with direct effects on those who have them. For instance, **cystic fibrosis** is a genetic disorder that affects the lungs but also potentially a range of other organs including the pancreas, liver and kidneys. It is caused by genes that regulate how water and chlorine ions flow in and out of cells in the lungs. When this flow is disrupted, it results in a build-up of thick mucus in the lungs that causes inflammation and leads to a greater risk of pneumonia.

However, with genetic engineering methods, it may be possible in the future to replace faulty genes with correctly functioning ones. This would greatly alleviate the health problems associated with many genetic disorders and allow sufferers to live a largely normal life. Such potential treatments are referred to as gene therapy. Proponents of genetic engineering, are a clear example of how the technology is being used to improve human beings. However, there are a myriad of other ways in which genetic engineering might be used. For instance, genetic engineering has been used widely already to produce crops that are more naturally resistant to diseases and pests, and grow larger and faster. It has also been used to create other organisms that have produced a wide variety of medicines, including insulin. Furthermore, it has played a vital role in scientific research, enabling scientists to study the function of genes on the molecular and physical structure of animals and plants.

A good example of this research is the **Human Genome Project**, a large-scale scientific project to map all the human genes, and determine how they are sequenced, with the primary aim of identifying the genes that give rise to genetic diseases and conditions. To a large extent, this mapping has been completed, and researchers are now looking in depth into the different genes and gene expression patterns.

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possess. But the HGP can at heart help scientists to understand which gene, or what combination of genes, is responsible for common genetic diseases in human beings. If this is known, then it may be possible to prevent all forms of genetic diseases, and prevent them through genetic modification before they are passed on.

So what's the issue? Well, first it must be said that genetic engineering is a very recent technology. In the past, recently have tools been developed which might reliably allow it to be performed. In a multistage process, it begins with first isolating and extracting the desired DNA sequence from a donor organism through use of enzymes to cut the DNA into fragments, enabling scientists to separate a specific gene from a wider genetic sequence. The next step is inserting the DNA into the host organism, which varies depending on the organism involved. Some, such as bacteria, can naturally take up foreign DNA, while others, such as plants and animals, require the gene to be inserted during the embryonic stage, which is a difficult to perform. Often the DNA simply isn't taken up by the host, so scientists are working on ways to improve the efficiency and reliability of genetic engineering.

However, there are also plenty of controversies surrounding genetic engineering. While genetic engineering presents unparalleled opportunities to prevent genetic diseases and improve the livelihoods of human beings, this does not come without risks. Many have expressed concerns about editing genes in the human body, especially when the ways they interact with the environment are not understood. Moreover, the effects upon society are perhaps even more poorly understood. In a world where wealth and power present throughout the world, how can we be certain that the benefits of the technology will be used for their own ends? These are questions that go beyond the scope of science, and religious thinkers have attempted to grapple with in recent years.

### Activity:

Research in your own time two novel ways in which genetic engineering may be applied. Write down three ways in which these procedures may lead to undesired ramifications. Evaluate whether you believe the benefits of genetic engineering outweigh the risks. Identify whether the undesired ramifications could be prevented by effective regulation.

### Ethical Issues with Genetic Engineering

In the previous section, we mainly focused on getting to grips with the science behind genetic engineering and the procedures are typically performed. At the moment, it is fair to say that genetic engineering is still a relatively new field in its medical uses. While we can identify how it might be applied more widely, currently, modern treatments do not incorporate genetic engineering on a wide scale. It is primarily used for its use in industries such as agriculture. Genetically modified crops are regularly used and have proved tremendously useful for cultivating plants that grant a higher yield and resistance to pests and disease. Yet, while there are controversies over the use of genetic engineering, the ethical debate has focused around its potential ramifications when applied to humans. In different ways, critics have questioned whether human beings should be 'playing God' by altering the genetic foundations of our persons for our own gain. Are there not great risks to this?

The answer to this question is likely to vary with your perspective on the worth of genetic engineering. Supporters of genetic engineering point out that research has already improved the world. In essence, if scientific progress has been a net positive so far, why should we stop? If we have the technology with the promise of extending and improving human lives around the world, what is the position to take, there are reasons to question this line of thinking. Such a claim is often made around the use of genetic engineering as a philosophical, or even theological. Their argument is that it comes out of nowhere and instead challenges our prior ideas about the sanctity, quality and value of human life.

For instance, conservative Christians are likely to oppose genetic engineering on the grounds that it goes against the natural order, and so God's plan for the world. God created the world and human beings ought to respect that. Such beliefs generally revolve around a sanctity of life principle, holding that human life is a sacred gift from God, and, therefore, any attempt to manipulate it is contravening God's will for the people involved. The argument is that it is only God who is wise enough to use them responsibly.

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On the other hand, liberal Christians are less likely to be beholden to the importance of the sanctity of life, and instead might recognise the important benefits to people that engineering could bring. Simply put, if we could help those with cystic fibrosis live longer, is this not the compassionate thing to do? In fact, we can view genetic engineering as using God-given powers of reason and a natural endpoint for human beings who are in control of their own lives and livelihoods of those around them. As such, screening for and preventing hereditary diseases at the embryonic stage of human development is a natural extension of good, just as is attending to a child with a medical ailment.

In reality, many Christians are likely to find themselves somewhere between these two poles. The Church of England cautiously approves of genetic engineering that is therapeutic in nature, and is focused on treating conditions such as Alzheimer's or MS. However, it has also expressed deep reservations about treatments that occur during the embryonic stage of development, and towards altering human beings for cosmetic or performance-related purposes. Similarly, in Protestantism there is a wide range of views around whether genetic engineering should be encouraged. Many in the US, oppose genetic engineering for similar reasons to conservative Christian opposition. The Catholic stance mirrors that of the Catholic Church. Yet more liberal Protestant churches, such as the United Methodist Church, offer a more liberal perspective on genetic engineering, endorsing it for a wider range of reasons.

Part of the problem is that many churches or religious groups don't have a deep understanding of the science involved. It is easy to think that genetic engineering can involve simply swapping genes. But the process is very much more complicated, especially since researchers are still learning how individual genes affect the development of human beings and how they interact with each other. This raises a number of ethical problems. What if genetic engineering is widely applied and it ends up negatively harming the lives of individuals as a result due to unknown side effects? What if the procedures are very expensive and richer individuals use it only to become wealthier, thus creating further societal inequalities?

Each of these problems is conceivable and also foreseeable. It may be that one day we will be able to create 'designer babies', who are genetically edited to produce characteristics that we desire. On the history of medicine, there are many instances where long-term effects of a treatment were not foreseen or understood. Large-scale criticisms of genetic engineering thus often raise the 'slippery slope' argument, pointing out that endorsing its use can easily lead to undesirable consequences. If we are being ethically responsible, we should at least be extremely cautious about new genetic engineering procedures. Such a view is arguably furthermore in line with the concept of **stewardship**. Our duty to care for the planet means not unduly interfering in natural processes, which could lead to environmental or social breakdown.

However, proponents of genetic engineering often contend that slippery slope arguments are unfounded. In fact, if we can foresee negative consequences, then we must know to avoid them! The use of genetic engineering does not mean not contemplating its potential effects. We should focus on the positive outcomes that can occur and working towards them in a way that avoids harm along the way. Some proponents might even claim that it is only antiquated religious objections that stand in the way of progress in genetic engineering! This is a view that we will examine in more detail in the next section. We will also look at the challenge of secularisation to Christianity and how the religion can respond to it.

### Quick Quiz

1. What is a hypothesis?
2. How is a hypothesis different from a theory?
3. Who is credited with the theory of evolution by natural selection in their 1859 work?
4. Why is the Big Bang theory proposed by some Christians to be coherent with the Bible?
5. What is the pseudoscientific theory put forward by some religious thinkers that the characteristics of biological organisms are too complex or designed to have been created by chance?
6. What are fine-tuning arguments?
7. On what level does Polkinghorne propose God intervenes or interacts with the world?
8. What is the name for medical procedures performed with genetic engineering?

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### 3. CHRISTIANITY AND THE CHALLENGE OF SECULARISATION

#### What you will learn in this section:

- The philosophical and theological discussion around 'non-faith' and secularisation
- How secularisation has led to the decline of religion and its influence as a source of ethical guidance.
- The rise of militant atheism and the arguments for relegating religion to the realm of private belief.
- The resurgence of Christian thought to materialistic secular values, with reference to weak material possessions.
- Alister McGrath's criticisms of Richard Dawkins, with reference to his work *The Dawkins Delusion?*
- The emergence of new forms of Christian expression and practice, such as the Church of England's 'New Ministry'.
- The potential importance and relevance of Christian social teaching, with reference to the 'Common Good'.

#### Starter Activity:

To what extent do you think secularisation has led to the decline of religion in the UK? Do you think this trend will eventually replicate itself around the world? Write down your thoughts and compare them to your studies throughout this section.

#### Key Thinker

Name	Richard Dawkins
Born	1941
Died	N/A
Key text	<i>The God Delusion</i> (2006)
Why are they important?	Dawkins is a highly influential figure in evolutionary biology. His work has been highly popularising a gene-centred perspective on natural selection. In recent years, his atheism has taken centre stage, with Dawkins becoming a prominent critic of religion in the public sphere.
Did you know?	Dawkins is responsible for introducing the term 'meme' in 1976. His work on the Internet might hold this to be his most important achievement.

#### Key Thinker

Name	Alister McGrath
Born	1953
Died	N/A
Key text	<i>The Dawkins Delusion?</i> (2007)
Why are they important?	Alister McGrath is one of the most prominent public theologians of the 21st century. He is one of the staunchest defenders of Christianity against militant atheism, particularly Richard Dawkins.
Did you know?	McGrath has done more than respond to Dawkins in writing. He has written all manner of secular criticism, such as Daniel Dennett, David Hume, and Stephen Law.

#### Introduction to Secularisation and Christianity

It is a common observation that, at least in the Western world, it is increasingly common to find people who are atheistic or areligious, a historical process that is often referred to as **secularisation**. This has led to religion playing much less of a role in public life than it once did. In the UK, for example, there is a clear distinction between **church and state**, meaning that the Christian Church does not play an active role in decision-making. Yet even a cursory look back across the last few thousand years

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phenomenon. For the most part, religious thought and politics have been deeply intertwined. To some extent this is still the case across many different states and countries. However, secularisation has taken place. On the one hand, the rise of modern scientific enquiry and the questions of religion that were once relied upon to answer are now solved by secular means. On the other hand, the sidelining of religious thought have been increased criticisms of many major faiths. Some have granted, for instance, that the Christian Church is a beacon of moral guidance, and others have often claimed that religion itself is a social malaise. Religion is seen as an obstacle to progress but also for much of the conflict, violence and repression around the world.

Throughout the first section in this part of the course, we will break these claims down, see how Christianity faces from secularisation, the view that individuals have the right to freedom of religion in their private and public lives. Moreover, we will see how Christians are responding to the growing secularisation of many Western countries, whether it be pushing back against it (such as **militant atheism**) or looking towards new forms of Christian expression, shedding the baggage of the faith. Because despite its broad definition, secularism can accommodate some more acceptable to religious individuals than others.

Typically, supporters of secularism advocate an atheistic or materialistic view of the world and religious practices as having no scientific or philosophically reasonable basis. Furthermore, they advocate leaving all religious matters to individual choice. This means that governments should not be influenced by religious institutions, and processes such as education should not be influenced by religious thought. Now, for conservative or traditional Christians, such ideas are often the greatest threat to religion itself, and it is common to hear such Christians bemoan that politics excludes Christian perspectives. However, as we shall see, secular criticisms of Christianity have also provided an unexpected opportunity for the religion, pointing towards new ways for it to grow in the modern world. Such growth may come from spirited defences of Christian ideas, as presented by Alister McGrath, or from a refocusing of Christianity on local communities.

For the moment, though, we first turn towards one of the main drives of secularisation. Through looking at the rise of this belief system, we will hopefully shed light on why it has influenced the world in many countries and analyse why it might have been rejected in others. It is also a moral guide.

## The Growth of Atheism

When we consider the decline of religion in the world, we're not just pointing to the decline of religious ideas but the adoption of a new, secularly oriented system of thought. Most countries, whether religious or areligious often support a broad set of ideas known as **humanism**. Humanists perceive to be dogma, superstition and faith-based thinking, preferring what they see as critical thinking and scientific discovery. In practice, this means humanists are often critical of religion and its impact upon the world. However, philosophically, humanism also has some interesting arguments. Central to adherents is often the belief that meaningful existence can be achieved which don't rely on God as a justification or reason for their adoption. Furthermore, humanists value the importance of individual freedoms and the need for scientific progress. This often comes into conflict with scientific theory, humanists side with science over the former.

Why, though, is humanism important? Considering the place of religion in the world, it is not surprising to consider the rise of humanism, or scientific thought to be one of the major movements that have occurred across many different countries. As we noted in previous sections, the decline of religion during the last century has resulted in an equal movement away from religious perspectives. Many thinkers sympathetic towards humanism have presented many of the key criticisms of religion, arguably inspired many to become areligious or atheist. These manifest not just in a philosophical one. Many who agree with humanist principles tend to agree also with a practical one. Many who agree with humanist principles tend to agree also with the idea that it would also be rational to ensure that countries are governed by principles which are based on human thinking. This does not mean that religion should not be allowed, but rather that it should be subject to the same critical thinking.

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religion should be relegated to **personal** (or **private**), not **public life**. Religious principles, therefore, should not influence key areas of society, including education, politics and the law. This proves quite difficult to enforce. The Christian Church is still broadly influential in the UK. As long as the UK is thought of as a 'Christian country', it can be argued that relegating religion to the private sphere is undesirable and impossible.

