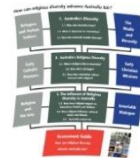


Teacher Background

Unit: Origins, purpose and destiny



Contents

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Origins: Where do we come from?

Christianity

Christians believe that God is the source of all existence. God is revealed in the person of Jesus and through all of creation. Knowledge and understanding of God require both human reason and faith. Christians believe God created the human person in the image of God; as body animated by a spiritual soul. The body and soul are truly one. According to Catholic teaching, the human soul is individually created for each person by God and infused at the time of conception and is immortal. Christianity shares Judaism's creation myths in the book of Genesis. In these stories, creation is not merely the initial coming into being of the universe and its life forms; it also includes the ordering and continuous unfolding of the world. The ancient authors of the two accounts of creation in the book of Genesis like so many other authors of the ancient world, assumed a completely different cosmology from the contemporary scientific one that Christians learn from today. The two accounts seem to be a construct aimed at teaching and remembering deep theological truths. Humans are made in the image of God as creatures capable of interpersonal love and called into personal relationship with the living God. They are called to work with and care for God's creation as God does.

Modern cosmologists trace the history of the observable universe back to its first second of existence 13.7 billion years ago. A Belgian priest and physicist, Georges Lemaître was the first to propose the expansion of the universe in an article published in 1927 and later proposed what became the "Big Bang Theory". Building on the work of Lemaître, Albert Einstein and Edwin Hubble, the *Big Bang Theory* as it is known describes the unfolding of the current universe from a small hot dense state that continues to expand and evolve today. Biologists trace the evolution of life back to microbial origins about 3.7 billion years ago. There is a large body of evidence to suggest that all living species on earth including human beings have evolved from these first microbial forms of life. The person who embraces both science and the Christian faith, sees the origin of the universe and the evolution of all forms of life as the work of a loving creator. God is present in the whole process described in the sciences, working through the laws of nature, enabling every interaction and every emergence, respecting the integrity of natural processes, over immense lengths of time. (Denis Edwards. *Jesus and the natural world: Exploring a Christian approach to ecology*. Mulgrave, Victoria: Garratt Publishing, 2012).

Aboriginal spiritualities

Australian Indigenous people describe their origins as coming from their ancestor spirits and particular spirit beings of their family groups which are unique to the area to which they belong. *Dreaming* (not a direct translation of any Aboriginal word) expresses the timeless concept of moving from 'dream' to reality which in itself is an act of creation and the basis of many Aboriginal creation myths. None of the hundreds of Aboriginal languages contain a word for time. Ancestor beings rose and roamed the initially barren land, fought and loved, and created the land's features as we see them today. After creating the 'sacred world', the spiritual beings "turned into rocks or



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trees or a part of the landscape. These became sacred places, to be seen only by initiated men.” The spirits of the ancestor beings are passed on to their descendants, e.g. shark, kangaroo, honey ant, snake and so on and hundreds of others which have become totems within the diverse Indigenous groups across the continent. The stories of creation are often told through sacred objects such as artworks and through song and dance which illustrate the group’s relationship with the land and their spirit being.

Hinduism and Buddhism

Judaism, Christianity and Islam emphasise creation by God and see time as linear, moving in a straight line from the beginning of the universe to the end. Time cannot be repeated. In Hinduism and Buddhism, space and time are cyclical. Lives come into being and can be remade. In Buddhism, no gods intervene. Everything depends on everything else: past events influence present events and present events influence future events.

Creation myths attempt to explain humankind’s existence and the beginnings of the universe. The Buddhist origin myth is described in the Buddhist text, *Agganna Sutta*, where the first beings are described without form or shape or sex. After feeding on the ocean surface, the beings gradually increase in solidity and they take shape and eventually people appear. In contradiction to the Hindu theory of caste, the Buddha says that there should be no hierarchy among the classes. The people make huts and store rice and eventually they divide the land up amongst themselves so that each has property. Eventually they fall into wickedness and punishment is introduced.

Origin myths provide a way of thinking about the world and are an avenue into understanding the main concepts of religions and tradition.

Purpose: Why are we here?

The search for meaning from a religious perspective

“...there seemed to be a fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones. The effort to restrain it wearied me, I could not do it!” Jer. 20:9

Concern about a meaning of life is the truest expression of the state of being human. (Viktor Frankl)

Religion can be a distinctive answer to the human search for meaning and purpose in life for its adherents. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are religions in which adherents believe that people are part of the divine plan but also are considered to be individuals who need to develop and follow a moral code which is prescribed by God.

The glory of God is the person fully alive...Iraeneus. Thomas Groome explains this capacity to become fully alive or fully human in the following way. *Our gift of mind enables us to reflect on experience, to know the world, to recognise truth, to make meaning out of life. What makes us Catholic? Eight gifts for life.* (New York: Harper Collins 2002).



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Christianity

The goal of Christianity is a sharing in the Trinitarian life; the believer's divine relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Some world religions have as their goal, a higher consciousness. They teach that a higher consciousness is an immanent reality and not above reality or super-natural. It is part of the spiritual journey and the capacity for awareness of spirituality. This awareness is thought of as realisation, awakening, enlightenment, "ah-ha!" moments of inspiration, insight and transcendence. For Christians, Jesus Christ reveals the ultimate goal of human development, the gift of oneself in love. It is in and through self-giving love that one achieves human development and fulfilment. The journey to wholeness is a lifelong one in which the person, created in the image of God, moves from egoism to self-giving love and contributes to the common good.