But what are these critiques of religion exactly? What has inspired people to move beyond religious viewpoints? Well, roughly these critiques can be divided into two forms, both in relation to the rationality of religious perspectives. The first, whether they can be considered as rational, is about the world and about the ethical principles which guide our lives. The second, holding that if religion is irrational then it is a potential threat to the safety of society. Supporters of the second argument typically point to conflicts, oppression or violence caused by religion as evidence for the social harm it causes. Both arguments naturally are of great interest to the world, and it is worth examining them in greater detail so we are able to fairly

## Faith and Rationality

Throughout the history of Christianity, faith has been central to the religion. Equally, it is acknowledged by religious thinkers that faith typically involves an individual belief that goes beyond empirical evidence. Theists will often talk of faith as trust, for instance, and faith as thus having some kind of irrational component. However, such talk also attracts criticisms of atheists, who argue that faith is foremost irrational, and if one agrees with this as a whole, this is a sign that faith in God or anything else should be avoided. But such arguments are against such simplistic critiques. Sure, faith to a degree moves beyond empirical evidence, but it does not mean it is completely divorced from evidence. Theists will generally contend that there is evidence for God but their faith sustains belief in him in the face of complete certainty. Many criticisms of faith have gone beyond simply pointing out its irrationality and have sought philosophical reasons for doubting its authenticity.

For instance, the German philosopher and anthropologist Ludwig Feuerbach presented an anthropological interpretation of religion, arguing that the Christian God, and indeed all other gods, are more than a reflection of human beings' inner nature. The qualities or characteristics of God are simply projected and magnified versions of human qualities, and religion is essentially a wish for the world to mirror what human beings want it to be. This was quite a challenge to those who had begun to question the teachings of the Christian Church, and such lines of thinking continued into the twentieth century, particularly in the work of psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud.

## Freud and Wish-fulfilment

Freud was a strict atheist and viewed religion as a series of psychological processes that humans develop as a response to their anxieties about the natural world. It is an illusion, not in the sense of a false idea, but as a form of wish-fulfilment based on the idea that humans subconsciously want the world to be a certain way. Freud argued that this 'wish for God' or 'wish for a father figure', as we might call it, had its roots not only in the general history of human thought but also in the basic experiences and psychology of each individual. Thus, we can trace any belief in God back to the general societal and cultural forces that have shaped human thought as well as the individual experiences of a person's upbringing; for instance, how they were treated by their parents or other authority figures.

Much of Freud's thought on religion are detailed in *The Future of an Illusion*. We can see religion as primarily a psychological response to the apparent brutality and chaos of the natural world. Whether it be volcanoes, earthquakes or droughts, there are many natural forces that seem random and uncontrollable. This means for the everyday person, who is generally powerless and preventing harm to themselves, there is a natural anxiety in dealing with the world. Freud argues that this anxiety subconsciously creates a desire within human beings to believe in a higher power or natural forces but to control them. It is this desire which leads to the idea of divinity.

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power of a God or gods who are capable of transforming the natural world, humans develop ways to align themselves with their will. Through acts such as prayer or appeals to gods to intervene on their behalf and save them from the chaotic powers of nature, humans establish control over the natural world in the face of their anxieties about their

So how does the Christian God specifically arise? Well, Freud notes that during childhood, we are exposed to the various dangers of the world and unable to defend for oneself. This makes us completely dependent on their parents for survival. Interestingly, though, when one grows older, one can begin to see obvious parallels between the world and one's wishes or experiences. Within the Judaeo-Christian tradition, it has been asserted that God is the Father of humanity. It is thought to be personally involved in the lives of human beings, offering them salvation and life on earth. Freud here argues that, individually, one wishes for God in the same way as a child wishes for a parent to take the place of one. It is simply the case that as human beings grow older, the parental upbringing, they conjure up God to take the place of their caregivers.

## Life beyond Religion

Freud here isn't really arguing against the existence of God. Instead, he is attempting to show that God arises from our anxieties about the world and our wish for security. But what about today? Well, what Freud points out also is that science has given us a much greater understanding of the natural world. We know what causes environmental disasters and diseases, and our anxieties have been quashed. Accordingly, people no longer need to invoke the supernatural. As secular perspectives have become much more the norm, this also means, however, that the knowledge of how such a belief arises, becomes a matter of utmost irrationality. The manifestation of our continued anxiety at our non-existence or an inculcation of

Therefore, what Freud's account potentially shows is that it is not a legitimate aspect of human life, but a certain element of irrationality. Rather, faith in God is a kind of psychological fulfilment. It is an irrational impulse towards what appears to be a chaotic world. However, irrationality doesn't necessarily lead to unreasonable behaviour or a coherent philosophy. However, there is one modern philosopher who takes the foundation of Freud's ideas and applies them to even the social significance of religion, claiming that, as an irrational world view, it is a source of the degree of tension and conflict we observe in our daily lives.

## Richard Dawkins and Militant Atheism

We already covered some of Dawkins' views when we looked at the conflicts between science and religion. But Dawkins goes much further in discussing this issue and has become known as a key proponent of a movement sometimes termed **militant atheism**. As the name suggests, this is a more fervent form of atheism that holds that religion as a whole is socially harmful and should be restricted in all areas of education, politics and public life. Thus, it is on the most stringent end of secularist beliefs, and, despite its proposals occasionally bordering on extreme, it has proved very influential across the world, leading many people to become much more critical of institutions such as the Church and faith schools.

But first, we can look at Dawkins' beliefs surrounding the irrationality of faith. For Dawkins ultimately holds that faith is a **childlike** response to the world, an 'accidental by-product' of a mind that intentionally considers the world around it. Similar to Freud, he claims that it arises when human beings encounter an absolute phenomenon and fill in these blanks with whatever intuitively seems to be the best explanation, even if these explanations are wrong or unnecessary. It is a natural propensity for humans to do this, and, in the absence of correct use of rigorous methods of investigation, so it is unsurprising that posited explanations arise from a process of wish-fulfilment.

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Altogether, this means a multitude of ideas or beliefs might form about the world which aren't connected to its underlying natural laws and processes. These ideas can spread between humans through a process known as **memetics**. Originally a bio idea proposed by Dawkins about how genes replicate and spread across populations, it can also be used in a more general sense to explain how abstract ideas propagate throughout human cultures and populations. Most importantly, memetics puts forward the idea that the 'fittest' ideas within a human culture will be the ones that propagate the most. However, the ability for an idea to survive is not necessarily rooted in how truthfully it reflects the nature of the world itself. Religion's propagation is often due to how robustly it corresponds with certain human desires about how they wish the world to be ordered. In the case of Christianity, Dawkins argues that at its core it presents a set of very attractive ideas which gives a simple message of salvation and evangelism centred around one God, making it easy to understand and replicate among human populations. The emphasis on faith also makes it difficult to reject, as belief in the Christian God does not have to be adjusted accordingly to empirical evidence. In fact, Dawkins contends that followers of Christianity are often taught to ignore evidence and trust in power.

Therefore, Christianity as a religion is well suited to spread among human beings. It is not a set of ideas which best explain the world around us. If belief were judged on a scientific hypothesis, the God hypothesis would be ruled out. Moreover, if Dawkins is correct, the emphasis upon the importance of faith and submitting oneself to a higher power makes little sense objectively for its followers. They are fundamentally committed to an irrational and fulfilling nature of Christian belief over its actual truth.

So altogether there are two key ideas to digest here. The first is that the faith response to the world is a natural but misleading response to the apparent chaos and confusion of the world. The second is that Christianity as a religion embraces this faith within its belief system, which is naturally attractive to human beings who are anxious or worried about the future. The idea of a creator God looking out for human beings is certainly appealing in this context, and this is why Christianity spread at the rate it did. Thus, Dawkins arrives at conclusions similar to his own by attempting to disprove the God hypothesis to explain why religious thought and faith has been so inherent in humanity. Furthermore, it reinforces the idea that as society has progressed and our understanding of the natural world, scientific enquiry has taken over the role religion once looked so chaotic and confusing is no longer so thanks to theories about the processes underpinning it. As the world is explained through science, the need for religion is no longer there. The idea that there is a creator God becomes just a curious relic of a bygone era.

However, for Dawkins, the fact that this idea persists emphasises how dangerous religion is. It hinders the scientific advancements and progress that scientific enquiry brings. Here we can begin to see the basis of Dawkins claim that religion is responsible for so much harm and why it needs to be rejected in favour of science and moral values.

### Discussion Activity:

Do you think Dawkins is correct in comparing religious belief to a kind of delusion? What evidence does he make it out to be? Discuss in pairs or small groups.

## Is Religion Responsible for Social Harm?

In the second half of *The God Delusion*, Dawkins argues that religion is responsible for a great deal of social harm and immorality present in modern society. Not only does religious thought lead to intolerance towards those of other faiths or those who are areligious but it also still leads to violence against LGBTQI+ individuals and those with alternative lifestyle choices. Simply put, religion provides a perspective which in turn results in violent, fanatical behaviour and bigotry towards those who are different.

This is quite an extreme claim in many ways, but Dawkins holds there is plenty of evidence to support it. Chapters 9 and 10 of *The God Delusion* in particular document a significant number of examples of religiously motivated violence and intolerance.

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religion produces, such as the mental abuse of children by evangelical preachers, criminalisation of homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia and apostasy. For Dawkins, religious practices might be excusable on the basis of singular immorality, for the most part, but fostering prejudiced attitudes on these issues. Moreover, the elements of religion accepting irrational forms of thinking mean these prejudiced attitudes have not been challenged by individuals within their specific religions. It is only the growth of humanistic thought and these ethical cases by secular individuals that has led to the increasing acceptance of these practices (acceptance that Dawkins argues many religious thinkers continue to challenge).

So although religion seems to promote peace in name, Dawkins presents evidence of various kinds of subtle harms. From this we hold that each human being is to some extent shaped by upbringing and social influences, then anyone brought up in the Christian faith will hold beliefs that a more scientific mind seem untenable. In the case of abortion, Christians would still hold that it is unacceptable except when there is severe risk to the mother. A secularist would view the termination of an embryo as akin to murdering a human being and would be in opposition. Yet from a secular perspective, which may not view embryos in the same way, this is irrational. While some might chalk up this conflict to a mere disagreement of opinion, it is in the sand. It is not just a discussion of beliefs but a failure of the religious individuals to think objectively. For him, the secular humanist proportions their views to the evidence, while the conservative Christian is not.

The answer, for Dawkins, is simple. Religious thought has to be removed from public life to prevent corrupting reasonable debate about pressing social and political issues. Although this is a difficult way to ensure that religion does not continue to cause social harm. Moreover, Dawkins is often painted as radical when many may just be fair within a multicultural and mixed society. He holds that religion should only be critically taught in schools, with a fair and right balance given to counter any particularly faith-based religious claims. Similarly, churches should not be given a special status in politics in the same way that any other body of individuals should not be given undue influence over the fairness or rightness of political decisions or policies. Whether or not a person believes in an autonomous decision for that person, with all knowledge and responsibility given to them.

Yet, for many religious people, such suggestions can provoke a certain kind of anxiety. The idea of **freedom of religious expression** often emerges. This is the idea that in an equal society, no one should be unfairly restricted from practising their deeply held beliefs. Freedom of expression is often seen as a unique principle but one that stems out of an overall free society where individuals can engage with their views and opinions as long as they do not cause undue or unjust harm. What counts as harm? For Dawkins, religion, by its nature, is inherently harmful, whether it is to the individual or society, whereas many theists will see their faith as fundamentally a positive influence upon the world.

Many societies have struggled with balancing freedom of expression, both religious and secular, with broadly egalitarian principles. Yet a lot have enshrined laws in the last century that restrict speech or discriminatory practices. These have naturally led to conflicts between different groups on a variety of ethical issues. Yet at the same time, it has also potentially allowed for a more balanced view about the contribution of religion and faith to everyday life. In the next section, we will look at responses to secularisation and then look at some case studies of how new expressions of faith and practice potentially counter some of the claims made by militant atheists.

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### Discussion Activity:

Is Dawkins correct in claiming that religious belief has led to significant violence? Or should we ignore other important factors in this discussion? Debate in pairs or small groups.



## Christian Responses to Secularisation

So how have Christians responded to the criticisms of religion and faith made by them? There have been a variety of defences of Christian thought presented and it would be difficult to give in detail of opinion given by theologians across the world. On one end of the spectrum are the fundamentalist Christians who simply assert the inerrancy of the Bible in the face of criticism. We looked at these when we analysed creationism in the previous topic, but it should be noted that conservative or traditional Christians are less likely to view their faith as irrational, considering God's continued presence on Earth. However, most defences of Christianity against secularisation a little more serious, rather than meet atheist critics headlong, either attacking their propositions entirely or pointing out the more philosophical benefits of religion to society.

For even just looking about the nature of religion a little bit reveals that there is something about it that is irrational faith in God. Religion for many is the source of meaning for their lives, a set of moral principles by which they live their lives. It might inspire them towards good behaviour, towards community or to be a better person towards their friends and family. One common criticism, as we shall see, is that he gives a very misleading picture of religion, only focusing on religious institutions out of context, rather than acknowledging the myriad of historical and contemporary human beings towards conflict. This does not mean that religion has not potentially inspired good behaviour in the past, but the times when it has inspired good behaviour should equally not be ignored.

For the moment, though, let us turn to a key critic of Dawkins: **Alister McGrath**. In *The Dawkins Delusion?*, he systematically goes through many of the arguments Dawkins makes and points out their various flaws, with the aim of showing how religion is not simply a delusion but plays a reasonable and meaningful role in both the personal and public spheres.

### Alister McGrath and *The Dawkins Delusion?*

One of the main issues McGrath takes up in the first chapter of *The Dawkins Delusion?* is how Dawkins treats the concept of faith in religious belief. He argues that the definition Dawkins gives of faith as 'blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence' is very much underdeveloped, or even wrongly defined, when one considers the long lineage of theological discussion on the matter. In *The Dawkins Delusion?*, McGrath goes so far as to say that for Dawkins this poor definition is upheld primarily because it works for the polemical purpose of discrediting religious belief. By setting it next to an elevated ideal of the scientific method, and its grounding on empirical evidence, Dawkins can effectively argue that if someone chooses to have faith, especially in God, then they are deluded, although McGrath even argues that '*Dawkins does not offer a rigorous definition of a delusion*'.

In one of the first sections of the book, McGrath details a story of how after a lecture in which he criticised Dawkins, he appeared to undermine the faith of an audience member, whose belief in atheism had been shaken after seemingly accepting Dawkins' arguments without fully analysing whether or not it had valid foundations. McGrath points out that whether one is atheist or religious, faith plays a part in everyone's lives, and, while we should not base our lives uncritically on delusions, it is equally important that one has faith. Delusions may underlie one's own belief. The Dawkins-led atheist, being so certain of their position, may miss the delusions that may have underpinned their own outlook. Through this introduction, McGrath summarises two main arguments he presents through his book. The first is that while atheism is partially based on faith, it is also to an extent reasonable and justifiable. The second is that about religion, Dawkins makes unwittingly disclose his lack of knowledge and understanding.

### Analysing Dawkins on Faith

The first issue that McGrath addresses is Dawkins' contention that faith is irrational. Dawkins regularly uses argument from analogy to argue against the validity of faith, comparing belief in Santa Claus, or, more famously still, a flying spaghetti monster. The basic argument is that if we cannot see or touch or measure something, then it is irrational to believe in it.

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is all that is required to believe in God, then one could have faith in any other existence and still be justified in one's own belief. Yet McGrath notes that much is infantile in nature, often arriving later in life and from reasoning on life and the world. He argues, Dawkins conflates the religious indoctrination of minors with the sincere beliefs of adults, arguing they are both the same when they are very different. Simply because a child might believe in ideas based on their upbringing does not mean the ideas are true. A child believes in are not more refined and developed as an adult.

An example he gives of this is intended to challenge Dawkins' trust in science, people who believe everything is made of atoms. It is like early Science lessons without knowing the physics behind the atom. In the same way, a child might uncritically believe in the existence of God, aware of the arguments, reasoning and evidence for God developed by McGrath, is simply a state of uncritical belief but a distinctive trust, aware of the evidence that can provide. It does not deny evidence and may well incorporate it despite what Dawkins is wrong in arguing the religious person does not employ evidence. It is evidence from that which Dawkins is willing to admit, whether it be direct experience, scripture or an awareness of the limits of science and observation.

McGrath, therefore, does not disagree with Dawkins that there are examples of evidence that religious belief is uncritical and infantile in adults. In fact, he claims to portray an accurate depiction of religious belief, but using source material out of context: fundamentalism: to provide fuel for propaganda. One particular example he brings is Tertullian, which he argues he used to provide a quote as evidence of early Christianity shown not to be have been uttered by Tertullian at all. As McGrath questions: 'Are religious, but not antireligious, dogmas and delusions?'

Thus, McGrath contends that Dawkins refuses to admit the evidence contradicts his meaning that, ironically, his own atheistic beliefs are fundamentally irrational, or ascribes this to Dawkins' perceived tendency to analyse Christianity purely from extreme beliefs, rather than the moderate beliefs of most ordinary Christians. Not McGrath contends, it would be possible to discredit them based on the opinions of them to the limits, including people who are atheists. Thus, he labels Dawkins as **atheist**; his definition of theism is structured upon a one-sided picture of religious belief. He considers the philosophical foundations of faith and religious belief.

## The Limits of Science

We can go a little further here, however. For if McGrath is correct and Dawkins is wrong from a scientific perspective, then we should be able to see how his fundamentalism comes from a theoretical conflict between science and religion. We explored this issue in the previous section. It is useful to come back to it here and see how it informs the more cultural and philosophical reconciliation between the two fields. For McGrath does actually agree in part with Dawkins that 'God of the gaps' arguments is important and a 'good example of how a dialogue between science and theology can lead to some useful outcomes'. Yet McGrath argues that Dawkins' view of explanations Christianity and other religions seek as 'God of the gaps' arguments is that religion prevents advances in scientific knowledge. For while there are Christians who accept scientific progress, most accept the validity of the supernatural. The question of whether we seek explanations for the world that are different from the ones given by science.

McGrath in particular highlights the theologian Richard Swinburne, who argues that the universe as a whole requires explanation, not simply the parts of it. The way science can grasp, develop on and understand the world with increasing precision is the question of why science is able to explain aspects of the universe in the first place. A little further. On the one hand, there do appear to be elements of the universe that we possess the tools to begin describing; these are the natural laws, cosmological constants, the universe itself. Here McGrath holds that religious debate is informed by scientific

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gaps are due to theologians working with science rather than against it, and then whether empirical investigation can resolve many of the key questions about the universe. However, there are also more personal questions, along the lines of 'why something do humans possess the tools to understand all the aspects of the universe that the science is fundamentally limited in its ability to answer these questions. It can explain evolutionary forces but not *why* it did. Such explanations have to appeal to ideas commonly employ to describe the natural world. McGrath's particular appeals to Gould's notion of **non-overlapping magisteria** (NOMA). In his 1999 book *Rock of Ages*, he explains the principle as:

*Science tries to document the factual character of the natural world, and to develop explanations that are testable. Religion, on the other hand, operates in the equally important domain of human purposes, meanings, and values—subjects that the factual domain of science can never resolve. (Gould, Stephen Jay 2002)*

This division does not mean, as we noted before, that science and religion don't interact with each other. But what it suggests is that, contrary to Dawkins' proposals, religion is not irrelevant by continued scientific discovery. Nor is the scientist committed to being not as a hypothetical explanation for various natural phenomena but as a source of answers to questions that science is incapable of answering sufficiently or meaningfully.

## Ethics and Spirituality

So we've seen how McGrath presents a rebuttal to Dawkins' main ideas. He points out an important part in everyone's lives, including the atheists', and that faith isn't simply a matter of choice. Moreover, he points out that Dawkins is potentially guilty of selective bias when he talks about the harms of religion, taking into account only events or cases that he sees as supporting his view, while ignoring the good that has come from individuals' religious convictions. Thus, we have a skewed version of religion that presents it as nothing but out of context and separate from the social forces that encourage people towards violence and immorality. Finally, McGrath argues that religious thinking and scientific thinking can complement each other, showing that

This might be particularly true when we consider modern liberal theology and Christianity. It might be right that Christianity and other religions in the past have been guilty of stoking conflict, but it can simply be a guide on how to reform or adjust religious ethical beliefs. In this sense, science can be a stimulus for Christian thinking, particularly around ethical issues. As such, it can move forward for modern theologians facing militant atheists. Some might focus on the ethical teachings of compassion or love while others, as we shall see in the final topic in this companion, might adopt **pluralistic** attitudes towards other religions. Some might even take specific doctrines and redevelop them to be less exclusionary and more focused on the possibility of salvation.

Yet, in a broad sense, it is important to note also that spiritual thinking can be an integral part of life within purely secular world views. In this sense, religion can also effectively critique and challenge the final part of this section, we will look at how religious ideas can help identity and address the problems faced by secular societies today.

## The Issues with Secular Materialistic Values

Now, going into all the problems faced by secular societies today and how they relate to the topic beyond even the scope of an entire A Level course. Nonetheless, it is easy to see how the shift across the 20th century has led to a number of distinct ethical and social issues. By adopting a **materialistic** perspective on the world. For without religion, we are talking about the world on a material level, as a set of physical causes and effects. As we have seen in our sections on the importance of science, this has been a boon for science, but that such materialistic thinking may also leave human life lacking in richness and meaning. By not meaningfully exploring deeper spiritual and existential questions that arise in the

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Now it's important to separate out the different meanings typically given to the term 'materialism'. In a strict philosophical sense, materialism is simply the view that only material, or matter rather, exists in the universe. There is no special spiritual, mental or otherworldly dimensions beyond what we can materially grasp. However, materialism is often used in a much broader metaphorical or artistic sense to talk about the preoccupation with material things that is exhibited by many individuals who have lost touch with their spirituality. Materialism in this sense may refer to a person's obsession with wealth or their fixation on obtaining certain things with little consideration for important virtues or values such as friendship, compassion or beauty. In other words, a materialistic perspective in the philosophical sense can be connected with a materialistic perspective in an ethical sense. If material things are all that exist, should we not only care about material things?

Now, belief in this connection isn't necessarily valid. We've explored the important atheistic views of the world, and many atheists or non-religious people would argue that the universe does not mean we should abandon our ethical beliefs about the right kinds of ethical priorities human beings should hold. Nevertheless, it may well be that automatically opens one up to ideas about a deeper meaning behind the things in life that people's priorities are not solely centred around acquiring possessions and possessions. The person of Jesus in the Gospels is critical of those who place too great a value on wealth. An example of this is the parable of the rich man in Luke 16:19–31, which illustrates a man who is not preoccupied with advancing one's own material gain.

At the same time, it is important to note that historically Christianity has not always been free from materialistic teachings. Even now, the Christian Church is an incredibly wealthy institution, with its wealth prominently on display around the world. Many have criticised the Church for being preoccupied with advancing the power and wealth of Christian denominations or individuals. Such traditions are made more problematic by elements of the Bible, most notably the view that wealth is a gift from God. Some modern Christian movements have teachings known as the 'Prosperity Gospel', which at heart put forward that material success is a sign of God's grace. Thus, it is not always clear whether the Church is materialistic or not.

Conversely, there are also many new forms of Christianity which take a different approach to faith. These often have been developed in response to criticisms of Church traditions. Christian communities in more progressive, modern fashions. In the next section, we will explore movements, from Fresh Expressions to liberation theology in South America.

## New Forms of Christian Expression

In the last section, we noted at the end that Christianity and other religions may be facing the issues that arise from overly materialistic values. These issues aren't strictly limited to religion, at least exacerbated by it, and religious values can help introduce more meaning to life than wealth, power or even fame. Yet we also noted that traditional forms of worship and Christian faith may be alienating to modern audiences. The working week is no longer 40 hours and many might find themselves excluded by the typical structure of a Christian service. They may feel that their spirituality doesn't mesh with Christian traditions and liturgy.

Now, the clergy of many churches are keenly aware of these issues and many have developed solutions to help people live their faith in ways that don't strictly confirm to traditional models. New movements have formed that take worship out of a Church context and more directly into the world across the UK. In this section, we will look at two in particular – the **Fresh Expressions** movements – and see how they aim to bring more socially relevant forms of the faith to the marginalised or forgotten audiences in the modern world.

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## Fresh Expressions

The Fresh Expressions movement is a new set of Christian organisations which are reported in a report titled '*The Mission-shaped Church*'. This report focused on the ways that churches were changing in the modern world, and how church missionary activities could be adapted at a time of both secularisation and changing worship patterns. Many of its conclusions are that, as individuals' lifestyles and work patterns might not easily mesh with a church, it recommended new ideas and practices for churches to engage with these neglected areas. 'fresh expressions' became generally used to refer to new outreach methods and churches that undertake alongside traditional church membership and attendance.

Naturally, the Fresh Expressions movement is oriented around **mission**, as its target is to reach those who do not belong to the church, but those who do not. Yet the activities it performs are designed to be different from traditional church outreach with the aim of encouraging individuals to participate in the church. One of the key aspects of Fresh Expressions is a movement away from orthodox worship practice. Instead of attempting to introduce participants to fixed Christian worship, it focuses towards sharing with them different religious values, morals and ways of life in which Christianity can normally be present. Moreover, Fresh Expressions is strictly non-denominational, focusing on Jesus and his life as opposed to the works of the present-day Church.

So from the very beginning we can see how Fresh Expressions attempts to meet the needs of a more materialistic society. It looks not to reinforce the presence of the Church in the UK but to show the importance of religious values to a healthy and fulfilling life. It's Jesus-centric, meaning that, despite a distrust of the Church and its hierarchies, anyone can participate and learn more about Christianity. It can be relevant to the ethical dilemmas they face in their own lives. In this sense, Fresh Expressions can ironically be more secularised in its approach to mission, for its focus is not on the church but on showing how the Christian faith can be of concern to everyone, even those who do not believe in God. Moreover, it attempts not to bolster traditional church membership but instead to create independent networks of Christians that can live and worship in their own fashion.

Graham Cray, who led the Fresh Expressions organisation between 2009 and 2014, has outlined two biblical principles behind this idea. The first is the notion that God establishes churches to serve the individual, not the other way around. The second is that new churches must arise from within the culture, not from outside it. This means those who are new to Christianity only have to grapple with the challenges and difficulties that come with adopting a new culture. Although these principles are argued to be biblical, they represent a strong departure from the way we typically think about organised religion and the process of growing new churches and maintaining their independence from the influence of the surrounding culture.

This focus is naturally opposed by some Christians and clergy who believe that mission should be denominationally focused. But there is a strong argument to suggest that Christianity can be relevant to modern audiences, and if this requires a less Church-centric approach, then this is ultimately acceptable. Furthermore, such adaptations may provide an effective response to the criticisms of Christianity, since it shows how the faith can grow from secular criticism and encompass broader values and ideals. It may even offer new forms of evangelism and missionary practices. Furthermore, it arguably helps the faith to grow as a whole, by providing new perspectives which may highlight the issues with Christianity's tradition as a whole.

Regardless, the Fresh Expressions movement has arguably been a success. Since 2004, over a thousand churches in the UK have adopted some of its practices and have been able to reach a wide variety of locales and contexts, whether it be among the homeless, in even skate parks. The next movement we will study is very similar but perhaps even more radical: the **church** movement.

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## The House Church Movement

The house church movement is broadly similar in aim to that of organisations involved in the New Church Movement. It focuses on taking matters of faith, study and worship out of a centralised church and into the private spheres of people's spiritual lives in their own homes. But what exactly do we mean by this? The house church movement points towards the practices of early Christians, who, few in number, worshipped in their local houses or buildings. This was especially the case in regions where local populations were small and people who had converted to the Christian faith. However, as Christianity spread, worship taking places in more formal, centrally located buildings naturally centred around small groups talking and reflecting on the teachings of Jesus and the Bible, which were not always available at the time.

Now, we've seen how many critics and Christians alike may have become disillusioned with organised religion as a whole. The Church of England and those involved in the house church are often no different. In the UK and North America in light of these issues and sought to emulate these early forms of worship and study. Thus individuals began organising local and national events focused on worship and study in order to recreate these early intimate forms of worship and study and attract people who may have become disillusioned with organised religion as a whole.

The advantages of worship in local environments are quite intuitive. Major denominations are often uniform in their teaching and worship practices. Many individuals feel that this is restrictive. Outside of these church environments allows them to more fully explore their own spiritual lives. Church schedules do not fit their working or living patterns, while some might object to the historical transgressions of the Christian Church. Yet perhaps the greatest advantage of house churches means that it can adapt to the needs of the people involved, who can meet in a more community-focused environment, rather than according to the principles and practices of a large denomination.

As such, it may even be wrong to call the house church movement a movement. It is not about particular philosophies or theologies at its core. Rather, what is important is a kind of faith; a choice to allow individuals to engage with their spirituality in their own private spaces. The home is just as viable a 'church' as those established by denominations. In some cases, 'churches' will respond to new theological ideas, exploring interpretations of the Bible and traditional Christian practices. However, in other cases it may simply mean exploring a denomination's teachings within one's home with friends and family.

Nevertheless, more traditional Christians have often criticised the idea of house churches. They acknowledge important elements of spiritual discipline required by the Christian faith, but they see the Christian Church in interpretation and practice of scripture. There may be the worry that the Bible is reduced down to whatever those involved in a house church believe it to mean. There is the worry that house churches may result in the overall secularisation of Christianity. They have to stoop to accommodate those who feel alienated by conventional worship. They have to educate, or impart the importance of these practices to, new or disillusioned Christians.

At the same time, it is clear how house churches may be an effective response to the challenges of modern life. It demonstrates how people can actively maintain their faith outside of organised religion. It shows that religion can still thrive in the private spheres of people's lives. In a sense, the Church of England's overt public presence if the practices of early Christians were effectively emulated. If the virtues of the religion were spread primarily by word of mouth, it captures a more intimate and personal mission that avoids the potential alienating qualities of large-scale organised worship. It takes a look at a more established theological movement which had plenty to say about the church, as well as about the general inequalities present in society.

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## Liberation Theology

Liberation theology is a Christian movement that emerged primarily out of Latin America as a response to the economic and social oppression many poorer people suffered in the region. In many ways, it sought to distinguish itself from Christian orthodoxy with its emphasis on the importance of **orthopraxis** and the **preferential option for the poor**. A distinctive element of liberation theology, however, was its blending of traditional Christian theory. The most important figure thinkers drew upon for inspiration was Karl Marx, the theoretical structure from which to understand the various historical political and economic impoverishment of human beings, but for many, his work potentially mirrored or inspired his work to liberate his followers, suffering under the oppression of the religious and political ministry. As such, Marx's work provided liberation theologians a methodological framework to apply Jesus' teachings to modern political contexts and how the Church could address the oppression and impoverishment of people around the world.

Liberation theology's use of Marx was controversial at the time (and still is controversial among Christian thinkers, including the Pope himself, criticised the introduction of secularist theology, arguing it risked distorting the moral teachings derived from scripture). It was motivated by liberation theology's thinly veiled disagreements with the work and authority of the Church itself. Liberation theology primarily grew in regions that were typically Catholic, but argued that traditional Catholic doctrine had purposefully diminished the political implications of the Gospels. This meant that theology as a whole had also ignored the important teachings of Jesus and overlooked his calls for the liberation of the poor and marginalised.

As a whole, this meant that for liberation theologians, the Catholic Church had a role in the social structures that contributed to the marginalisation and oppression of the poor. They argued that forcing a radical rethink and change in how the Church operates could those who were oppressed by unjust political systems be helped and the Church prevented from becoming complicit in benefiting from the impoverishment of other human beings. Yet, their aim was not to abolish capitalism itself, which many influential liberation theologians, such as Gustavo Gutierrez, argued (alongside Marx) led to the **exploitation** and **alienation** of human beings. In the first case, by systematically underpaying workers for their efforts, and in the second case, preventing them from enjoying the fruits of their labour.

However, liberation theology was not developed in isolation; it draws on many elements of traditional Christian **teaching**. These we will briefly look at before examining how liberation theology developed as a form of Christian expression.

### Activity:

Research the dual ideas of alienation and exploitation that Marx espouses through his work. Do they still apply to individuals today, and do you think that Christians have a responsibility to address these injustices? Write down your thoughts and discuss with your classmates.

## Catholic Social Teaching

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is a broad field covering the various doctrines the Church has developed on the themes of social justice. Generally these are oriented around concerns about how society functions for ordinary people and how wealth is distributed throughout society. Although it has roots in the teachings of Catholic thinkers, such as Thomas Aquinas, it emerged from a study of the Bible, and its development in modern theology came with Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.

Now, in CST, it is regarded as a way in which society should care first for its weakest members. It argues that all should enjoy freedom and how they possess important rights to life, property, and dignity. Society and the Church have a responsibility to economically support the poor and not hoard it to their disadvantage. So the question remains, if CST is prominent in the Catholic Church, what issues do the liberation theologians take with current Catholic doctrine?

Well, one initial major difference is that although the Catholic Church has committed to social justice, it has not addressed certain structural issues in society, such as alienation and exploitation.

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noted. For liberation theologians, this is a sign of a lack of commitment by the Church to the systems which naturally impoverish and marginalise people. In fact, although the Church is committed to social justice, it has often criticised movements such as socialism and Marxism which seek equality between individuals across the world. This means that although the Church has been engaged in charitable activities, for liberation theologians, it does not address the root causes which enable poverty and oppression to persist.

This is a deeply important point. For the development of liberation theology coincided with issues in Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s. At that time, the traditions of Latin American Catholicism were criticised and questioned by many people throughout the world. These were largely owned by wealthy individuals who took much of the value generated by their workers and gave little in return. Moreover, the workers often had no choice but to accept these small wages as the machines required them to work for themselves and in effect were wage slaves; if they did not, they would starve. The political and social context was why liberation theologians developed and saw the Catholic Church as an obstacle to change rather than a leader. For if the Church was committed to Catholic social teaching, it would have helped bring about reform.

### Ecclesial Base Communities and the Aims of Liberation Theology

Now, we haven't gone into depth around the theory and ideas behind liberation theology. However, we've noted two key aspects. First, it values **orthopraxis** (right action) much more than **orthodoxy** (right thought) and has been critical of organised religion that fails to enact its own progressive theological principles. Thus, considering the corruption and injustice prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s in Latin America, it was clear to many liberation theologians that change would have to occur outside of the Church. In essence, their views were a more radical version of the ideas at the heart of the Fresh Expressions and house church movements. For liberation theologians, however, it was not enough to engage with the Christian faith outside of the Christian church. Rather, it was necessary that the Church fundamentally restructure itself so it could help those in need.

Moreover, liberation theology sought to address the concerns of everyday people and show them how the Church could work for them in the present, not just in the speculated afterlife. For instance, at a key early conference at Medellin, the Latin American bishops agreed that priests in their preaching should aim to '*awaken in individuals and communities... a living awareness of justice... [and] a sense of responsibility and solidarity.*' Without such principles, the Church was irrelevant to those facing significant material difficulties. But still, all this is still just ideas. How do theologians convert their ideas into action?

One key response was the development of **Ecclesial Base Communities** (EBCs) (or Ecclesiastical Communities (BECs) or Base Ecclesial Communities). These are small groups of Christians who meet outside of a church context to study the Bible and work out how to apply it with their local communities. EBCs originally began in Latin American regions during the 1960s where **catechists** took over the duties of overseeing communion and other forms of worship. Over time, however, they started to develop their own identity and partially separated from the Church as a whole. In particular, they focused on an egalitarian model of biblical study. Churches were preached to the congregation; rather than the congregation would form and look at scripture and bring their own ideas into scripture, rather than the church looking for objective meaning), where individuals shared their own experiences to guide their reading of the Gospels. Therefore, the search for the 'true meaning' of the Bible was jettisoned in favour of allowing all Christians participating to find their own meaning.

As a result, within EBCs there was often a greater emphasis on the social and political context and a broader understanding of how his ministry related to the modern world. One of the key aims of EBCs meant that, over time, ordinary Christians became more directly involved in their moral principles together with their perspectives on poverty and oppression. This was the advantage of encouraging **praxis** on behalf of ordinary Christians and, for many,

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alienation that came with simply being an invisible member of a traditional, hierarchical church. For liberation theologians, EBCs were an important example of how Christian practice could empower ordinary workers, and demonstrated the natural structural flaw in Christianity. To an extent, it was largely inaccessible and unrelatable to ordinary suffering Christians.

Naturally, some Christian thinkers argued that EBCs were not authentic reflections of Christianity. While they might be empowering to some, they also risked distorting the message of the Bible. However, for liberation theologians, the empowerment of anyone to read their own meaning into the Bible was a minor concern in comparison to the strengthening of faith in a community that resulted from EBCs. In fact, such criticisms highlighted the danger of Christianity's blinkered focus on doctrinal purity. What the Christian Church should be designed to do rather was focus on the concrete needs of the poor, especially those poor who are marginalised and oppressed. If the Church fails to accommodate their needs, for liberation theologians, it is just another part of the structural flaw.

Nonetheless, this debate was often overlooked at the time by the Catholic Church. Whether Marx's ideas could be theoretically integrated into Christian thought, especially his dismissive and critical position on religion altogether! Liberation theologians have sought to accommodate Marx's ideas on revolution, for which he admitted violence might be necessary. On the surface, Christianity is thought of as a peaceful religion, this is a difficult idea to reconcile. In these issues, the virtues of liberation theology can easily be seen, especially in the eyes of the atheists that Christianity as a whole has failed to live up to its moral principles.

For liberation theology ultimately draws on the same kinds of secular ideas, both humanists do. While, this is opposed by many traditional or conservative Christians, ideas such as feminism or Marxism may be very useful to Christians attempting to understand the world as it is. Christianity and the ethical problems they face in the world today. One could argue that, even if they are being secular, they may still be inspired by divinely given reason, and exploring these ideas through thought can only add balance and insight to traditional theological pursuits. In essence, Christianity can be seen as an opportunity for the world to grow and the future requires recognising that its historical traditions may at least be partially misplaced. The perceived 'secularisation' of the world has resulted that some Christians would balk at the idea of religious thinkers who argue that this is necessary reform.

### Discussion Question:

Do you think the new forms of Christian expression we have studied in this section are a positive response to the militant atheist? Discuss in pairs or small groups.

### Quick Quiz

1. What is secularism?
2. How do humanists arrive at their moral principles?
3. Why does Dawkins believe Christianity is successful, even if not true?
4. What does McGrath accuse Dawkins of being?
5. What are non-overlapping magisteria?
6. Give two new Christian movements that endorse new forms of mission and evangelism.
7. What is liberation theology?
8. What are Ecclesial Base Communities?

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## 4. CHRISTIANITY, MIGRATION AND PLURALISM

### What you will learn in this section:

The philosophical and theological discussion around 'freedom of religion' and issues concerning migration and pluralism, including:

- The ways in which migration and other factors have led to the development of a multicultural Western world, with a specific reference to the UK.
- The nature of laws concerning freedom of religion and religious expression and how pluralism has become a feature of modern secular states.
- The various Christian attitudes towards other faiths, including exclusivism, and how these influence thought on interfaith and interdenominational relations.
- Christian responses to the issues surrounding freedom of religious expression.

### Starter Activity:

Do you believe the UK has significant *freedom of religious expression*? Research this question, comparing your notes to your studies as you progress throughout this section.

### Key Thinker

Name	Karl Rahner
Born	1904
Died	1984
Key text	<i>Schriften zur Theologie</i> (1954–1984)
Why are they important?	Rahner is commonly thought of as one of the most influential twentieth century theologians on a vast number of topics and in Catholic doctrine today.
Did you know?	Rahner was well known for being prolific, producing an estimated 1000 pages of work throughout his life!

### Key Thinker

Name	John Hick
Born	1922
Died	2012
Key text	<i>Death and the Eternal Life</i> (1976)
Why are they important?	Hick is perhaps simultaneously one of the most influential and controversial theologians of the twentieth century. Although Protestant, he argued that all religions should be thought of as myth and that other contentious ideas such as heaven and hell and pluralism should be adopted by Christians.
Did you know?	Hick in the late 1950s accepted a place at Cornell University. At the time, Cornell was also becoming more liberal at that time and he faced severe opposition from conservative academics, with many even accusing him of heresy. His doctrine of the virgin birth and his hostility eventually led to his departure from Cornell in the early 1960s.

### Introduction: The Growth of Religious Pluralism

In the previous topics, we've looked at how secularisation has led to a decline in religion in the public sphere. As such, most European countries can be accurately labelled as 'secular'. Even if a country might have a primary religion, they happily accommodate those of other faiths. This is due in part to migration across the last century, many have become **multicultural** or **multifaith**. This has arguably been of benefit to many within these states (although also not without controversy). However, the existence of multifaith societies isn't a new phenomenon. Through

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there have been many different documented societies or cultures that have included religions, especially in landlocked states which have possessed fluid borders.

In this respect, the theological debates around multifaith societies are also not new. The kind of attitudes to have towards those of other faiths have often been led by the conflicting views of different religions, and it is erroneous to hold that multifaith societies are racked with religious conflict. For many throughout history, the idea of a single religion is inconceivable, and although there have been an estimated 100 million battles, rarely has a state been able to religiously isolate itself from the influence of other religions.

Yet, with the increasing ease of travel and communication in the modern world, it is prevalent that more and more individuals regularly come into contact with people from other cultures and religions. While this presents challenges in everyday life, it also has put increasing pressure on religious leaders to issue guidance to followers on interfaith dialogue and develop more balanced approaches to mission work. This is particularly true for the UK. Although Christianity is still the dominant religion in the country, there have been growing numbers of Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Jews. The moral and spiritual ideas of these religions have influenced many Christians. This means that all Christian denominations, including the Church and Church of England, have been pushed to engage in more interfaith dialogue. Conflicts arise between individuals of different religions in order to ensure social harmony.

Moreover, states themselves have engaged in efforts to maintain this social harmony. While these efforts in time, but first it is useful to note how multicultural societies have developed. There are many reasons individuals have chosen to migrate to other countries and settle down.

### What Factors Contribute to the Development of Multifaith Societies?

Multifaith societies are largely developed through the movement of people. While individuals may cluster around those of their own culture or faith, there are a number of influences that can necessitate them moving to another location. Conflicting religious beliefs or cultural differences aren't isolated. A person might choose to move to a new country due to a combination of certain constraints or pressures, while others might be violently forced to move to a new eventual destination. It is also true that individuals in their everyday lives face different challenges. Of these different challenges, one individual might perceive movement to be voluntary, while another might see it as involuntary. This is particularly true when racial, cultural or religious prejudice comes into play. For example, many migrants who move for economic reasons without understanding how pre-existing social structures might have unfairly impoverished them.

Unpacking the myriad of different factors that affected the movement of people is a complex task. Rarely does someone have a full understanding of not only the large-scale influences on mass movements but also the individual psychological reasons individuals might choose to move. However, a number of key aspects we can note:

#### 1. Voluntary Migration

This is often the most transparent factor in the development of multifaith societies, but it is often misunderstood. As travel and communication have become easier with technology, the barriers people have faced when moving to other places have diminished. As a result, people have moved to other countries for a change in lifestyle and environment. A classic example is people moving to warmer climates. Such voluntary movement can be short-term or long-term, but, on the whole, it has created opportunities for people to explore different cultures and religions has led many to settle in their new birthplace. Such migration has been spurred on by a multitude of personal reasons. For example, more and more people are voluntarily choosing to engage with those of other religions. This has led to the development of communities without a single unifying faith.

#### 2. Economic Necessity – Labour, Development and the Free Market

Increasingly, the effects of **globalisation** can be felt among individual communities. Influences placed upon international trade, markets and economic growth across borders mean that economic influences can inform people's movement. Often in impoverished areas, there is a need for work for people to survive and so this might spur movement in both skilled and unskilled labour.

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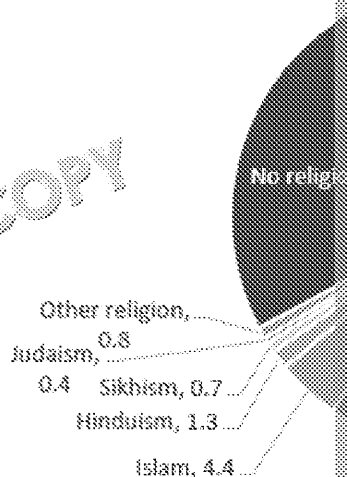
In particular, companies that engage in a larger number of international projects and workers, especially in labour-intensive fields such as construction or resource gathering, have people of different faiths having to migrate. However, there is of course debate as to whether this is a necessity and what is simply economic desire. What might appear necessary to one person is a desirable choice to another.

### 3. Involuntary Migration – Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Following on from economic necessity, there is arguably an even greater influence on migration from conflict and war. This is perhaps the most visible aspect of the mixing of individuals in light of modern conflicts such as the civil war in Syria. Simply put, the continuing conflict around the world means that people are displaced from their native countries displacing them into regions of different faiths. Yet, even though such migrants are not of their own will, tensions can easily arise between them and native populations due to differences in culture and religion. Moreover, many often conflate such forms of involuntary migration with both voluntary migration and meaning interfaith dialogue or governmental intervention may be even more necessary to maintain social harmony.

### Religious Pluralism and Law

Although we've noted in prior sections that the influence of Christianity has declined, the opposite might be said of other religions. The 2011 Census found that Christianity is still the dominant religion, but there were significant numbers of people who held Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and Judaism to be their primary religion. All in all, not far off 10% of the UK belongs to a religion other than Christianity, and many now simply register themselves as having no religion. These statistics, however, can vary; the census doesn't always capture the nature of people's religious or spiritual beliefs, which don't always fit into a single set of beliefs. Beyond the categorisation of mainstream religions, there are innumerable other small religions and religious movements in the UK to which people subscribe.



This creates potential tensions within communities. Most religions hold that they have some privileged access to the truth above other religions, and this can create conflicts between individuals. In the UK today, it is not only the case that religious pluralism exists in name only. Many people do not accept the validity of other beliefs and the government often attempts to keep the peace by enshrining religious expression in law itself. For instance, the Human Rights Act of 1998 details:

*'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change their religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest their religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.'*

Perhaps more importantly, the second part of the Act states that limitations on the rights are:

*'In the interests of public safety, the protection of public order, health or morals, and the freedoms of others.'*

Thus, there is a broad notion that individuals should be free to practise their faith as long as it does not cause the harm of others or the general social order. For the most part, this is easy to understand. A Christian might recognise that praying in a public space is unlikely to harm anyone. However, when individuals from society and services based on personal or social factors may well be affected, difficulty ensues. Where are the limits to freedom of religious expression and how are they applied to complex ethical situations? For although we are commonly thought to

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secular society in the UK today, this outlook has not traditionally been shared by Christians. When it comes to matters of salvation. Thus, before we look at the application of freedom of religion, let's first take a look at the various attitudes Christians might take towards those of other faiths.

## Christian Attitudes to Other Faiths

The history of religious thought is filled with prophets and thinkers claiming that their religion is the true knowledge or grants the only means to salvation. Christianity included. More than countless wars and conflicts over the inevitable arguments these claims bring about, the world more than ever we are naturally suspicious of any individual who claims to have the truth. Yet most religions are still reluctant to adopt a different stance, with many still holding onto some special means to truth, knowledge and salvation. Considering the large number of different religions, this creates a distinct philosophical issue: how should religious claims be reconciled with the contrasting claims of other religions?

This section will look at these questions in depth, examining three models of religious interaction: **inclusivism** and **pluralism**. While the main focus of these models will be Christianity applied to almost any other religion, so long as they maintain some position about the truth of their claims. Similarly, while the issues analysed will seem quite abstract, they have significant real-world repercussions. In Year 1, we looked at how missionary practices are shaped by certain perspectives, while through both years we have seen how adopting certain exclusive perspectives on scripture holds wide ramifications for Christian belief. Yet, the extent to which religions interact with each other is often directly dependent upon their willingness to acknowledge the competing claims. However, before we get into such issues, it is necessary to first understand the dominant Christian thought throughout much of its history: **exclusivism**.

## Exclusivism

In the context of Christian thought, exclusivism holds that only faith in Jesus Christ (and God) can grant the means to salvation and eternal life, a position sometimes called **monotheism**. As a consequence of this mental framework, for exclusivist Christians, other religions do not provide knowledge of salvation, but may only lead an individual towards condemnation. Throughout the history of Christianity, this was the view that most theologians held, and these attitudes have persisted at various times. Many of the historical figures we have studied in the syllabus – for instance, Augustine, Aquinas and Luther – have adopted some variations of exclusivism, more pointedly than others. This means that generally these thinkers have all held the view that those who have faith in Christ will be punished, regardless of the lives they have led.

It is important to note that such exclusivist beliefs have not always been a common feature of religion, particularly for polytheistic religions. The emergence of Christianity as a monotheistic religion was partially because Roman-oriented paganism was decidedly more pluralist in its approach to gods and religious beliefs of other cultures into its own during the conquest of other cultures. In the history of Christianity there were many heretical movements which combined Christianity with other religious beliefs. Whether it be Gnosticism or Manichaeism, the journey to exclusivism was paved by theologians explicitly rejecting some movements as heresy and maintaining the exclusivist view even if they were developed out of important philosophical concerns.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that there are also potentially strong theological arguments based on the nature of Christianity itself which support exclusivism. In fact, exclusivism as a whole is a natural conclusion of holding that Jesus Christ holds the truth or the means to salvation. Christianity is distinctively monotheistic, meaning that no other religion can be equally true. Furthermore, many other key Christian doctrines arguably tacitly support exclusivist beliefs about **predestination** and **election**, in positing that God preordains who will be saved. Exclusivist attitudes as they imply there are some individuals who will have chosen the right path and others who will choose the wrong path to salvation.

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Accordingly, many thinkers who endorse exclusivism also hold the Bible to be an authoritative source of knowledge about God and salvation (**biblical realism**). If the Bible were thought of as infallible, it would equally affect the claim that only Christianity holds the means to salvation. It is not only other religions or belief systems to criticise the foundations of Christian thought. Christianity is often seen by proponents as a denial of the veracity of scripture itself. That exclusivist attitudes do not always uphold this principle. Karl Barth, whose thought is often seen as endorsing exclusivism, famously warned against upholding the Bible as infallible and guilty of bibliolatry. However, even Barth held that the Bible was still an authoritative source of truth such that it would be wrong to categorise it as a critic of scripture-focused thought.

Overall, maintaining an exclusivist attitude towards Christian belief is arguably not a neutral position. For exclusivism is justified by a prior belief in the truth of Christ and the Bible. There are also key theological difficulties in reconciling exclusivist thinking with traditional Christian teaching. For example, Christianity has often been criticised for the explicit (or at least implicit) teaching that those who do not have faith in Christ will be punished. This stands in contrast with many of Jesus' teachings. In the Gospels, Jesus often seem to emphasise the importance of good ethical conduct over religious observance. Outside of the theological context, this issue is still under debate. Some argue that under single-track thinking does not necessarily entail condemnation for those outside of the Christian faith. For example, argues that it is only those who would willingly turn their backs on Jesus and his teachings who could be condemned, not those who are ignorant of Christian teaching. For the moment, though, let us turn to some of the biblical evidence for exclusivism. We will then look at the wider philosophical reasons for its adoption.

### Biblical Evidence for Exclusivism

The biblical evidence for exclusivism is often difficult to assess. Throughout the course, we have studied many aspects of Christian teaching that quite easily align with exclusivist thinking. One who accepts Christian dogma to view the Bible as supporting exclusivism. Beliefs about the **incarnation** and **atonement** are often detailed with the view that Christ is the absolute source of salvation. Christianity itself as a religion is often seen as the only true religion. Perhaps the greatest support for exclusivism, however, comes from key passages in the New Testament. Proponents of exclusivism often cite John 14:6 or Acts 4:12. John 3:16 carries a similar sentiment. *For God so loved the world that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.* Both these passages seem to support an exclusivist attitude as they clearly state that faith in Christ is the means to salvation.

*'Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."'*  
(John 14:6 NRSV)

Similarly, many passages in the Old Testament seem to present the view that Christ is the only true God, and even recognising the potential validity of other religions or gods as a covenant they have formed with him.

Yet we can question whether the Old Testament is authoritative in these matters. Did Jesus himself follow Jewish traditions and customs himself? Moreover, did Jesus not seek to present himself as the Old Testament God, who at times can appear capricious and overly judgemental?

*'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'*  
(Deuteronomy 6:5 NRSV)

*'If you transgress the commandments of the Lord your God, which he enjoined on you, and do not obey them, then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and he will send you into the land that he has given to you.'* (Joshua 23:16 NRSV)

Furthermore, there is an issue with the exclusivist passages taken from the Gospels. The Gospels aren't exactly mirrored by the Synoptics. John was probably written much later than the Synoptics and presents a very different picture of Jesus' ministry. Some theologians argue this is due to the

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sources, but others think that the author added in their own ideas that reflected community they were part of. As we will see in the section on inclusivism, there don't seem to suggest all non-Christians cannot be saved, and these have to be taken into considering the right kind of attitudes to hold. In fact, St Paul himself discusses this where he considers the fates of those who cannot hear Jesus' teachings, reflecting on the Christian Church, the potentially exclusionary nature of the religion was not

So overall, while scripture does potentially contain evidence for exclusivism, it is questioned under a more critical approach to the Bible. If this is the case, though, how is exclusivism so prominent in Church doctrine and Church history?

## The Church and Exclusivism

When looking at the history of exclusivism, it is important also to note the role of the Church – for instance, the Catholic Church – adopt the principle of **extra ecclesiam nulla salus** 'outside the Church'. This means that it is not enough simply to follow the teachings of God. One has to be a member of the Christian community, who, in the eyes of many, leads to salvation through tradition and worship. However, the nature of the 'Church' also varies by denomination. For Catholics, it refers specifically to the Roman Catholic body of the clergy whose authority can be traced back to Jesus through apostolic succession. For other denominations, the 'Church' often has a looser definition, pointing instead to the wider community of Christians around the world. Yet regardless of the definition of 'Church', the principle is often seen as essential in order to give meaning to practices such as baptism or communion.

Note, though, that it is not essential to subscribe to such views and be an exclusivist to believe that salvation is mediated through Christ without referring to the Church, but beliefs in a Church-dominated exclusivist discourse throughout much of Christian history, and they still exist. As Jesus (2000), a declaration by Pope John Paul II, he argued strongly that the Catholic Church is the only way to guarantee salvation through Christ. It also firmly rejects any form of religious pluralism or openness to other faiths outside of 'what is true and good in these religions'. Therefore, although there are inclusivist elements in the Christian tradition, it does contain many exclusivist attitudes, particularly in matters of salvation. Many Christians are 'gravely deficient'.

One final important point is that although many denominations still maintain exclusivism, they do not regard each other as **heretical** any more. Instead, they often talk of **schismatic** divisions and generally avoid declaring any followers to be misguided about the means to salvation. Many might claim to the true 'Church', in reality there is often much more agreement on key issues. Yet at the same time, the truth of Christian doctrine is still predicated on the need for ultimate saviour, and it can be contended that if this is the case, then severe disagreement with other faiths who present similar doctrines. Before we look at arguments for inclusivism, let's look at why modern theologians might support exclusivism on a more philosophical level.

## Modern Theology and Exclusivism

One apologist for such an attitude in the last 100 years has been Hendrik Kraemer, who was extensively in mission work throughout his life. The starting point for his exclusivism was Christ as saviour, although this plays an important part in the fundamental discourse of Christianity. He argues that regardless of whether certain religions, for example, Abrahamic faiths, profess their God to be the saviour, and accordingly to be the true religion, they all profess their God to be the saviour, and accordingly to be the true religion. The approach to exclusivism from a Christocentric position. His main point is that without beliefs in a saviour, there are no points of contact or connection from which to reduce other religions down to mere bundles of teachings when they are whole. To engage in trite inclusivism is to do justice to the ideas they present.

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Kraemer's exclusivist position holds a certain impartial appeal. As we will explore, pluralists, often struggle to identify similarities or connections between religions and their differences. However, there are other potential modern theological arguments for exclusivism that are Christocentric in nature. Karl Barth, for example, has occasionally been identified as an exclusivist because of the importance he attaches to the figure of Christ in his theology. Barth in particular believed that no human beings can understand God through their own efforts and was critical of naturalism, the idea that human beings can observe or reason upon the existence of God. His central notion of revelation is only meaningful because they are centred around the revelation of Christ himself. Salvation is not human work, and human beings by their own efforts cannot reach or understand God.

This seems to intuitively suggest that Barth would be an exclusivist, but there is still an issue around his position on the theological issue. While Barth's theology is very Christocentric, he does believe that human beings are inherently fallible and have no real knowledge about God's plan for the world, and why God chooses to reveal himself in the ways that he does. Moreover, since God is not limited by human beings, it may well be possible that those of other religions might be saved. The only thing that we know is that Christianity is a sure path to salvation.

When framed in this way, Barth suddenly doesn't seem so exclusivist. In fact, many of his views are closer to inclusivism, a position that was famously outlined by the twentieth-century theologian Karl Rahner, an influential figure who paved the way for modern Catholic doctrine on the relationship between religions. It is to his thought we shall turn next. But for the moment it is worth seeing how the line between exclusivism and inclusivism is often narrow. While exclusivism is a position that is often taken from a modern-day perspective, its proponents often simply note that, in reality, the truth is what it is. If they are sufficiently different, how could they all be true? There are plenty of questions, but the task of the inclusivist (and the pluralist, as we shall see) isn't necessarily to answer them.

## Inclusivism

Inclusivism, in respect to Christian belief, refers to the view that although Christian salvation is through Jesus Christ, other religions can possess a partial knowledge of this means. Typically, this view holds that it is possible for non-Christians to be saved, even if their respective religions cannot fully grasp the teachings of Christianity. In comparison to exclusivism, Christian inclusivists often believe in a more universal election, believing that Jesus died for all of humanity's sins, not just those who have been chosen by God. Similarly, inclusivists may also have a more positive disposition towards non-Christian religions. If other religions can share in knowledge of God and salvation, this implies there are natural points of contact between human beings separate from revelation in Jesus Christ. Perhaps most importantly, in making a broader attempt to reconcile the idea of a benevolent God with the primacy of the Christian faith, it would be an unintuitive proposition to claim that those of other religions are damned or condemned, even if they led a good life. As such, many modern Christian inclusivists offer accounts of how those living good moral lives might be saved by God, regardless of their religious affiliation.

However, Christian inclusivists may have a variety of different viewpoints, even if they agree that other religions possess important theological insights. Where inclusivism is seen as a middle ground is that it avoids some of the pitfalls of exclusivist attitudes while not sliding into pluralism. It maintains the significance of revelation through Jesus Christ. Furthermore, inclusivism is more seen as a healthy way of encouraging interfaith dialogue and communication between different religious groups, as it implies that at the minimum, all religions must share some teachings or beliefs. In recent years, churches have been seen to move towards more inclusivist positions in the last century. Many key theologians, such as Karl Rahner and Gavin D'Costa. Nevertheless, before we fully embrace the ideas that are often presented, it is worth considering how inclusivist attitudes might impact the history and nature of the Christian faith.

## The Development of Inclusivism

We noted in the section on exclusivism that there are some significant Bible passages that suggest that only Jesus Christ holds the keys to salvation. Yet at the same time, it was also questioned whether this might be interpreted in light of not only the historical development of the Christian faith, but also the broader context of the world in which it was developed.

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intentions of the Gospel writers. This debate is particularly important for inclusivist and exclusivist attitudes towards Christian teachings is not coherent when one considers Christianity and other religions. For a start, we can note that Jesus himself was Jewish. In his ministry it is likely that he saw himself as a Jew, leading to a renewal of or break with Jewish law. As such, Jesus often refers to Jewish law, the prophets of the Old Testament and the scriptures in his teachings to help those listening understand their meaning and relevance to the Christian faith.

More transparently, we already noted that most Christians refer to the Old Testament for theological insight into the nature of God. If this is the case, then how would it not be reasonable for those who share in both scripture and tradition with Christians, to possess some knowledge of God? Without an inclusivist position on the nature of the Christian faith, it may be impossible to understand and Christian teachings. In the case of Islam, Jesus is regarded as an important prophet, especially in studies of eschatology. If this is the case, then the similarities between Christianity and other religions are grounds for arguing that all faiths do possess partial knowledge of God and salvation.

This idea is not just limited to religious thought. Christian theology throughout history has drawn on areas of philosophical thought to influence its ideas. Some historians, for example, have noted the influence of Jewish philosopher Philo, who synthesised Jewish teaching and Greek philosophy, on the concept of the Logos. Perhaps more significantly, Aquinas and other medieval theologians drew on Aristotle to help illuminate fields such as natural law, while Platonism is a major influence on many early Christian theologians. An exclusivist as such may well state that other philosophies could not possess certain knowledge of God or salvation if they maintain Christian teaching over all other religious thought.

Such issues were appreciated by many of the early Church Fathers. Although it is true that history has revolved around exclusivist attitudes, many early theologians considered an inclusivist an appropriate stance to take. Justin Martyr, for example, argues that those who pay attention to the truth, even if they are unaware of it, can ultimately be considered to be on the path towards salvation. He puts forward that when a culture denies the influence of another on its thought, it is a denial of its own history. In order to reject a school of thought, one has to ignore one's own history. Even if a school of thought evolved separately or away from such a school, Tertullian argues that religion cannot arise in a vacuum, and as such it is impossible for Christianity to be the truth about God and salvation when it has been so deeply influenced by Greek thought.

Although such views might not have enjoyed extensive popularity with later theologians, Christian thought were less accessible, they have been raised once again in recent centuries. This is in particular is mirrored in the writings of one of the most important Catholic theologians of the 20th century: Karl Rahner. It is to his ideas we shall turn next.

### Karl Rahner and 'Anonymous Christians'

Karl Rahner's inclusivist theology primarily aims to reconcile two different principles. The first is that of **Solus Christus**, the idea that it is only through the atonement of Jesus on the cross that people were allowed to be saved by God's grace. Without this action of Jesus, Rahner argues that people would not be able to reach salvation. The second principle is that any religion can mediate this grace, even if it necessarily requires the sacrifice of Jesus. Through reconciling these two ideas, Rahner ultimately seeks to provide a theological account of how Christianity is the ultimate source of knowledge about God and salvation while acknowledging that other religions can separately arrive at a partial understanding of this knowledge. However, as you might initially guess, this on the surface can prove to be a tricky goal. Many religions do not hold Jesus even to be a prophet, and so if God's grace ultimately is sent through Jesus, then it is difficult perhaps to judge how they would even begin to accommodate such an idea in their thought.

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Rahner's solution is not to suggest that all religions must incorporate Christian ideas. Those of other religions may in fact live their lives as **anonymous Christians**. This is the virtues embodied by Jesus in the Gospels and so has implicitly accepted God's plan. They were unaware of it themselves. What's interesting here is that in endorsing this, Rahner explicitly denies a principle that the Catholic Church continues to hold to: **salus**, the idea that salvation can only be found in the Church. Instead, Rahner has termed **open Catholicism**, a central tenet of which is that Catholics should not be open to the idea that those of other religions might find truth and salvation through their own faith. Then is not simply the community of individuals who practise Christianity through their faith, but encompasses all who follow its teachings in their lives. This does not demean the Catholic faith, Rahner. The natural desire of all human beings means that other religions have a right kind of faith, and the visible Church still has a duty to proselytise to the world. Yet through this, maintaining the essential role of the Church, Rahner allows for the possibility that people can be saved, regardless of their adherence to the visible signs of the Christian faith.

## Rahner and Scripture

The philosophical support Rahner gives for his inclusivism is much the same as that given in this section. Rahner argues that God is not revealed just in the historical moment but in the whole of creation. One example is St Paul's sermon in Acts 17 at the Areopagus, the Athenian's 'unknown God'. Similarly, Rahner acknowledges the importance of Christianity before Jesus when individuals were still aware of God's presence but unable to be saved. Therefore, although the Christian faith was an essential part of God's plan, it is not the only way. God reveals himself to human beings, and there are a variety of ways that individuals can understand his being and work outside of Christianity.

But the key advantage of Rahner's proposals is that many of the more exclusivist positions have to be discarded or explained away due to his continued support of the principle of Christian universalism. There are many areas in the Bible which do assert the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as saviour. A very liberal approach to scriptural interpretation is required. They are difficult to reconcile with the sources of divine authority in other religions.

*'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we can be saved.'* (Acts 4:12 NRSV)

Not only do passages such as Acts 4:12 still make sense, but the original ideas perhaps retain an even greater relevancy. Moreover, Rahner avoids sliding into the idea that no religion has some exclusive or unique access to the truth about salvation. Instead, **Christian universalism** is endorsed; the belief that Christ died for everyone's sins, affirming the possibility of salvation through Christ. Finally, it seems as if Rahner's position offers a better interfaith dialogue offered by inclusivism. It supports a healthy understanding of accepting the validity and partial truth of other faith traditions while still accepting Christianity as the path towards salvation. So what bad things could we possibly say about Rahner's proposals? Let's look at a few in the next part.

## Criticisms of Rahner

Rahner's ideas might initially seem attractive as they preserve the role of Jesus Christ while acknowledging how people of other religions might share in this salvation. However, the idea of anonymous Christians, while still attractive, is highly controversial. Among Catholics, it is seen as undermining the role of the Church in mediating salvation. The Catholic Church, through its teachings and traditions by referring to **apostolic succession**, maintains that it is not just Jesus who mediates salvation but the Church as a whole, supporting the doctrine of **nulla salus** in the process. Yet Rahner's rejection of this doctrine severely diminishes the role of the Church and effectively contends they are far from essential in matters of salvation. Similarly, Rahner's theology is that sacraments such as the Eucharist (communion) are also found outside the Church, what role should be accorded to any Christian practice?

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The criticisms of Rahner's thought always carry another difficult implication. The does not just suggest that Christian practice is inessential but also that Christianity matters of ethics. This was an objection put forward by a contemporary of Rahner who argued that if individuals can be saved without practising any visible signs of Christianity itself is nothing more than a guide to acting virtuously. Rahner disapprovingly holding that such criticisms overlook his emphasis on anonymous Christians 'implied by God alongside acting well, but these kinds of objections still pose an issue for Christian conception of the Christian faith, encompassing both worship and ethics.

A final issue concerns whether Rahner's inclusivism is conversely insulting or 'patronising' such as Hans Kung have argued that defining those of other faiths as anonymous Christians about their beliefs or their religious beliefs but also reduces other religious traditions to mere versions of Christian thought. It can, therefore, be reasonably argued that most would resist such a characterisation of their views if they hold a sincere belief in their faith. Rahner's theology doesn't really 'include' other religions as much as is palatable to Christians. For while it can be contended that Rahner is speaking outwards towards other faiths, it can also be thought that his adherence to the principle of endorsement of an exclusivist attitude that implicitly denies the wisdom and insight of other religions.

So it might seem that exclusivism is inevitable if one seeks to guarantee the authority of the Christian Church. But what if these weren't authoritative? What if they were simply more unique than any other? These questions were addressed by an influential theologian and will be the focus of the final part of this section.

### Discussion Activity:

Do you think Rahner is successful in reconciling traditional Christian teachings with a pluralist outlook? Or does he fail to appreciate the differences between religions? Discuss.

## Pluralism

Religious pluralism, in contrast to exclusivism and inclusivism, holds that no religion or knowledge has a monopoly on God and salvation. This equally means that for pluralists, there are many ways to salvation, and multiple religions might possess equally valid claims to know God, even if they present competing beliefs or principles. Yet, with these basic ideas in mind, there are many ways of interpreting pluralism. On the one hand, religious pluralism might arise from the fallibility of the human intellect and the varieties of thought in the world. It may be that we are not equipped to judge what is and what is not the right religion and so by virtue of this we must acknowledge that each religion may have a valid claim to knowledge about God. On the other hand, some pluralists hold that if one analyses the competing claims of religions, one can observe how they are all simply different forms of underlying universal or spiritual truth or enterprise. Such ideas are often based on the concept of **philosophia perennis** (perennial philosophy) – that there is a single metaphysical truth from which all spiritual or religious knowledge has arisen – and adherents often called themselves Perennialists or, more commonly, Traditionalists.

Throughout the history of Christianity, pluralism has been a rare proposal from theologians. The belief in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the theology that arises from that belief has typically led to exclusivist or inclusivist attitudes. Yet one modern theologian, John Hick (who will be the focus of this section), has arguably opened up the discussion in Christian circles to consider pluralism as a viable model for Christian faith. In his 1993 work *God and the Universe of Faiths*, Hick presents a detailed outline of how Christian pluralism is not just a valid position, but a justifiable position to take with respect to other religions, and much of his subsequent writing has helped flesh out this vision through discussion of a myriad of theological and philosophical issues.

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Hick's central contention is that when one considers the various dimensions and claims and ends of various religions, it is a more viable solution to search for the emphasise their differences. Moreover, despite the claims of critics, he also argues religious pluralism does not reduce down to relativism. For Hick, holding that all equally valid claims to knowledge of salvation is not the same as arguing that true religion. Rather, if one recognises that all religions are not 'final' – that is, they are in growth and evolution – it is possible to reconcile their different claims through their immaturity and their common goals. Moreover, Hick contends this is not a radical conservative of theologians would recognise that disagreements and academic can develop Christian beliefs but still maintain in many ways across the Christian faith. These disagreements lead to pluralism itself? This we shall cover in the next part.

## The Evidence for Pluralism

We analysed in the section on exclusivism the argument that acknowledging religion with competing claims can easily lead to exclusive mentalities. Yet in the introduction how these competing claims may potentially not be real disagreements but reflections of different religions undergoing various forms of growth. But how is it possible to do this? Hick does not present one avenue towards choosing one presentation over another, but is characterised as a complete overhaul of the assumptions behind the Christian faith. This cannot proceed by analysing its parts, and it is necessary to appreciate the various reasons Hick has for presenting a very different world view from that of Christianity.

The first and most basic reason Hick gives for pluralism is his belief in a benevolent, all-loving God would never condemn anyone to eternal punishment, regardless of their life, religion or beliefs. We won't delve into this aspect of Hick's thought too deeply, as his views are unusual for a Protestant theologian. One implication of his argument is that there is an intermediary state between life and the afterlife, which is reasonable in the context of how individuals can come to understand the moral nature of their actions before they die. This is ultimately a materialistic view, and does not believe that it is a separate spiritual aspect of life. This is anathema to many religious findings. Instead, he proposes that in the afterlife, each person is comprised of their material person.

You don't need to know these aspects of Hick's thought in depth when evaluating his argument. To note that Hick is far from orthodox in his beliefs, and these help inform his pluralism. If individuals are eventually saved, the exclusivity of Christianity is automatically to be rejected. If all will eventually reach salvation due to God's benevolence, and it may be that Christianity is one of many paths that help human beings understand this process.

The second and perhaps equally important reason is the limitations of the human mind, reflected in the immaturity of religion itself. Hick's viewpoint is not simply based on the existence of God but on how individuals come to possess their religious beliefs and the potential for growth. Importantly, Hick asks whether there is any independent way to rationally justify one religion over another's, ultimately concluding that there is not. Taking a step back from our own religious beliefs, we can observe an incredibly wide range of spiritual and religious viewpoints across the world. These are based upon experiences of ineffable, transcendent realities that cannot be proved using scientific methods. In the case of Christianity, Judaism or Islam, the being and motives of God are central. While in other religions such as Buddhism, higher states such as nirvana are where the focus is. Conventional religious beliefs are often based on tradition and authority.

What Hick argues (just like Barth) is that natural theology, or any other 'rational' approach, cannot justify belief in one religion over another. In any argument for a particular conception of God, there is always contradictory evidence to dispute its claims. Each religion may have good reasons, but these are by and large not based on independently analysable evidence but on the authority of major figures. Yet at the same time, Hick notes that nearly all religions have some common ground.

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and a way or path that human beings can take to engage with that reality and that process. What this indicates, for Hick, is that the most coherent position to take is not religion over the other as preaching the truth about God and salvation, but to view religion as accessing an underlying reality or level of existence that is imperfectly understood. In doing so, one acknowledges that all religions may have some partial knowledge of the Real, but can claim exclusive access to this knowledge.

However, this is ultimately only an outline of Hick's world view. Before we assess whether this account of Christian faith, it is worth exploring the more philosophical side of Hick's work and what it has had for theology in the future.

## Religious Experience and the 'Real'

In the last paragraph we noted that, for Hick, there was no rational way to justify belief in God. So what are the grounds for religious belief? Hick contends that it is primarily religious experience. In their heart, he claims, are based on the different experiences individuals have had of the Real. If these experiences are naturally **private**, **incommunicable** and often **ineffable**, there is a problem in relating them to others, let alone understanding their overall implication as a whole. In fact, religious experience may itself be only able to be communicated in an artistic language which can perhaps more readily capture its often strange and mysterious nature.

More importantly, if religious experience is the foundation for religious beliefs, then religious beliefs are actually truth claims about *experiences* of God. What this means is that no religious belief is immune to influences and constraints upon human experience. This includes the very categories we use to understand experience, the cultural influences upon the way we experience things, and the circumstances of this experience. For Hick, this does not mean that religious experience is not knowledge. Rather he holds that all religious experiences originate from the same **Real** (this is to avoid the often loaded term 'God'). While the Real ultimately cannot be known as religious, these experiences are affected by the subjective elements of our experience, which results in the different religious beliefs we can observe today.

By detailing the grounds for religion in this way, Hick seeks to avoid charges of **relativism**, and separate himself from philosophers and theologians such as Don Cupitt who advocate **non-realist** interpretations of God and religion. He employs categories developed by the philosopher Immanuel Kant in order to further illustrate how a realist, pluralist position on religion is possible. Kant distinguished between what he termed the **noumena** (things-in-themselves) and the **phenomena** (the things that appear). The phenomenal world is, therefore, the world as experienced by human beings, whereas the noumenal world is the real world behind this experience. Kant held that the noumenal world was fundamentally inaccessible to human beings, who could only engage with the phenomenal world due to the structures of experience. In a similar fashion, Hick argues that the Real exists in this noumenal world, with religious experience occurring in the phenomenal world. Whatever the Real is, it is inaccessible to human beings except through the structures of their experience.

So Hick, along with his initial evidence for pluralism, gives a deeper philosophical account of the competing truth claims of religion. However, if this account is true, it stands in tension with the truth claims of monotheistic religions, which generally hold that they alone have exclusive access to the Real. So how does Hick resolve these tensions between his world view and the claims of religion? This is an aspect of Hick's thought we shall analyse next.

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## Demythologisation and Global Theology

Although Hick himself was a Christian, it would be unfair to characterise his theology of his work on pluralism was aimed at not just Christians, but people of all religions encourage the development of a **global theology**, an approach to God and salvation of religious claims and sought to build bridges between those of different faiths. between his perspective on religion and the **Copernican Revolution**, the shift in belief in the heliocentric model of the solar system. He compares the older **Ptolemaic** planets revolved around the Earth, to orthodox Christianity. The Christocentric nature of things as if they are centred around Christianity as the only source of salvation and a more fruitful attitude would be to view Christianity as one of many religions all reaching the Real. Yet Hick's view involves accepting the ideas of other religions as they are, not comparing them to Christian belief.

However, Hick also argues for reanalysing and redefining many key Christian concepts. The Bible, the source of Christian beliefs about the world, is far from reflective of the scientific knowledge we possess about the nature and form of the universe. It is expected under Hick's proposals, since the experiences of the Gospel authors and Jesus were influenced by the language, culture and historical circumstances under which they lived, that whatever essential truths are contained within the Bible are buried within layers that have to be picked apart by modern audiences. Simply put, the Bible, for Hick, is not a fallible witness to the experiences historical individuals had of the Real.

Therefore, Hick holds that in order to reach the core teachings and truths of the Bible, we must **demythologise** the stories around Jesus and attempt to discover the historical Jesus. This is, however, somewhat different from the idea espoused by Rudolf Bultmann (with which the A Level syllabus). For Hick, demythologisation should not result in the creation of a new modern audience but should be undertaken as a way to discover the **historical Jesus**. If we grapple with the real Jesus, it becomes easier to see how he did not teach his followers doctrines such as the **Trinity** or **Heaven**, which Hick argues have been primarily extrapolating different ideas from the myths surrounding Jesus' life. In fact, the message for Hick, is that by recognising the mortality of Jesus and the power of his teachings to ordinary beings is arguably more inspiring than the divine picture of Jesus in the Church. More importantly, however, it means that, for Hick, Jesus did not possess divine power with God, and so the assertions within traditional Christian thought that this is evidence of the means of salvation are ultimately unwarranted.

Throughout this section, it should be possible to see how Hick's pluralism is not based on an entire overturning of the assumptions made by many religions, including Christianity. It is wholly benevolent, if the claims of religion should be judged against various different pieces of evidence and if no religion can rationally justify its claims over another, then the most reasonable that Hick's pluralist approach might provide the most coherent attitude towards religion. Nevertheless, each of these claims can be contested, and, in the next part, we will look at those that have been made of Hick's world view.

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### Activity:

What do you believe a global theology would look like? Write down at least three things you believe religious discourses should intersect. Then, once finished, compare your ideas with your classmates. Did you agree on examples? If not, why not?





## Evaluating Pluralism

It was noted earlier in this section that Hick's pluralism is quite contentious, and does it deny Christianity exclusive access to the means to salvation, but it also denies theological teachings that are often perceived to be central to the Christian faith. However, it has been argued that religious pluralism simply strays too far from conventional accounts, it can be argued that Hick's pluralism makes Christianity itself meaningless. It is a moral teacher on par with any other secular figure, and there is little to inspire faith to be wholly human. However, such a view is perhaps also misleading. The reason for this view is as much to do with philosophical issues at the heart of Christian dogma as it is to do with the claim that no one religion can maintain an exclusive claim to the truth about God. It may be that to change the nature of religion to still be reasonable and meaningful when considering modern human knowledge.

Moreover, there are good reasons to believe that Hick may be right about his theory. His work has gone into developing viable accounts of election in order to explain why some beings are to be condemned while saving others. Is it not just simpler and more coherent if a benevolent God would eventually save all human beings, regardless of their actions? It may be that this process of salvation is longer and more painful for those who do come to faith, but it is overlooked that philosophically Hick's ideas may be fundamentally sound.

Yet it is also possible to criticise Hick from the other end of the spectrum. Hick is not representing an actual being or thing that exists outside of our perceptions. But what is the noumenal world? Non-realists might contend that Hick is assuming too much. To ideas such as demythologisation, he should extend this to his beliefs about religion. If there is no one underlying cause, and simply a myriad of different physical causes, then there are different ways depending on a person's background, culture and psychological state. It is not clear what propositions about religious experience can be made here, but it can be questioned whether it may be that his commitment to a realistic portrayal of Christian belief ends up being undermined.

Alister McGee has made a similar point here, contending that Hick provides no valid connection between the 'Real' in the noumenal world and religious experience in the phenomenal world. Not only leads to questions about whether there is a Real, but also makes it impossible to say if someone has had a genuine religious experience in the first place. Similarly, it can be argued that if Hick's pluralism is true, then it is impossible to say if someone's religion constitutes as a genuine religion with meaningful access to truths about salvation. If so, then it is argued that Satanism should be considered to possess the same privileges as Christianity. Hick has argued that Hick is still closer to inclusivism as his authentic religious experience is based on the idea of a Real, but it can be questioned whether or not this is a valid spiritual belief.

So can we say Hick's vision of religious pluralism is a success? At the minimum, his theory of inclusivism may ring true. If one is a Christian, then it makes sense to hold that one's religion is the true one. But from a more objective standpoint, this proposition seems quite problematic. It is argued that all Hick is doing is taking a less partisan view on the truth and nature of religion. Where it gets more difficult is in justifying the legitimacy of religion altogether from a philosophical standpoint. Could it not be that some religions are right and some are wrong? How do we tell the difference? Arguably these are just questions to be asked, but building a philosophy of religion on the validity of religion as a whole is a different set of questions about its authenticity is a different matter.

Where Hick's pluralism is most influential, however, is in his discussion of a global religion. It has been argued that the last century has seen more interfaith dialogue, and this has led to a greater understanding of the potential of religious pluralism theoretically can yield practical insights into how different religions can coexist. In the final section, we will look at a broader societal issue, and explore how these different religious outlooks can lead to deep and divisive issues.

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## Freedom of Religious Expression and Its

So far, we've primarily explored the theoretical debate around the different kinds of religious freedom that might be upheld. On a very basic reading, one might think that exclusivist beliefs are problematic, but even if one adopts a pluralistic perspective on religion, problems around the freedom of religious expression are likely to arise. This is especially true for matters such as education or government, where individuals are likely to want their voices to be heard and their freedoms respected, even if from non-religious or religious perspectives.

For instance, faith schools continue to be a contentious issue in modern Britain. One argument against their existence given by secularists and humanists is that religion ultimately hinders education, for children should not make an informed decision until they are of a mature age. However, secularists also argue about what this means. Religious Studies, as you will naturally know, is not a specification, but it is still a part of the educational landscape of the UK. It can be argued that the option of learning more about religion is acceptable so long as it is also critical. This means that religious views are respected where they meaningfully conflict with scientific evidence or rational thought.

However, Christians may argue that such restrictions are imposing upon their religious freedom. They should be free to bring their children up within the faith how they wish. They might claim that religious education can add much to a child's life, including an awareness of spirituality and moral guidance. Even if the secularists' intentions are good, the result is secular indoctrination. Christians should be given the right to explore their spiritual lives as they wish. As we noted with Father McGrath, teaching children only about scientific knowledge leaves them unprepared for the complexities of humanities-oriented issues in their life, and so a balanced and comprehensive education is necessary. Whether or not this necessarily encompasses faith schools, however, is a more difficult question. One might be that the most egalitarian option is to enforce a universally critical syllabus that all children must learn, rather than leaving it up to the discretion of those in charge of a particular school.

Similar issues occur when we think about the relationship between religion, government and laws. In many Western societies, including the UK, there is a firm separation between **church and state**, in reality, the situation is a little more complicated. In the UK, for example, bishops sit in the House of Lords, which scrutinises all key pieces of legislation by the House of Commons. More substantially, in the US, political parties are regularly given donations by religious groups, and commentators often talk about religious blocs such as the 'evangelical right' who can in key states strongly influence who gets elected by voting as one. While this might seem alien for British people, it is worth remembering most prime ministers in the UK across the last century have still publicly professed Christian belief. So religion still plays an active, if more removed, role in government and policymaking. Yet, it is easy to observe cases where religious influences may have prevented social or political progress on key issues. From legislation on same-sex relationships, religious groups have often sought to interfere with or prevent important laws on issues that affect their beliefs. Thus, difficulties emerge when considering how to preserve the freedom of religious expression while preventing any one group from dominating legal decision-making, especially where the rights or privileges of others are affected.

Moreover, these difficulties extend into everyday life. In the UK, for example, a gay couple being turned away from a Cornish guest house due to the owners' Christian beliefs against homosexuality and same-sex relationships. The event took place in 2008, and the couple's legal partners, suing the owners in Bristol County Court and won £3,600 for unlawful discrimination. The case was the way for future appeals that eventually led up to the case being heard in the UK Supreme Court, where the appeal was lost. While this might seem a trifling case at first, it reflects deep-seated tensions over whether individuals should in effect be allowed to discriminate based on their religious beliefs. It is a clear matter of freedom of religious expression. Society should respect their freedom of expression, even if against the grain of modern ethical thought, especially when it concerns their own business.

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At the same time, if such an argument is accepted, it potentially paves the way for discrimination on a large scale. This may deny opportunities to LGBTQ individuals and give other Christians the right to oppose and criticise the LGBTQ community. For example, while the gay couple *Wallersteiner* won their case in the UK Court, a similar case in the US Supreme Court recently concluded otherwise. The couple *Jack and Jill* who wanted to buy a wedding cake in Colorado in 2012 were refused on a religious basis, and, in a similar case that made its way to the Supreme Court, the couple lost, with Justice Anthony Kennedy stating that 'the philosophical objections to gay marriage are protected under the right to free speech and in some instances the right to religious expression'. While this was not supposed to be a wide-ranging ruling by the court, it has since then such cases reflect deeper divisions between religious and non-religious political views.

For many Christians, non-discrimination is the case of the Cornish guest house is an example of a system increasingly that denies the right to practise the Christian faith. For example, an employee refused to take off her white cross at work and was suspended as a result. This case that eventually went to the European Court of Human Rights in 2013. They ruled in favour of the employee saying that the employee had in fact been discriminated against. Contrasting all this with the but difficult problems about the nature of discrimination. When certain religious beliefs are protected, but religious expression is restricted. Yet, as we shall analyse in the next part, these challenges are much more as challenges for Christianity than they are for secular governments.

## A Challenge or an Opportunity?

It is interesting to think for a moment about how freedom of religious expression is viewed in a secular society. Were society completely secular, it would not arise. Yet at the same time, where religious faith, it is also not considered an issue. Where freedom of religious expression is an issue, it is in societies with competing religious claims. In this sense, the problem occurs not because of the competition between various inclusivist and exclusivist perspectives. When it comes to displaying religious symbols or enforcing religious beliefs, the focus is on how individuals are to regard their belief system as on a par with others in terms of truthfulness or equality.

If we take Hick's perspective, the challenges of freedom of religious expression can be seen as an opportunity. It could be using conflicts to work together and heighten our understanding of each other as a whole? It is contrary to claims that the conflicts between religions are an issue that should be avoided. Adopting a pluralistic perspective, there may well be a stimulus for new thinking, and theists and atheists could have helped develop new ideas and perspectives within the framework of more traditional or conservative Christians may simply view such conflicts as the result of a misunderstanding of Christianity in the UK. The solution may be not to give every religion or perspective the same status, but that at heart the UK is a Christian country and laws should protect Christian expression.

For it cannot be ignored that these challenges to freedom of religious expression are a natural consequence of secularisation. Before the last few centuries, and even until the 19th century, Christianity was an influential, public force in British life. Its ethical principles were widely accepted and upon and far fewer criticisms were levelled at the Church, which on the whole was seen as a pillar of society. Secularisation thus raises an important question: is freedom of religious expression the Christian Church just now dealing with a society that no longer accords it special status? Those that have long held power or influence, equality can be perceived as oppression.

This is an important question to consider in the decline in the role and status of Christianity. It has accompanied many of the changes about the rights of Christians. Yet, with regard to the challenges concerning the Cornish guest house, if LGBTQ individuals cannot refuse service to Christians, is it allowed the Christians to do the same? Moreover, if religious liberty for Christians necessitates the same for others, can it really be said that this belief follows Jesus' example of compassion and love? Or are attitudes once again might just be the remnants of **exclusivist** attitudes, which in a pluralistic society the same rights or freedoms as the dominating religion in a particular society.

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### Discussion Activity:

Do you think the issues arising out of conflicts regarding freedom of religious expression can be resolved?  
How would this occur? Discuss in pairs or small groups.

Nevertheless, even taking this line of thinking, the challenges faced by Christians can be seen as opportunities. Secularist criticisms, though potentially painful, may simply be a call to reflect on the effects of their faith upon others who do not share their views. Similarly, it may be that Christians themselves should do more to criticise ideas that encourage discriminatory attitudes. The Church as a more holistic institution focused on the needs of the whole community, not just its members. What may emerge is a more socially responsible Christianity, but, despite the protestations to the contrary, this might ultimately lead to the freedom in which Christianity has to grow to retain its relevance.

In this sense, secular criticism may simply be an opportunity for Christianity to improve itself by reflecting on the virtuous moral principles at the core of its teaching. While many conservatives would object to this, suggesting it is not right for the religion to adjust itself at the whim of atheistic pressures, there is a greater sense that Christian churches and groups have a duty to monitor themselves and ensure their activities are reflective of the moral principles at the heart of the faith. In the context of the issues surrounding mission and evangelism, and, although many denominations have different concerns around missionary activities, they are often seen as essential for church growth. In an evangelistic enterprise where concerns arise as these often necessitate Christian engagement with the world, to convince others of the important truths behind the Christian faith.

There are signs that these kinds of changes are taking place. We've seen previous chapters discuss how churches and liberation theology that Christianity can seek to play an active role in society without introducing theological baggage. While for critics, this is a sign that Christianity is becoming more relevant, conflicts in freedom of religious expression may be resolved by striking the right balance between public participation in a religion and private engagement. If a particular element of religious expression is discriminatory, then it may well be right to restrict it so that it should not be expressed in public. If a form of religious expression is unduly or unfairly restricted to private life, then society has a duty to accommodate it in the public sphere.

In this sense, it may be that a kind of **inclusivist** understanding can be reached between different values and different forms of religious expression. One can recognise the inherent value of one's own in return. However, this requires a cooperation between the different realms of exclusivism. Either way, it is easy to see how resolving the conflicts around religious expression is a complex issue and one on which many Christians will disagree. For the Church to reform Christianity to be more tolerant and less focused on projecting potentially divisive views onto others, it is a sign that Christianity itself needs to be revitalised and to occupy a prominent place in the face of secularisation. In any case, it is important to recognise that any view on religious expression, ideas of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism that we have explored throughout the course.

### Quick Quiz

1. What are multifaith societies?
2. What is exclusivism?
3. Give one biblical passage that potentially supports Christian exclusivism.
4. What is Rahner's name for individuals who unwittingly participate in the values of the Gospels?
5. What traditional Christian teaching does Rahner oppose as part of his inclusivism?
6. What is the term for Hick's view on salvation whereby every individual will be saved?
7. What does Hick argue will form as a result of religious pluralism?
8. Give three Christian teachings that Hick denies were taught by the historical Jesus.

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## ANSWERS TO ACTIVITIES

### Activity 1:

Read the *Mulieris Dignitatem* passages 18–19. Write down three ways in which the Church promotes true gender equality and three ways in which it might still promote inequality. Do you believe the Church still perpetuates unequal gender roles?

This passage is quite wordy and occasionally difficult to get through. Students should be encouraged to look at aspects concerning gender roles in the Catholic Church so keen to emphasise motherhood when it is largely eclipsed over by Genesis, with the pain of childbirth. Why is Mary a prominent figure in the Bible and not one who seemed to lead? These questions can be related to wider issues about female ordination, contraception, etc.

### Activity 2:

Research in your own time two novel ways in which genetic engineering may be used. Write down three ways in which genetic engineering may lead to undesired ramifications. Compare the two and evaluate whether you believe the benefits outweigh the costs. In particular, be sure to identify whether the undesired ramifications could be effectively regulated by the industry!

This activity is useful for getting students to engage more with the specific technology of genetic engineering. It is easy to see it as a vague bogeyman, but students should reflect on how it could be misapplied or misused.

### Activity 3:

Research the dual ideas of alienation and exploitation that Marx espouses through his theory of capitalism. Do they still apply to individuals today, and if so, how? Do you think that Christians have a responsibility to address these injustices? Write down your thoughts and discuss with your classmates.

This activity is designed to get students to think about how political theory and economics intersect with religion (specifically in the area of social justice theology). The specification doesn't require students to know what exploitation and alienation are two easy concepts to grasp (in both an economic and a religious sense). Give students more of a grounding when thinking about the positives and negatives of these concepts.

### Activity 4:

What do you believe a global theology would look like? Write down at least three ways in which you believe religious discourse could intersect. Then, once finished, compare your ideas with those of your classmates or friends. Did you agree on examples, and if not, why?

This activity is designed to try to get students to think about pluralism not just in terms of different religions but also in terms of practical ones. How would religions discuss their ideas on an equal footing? Perhaps by focusing on common ground: God, religious experience, the created world, the nature of faith, worship practices, etc. It is important when thinking about students' later studies that the freedom of religious expression and how it can be expressed in a number of ways even if it is just a minimum common ground. This is a minimum common ground for God or spiritual dimension.

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## ANSWERS TO QUICK QUIZZES

### Quick Quiz – Christianity, Gender and Sexuality

1. A contempt for, hatred for or prejudice against women.
2. Galatians 3:28
3. St Paul
4. Theories or forms of scriptural interpretation that accommodate feminist
5. The Catholic Church
6. A golden thread
7. Post-Christian
8. 1 Timothy 3:11

### Quick Quiz – Christianity and Science

1. A proposed explanation for a phenomenon that has not yet been tested or
2. A theory is evidentially supported and refers to more general scientific prin
3. Charles Darwin
4. As it holds that the universe has a beginning at which space and time came
5. Intelligent design
6. Fine-tuning arguments are those which argue that certain elements and co
7. The quantum level
8. Gene therapy

### Quick Quiz – Christianity and the Challenge of Secularisation

1. The belief that religion should be separated from political and social affair
2. Through reflection upon human reason, nature and experiences.
3. As it is an attractive example of a religion; its ideas are intuitively appealing
4. A fundamentalist atheist.
5. Different fields of investigation; referring to the notion that science and reli
6. Fresh Expressions, house church movement
7. A Christian movement that developed primarily in 1950s and 1960s Latin A
8. Semi-autonomous congregations or groups of Christians led by lay catechists

### Quick Quiz – Christianity, Migration and Religious Pluralism

1. Societies, states or communities with more than one major religion.
2. The belief that only one religion is authoritative in teaching the truth or the
3. John 14:6
4. Anonymous Christians
5. Extra ecclesiam nulla salus
6. Universalism
7. A global theology
8. The Transfiguration

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