I have come so that you may have life and have it to the full. *John 10:10*

Christian faith holds that we "know" about God, not through human enlightenment, but because God chooses to reveal God's-self in creation, human history, human community and the human heart. Christians are challenged to live a good life, to develop their moral conscience, to expand their understanding and self-knowledge and to act justly with special care for the poor and marginalised.

Judaism

For adherents of the Jewish faith tradition, a purposeful life is not only to perform obligatory rituals but also to behave ethically towards others and to work for justice in the world: to accomplish ethical and religious perfection by living a good life, developing a good heart and exerting themselves on behalf of others whenever possible. Jewish people seek to bring holiness to every aspect of their lives. In this way, the whole of their lives becomes an act of worship.

Islam

The purpose of life for all Muslims is to worship Allah and to acknowledge the supremacy of Allah. Allah is in complete control of the universe and every detail of life. (The word 'Islam' means submission to the will of God). Muslims believe in free choices but that Allah has the knowledge of all that will happen. The five pillars of Islam are the five obligations that every Muslim must satisfy in order to live a good and responsible life according to Islam. The Five Pillars are:

Shahadah: sincerely reciting the Muslim profession of faith.

Salat: performing ritual prayers in the proper way five times each day.

Zakat: paying an alms or charity tax to benefit the poor and needy.

Sawm: fasting during the month of Ramadan.

Hajj: making a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime.



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Carrying out the Five Pillars demonstrates that the Muslim is putting their faith first, and not just trying to fit it in around their secular lives. The Pillars form the foundation or purpose for their daily life and help them to achieve what Allah wants of them.

Buddhism

Purpose and meaning in life for Buddhists is expressed through the *Bhavachakra* or Wheel of Life. The *Bhavachakra*, the Wheel of Life or Wheel of Becoming, is a *mandala* - a complex picture representing the Buddhist view of the universe. To Buddhists, existence is a cycle of life, death, rebirth and suffering that they seek to escape altogether when they reach enlightenment. The Wheel is divided into five or six realms, or states, into which a soul can be reborn. It is held by a demon (Yama). Around the rim are depicted the twelve stages of dependent origination. Buddhists consider being born as a human to be the most fortunate state. Because they are not suffering as heavily as those in the other realms, yet are not in lengthy bliss like the gods, humans have the best chance of enlightenment.

Destiny: Where are we going?

Freedom and destiny

Catholic Christians believe that God has a plan for all of creation and that humans have full freedom. It is because human freedom has been damaged by sin, that it is only with the help of God's grace that the relationship with God and thereby with the whole of creation can be brought to fullness. Creation is brought to "fullness" through Jesus Christ in the Paschal Mystery. God's grace allows us to participate in that mystery of renewal and redemption, and be brought to fullness, along with the whole of Creation.

God's movement towards us is called "Grace". Grace, God's Spirit poured into our hearts, is not something external to our human nature but an intrinsic part of it. Grace builds on and perfects who we truly are. However, Grace does not destroy or make redundant our human freedom. Rather, one of the effects of Grace is to set us free to love and transcend our own egos and self-centredness. God's Grace and our human freedom work together to draw us deeper into the life of God. Nevertheless, even as Grace offers us forgiveness, we remain sinful and capable of damaging our relationship with God, others and the whole of creation. That is why the grace of God's presence is a constant gift in our lives for us to respond to through the best capacities of our human freedom. Given our human freedom, God's grace is also something we can fail to recognise, or ignore, or reject. This is what we know as sin.

Freedom is what we have, Christ has set us free. Remain then as free people and do not become slaves again.

Galatians 5:1

Thomas Groome writes: Looking to the actual life of Jesus, we recognise that becoming fully alive includes becoming free and responsible, just and peace-able, merciful and compassionate, kind and respectful, hospitable and inclusive, prayerful and centred, balanced and integrated, hopeful and faith-filled, and above all loving.

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Fullness of life after the example of the historical Jesus means growing into the best virtues and values that the human heart desires.

Life after death

Judaism

Many Jews believe that human life continues beyond death and that the final destiny of a person is *olam haba*, the world to come. *Olam haba* is a state of spiritual perfection beyond what we can imagine. Most people have to be purified at a place called Gehinom after they die before entering *olam haba*. The predominant view of destiny for Jewish people is that you live and die only once and that purification takes place after death, thereby expressing a linear eschatology.

Christian funeral rites and life after death

The Paschal Mystery, Jesus' Life, Death and Resurrection, is a living reality for Christians.

It is not just an event that happened 2000 years ago; it is the presence of the Risen Jesus, his Spirit and his Kingdom, today and always. The Paschal Mystery is the promise of life beyond death for Christians which we receive at Baptism.

Together at one altar

Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, has a linear view of human existence with one final judgement based on a single lifetime and a temporary post mortem purification that prepares the person for final communion with God. The important difference is the belief that Jesus has already been resurrected on the third day after his crucifixion. Because of Jesus' resurrection, Christian funeral rites focus on the theme of Jesus' victory over death and the promise it holds for those who die in faith in Jesus. The use of gestures and symbols during Christian funerals include objects also associated with baptism. Water, a white pall and the Easter candle form a sacramental link between birth and death, the candle symbolising the hope that the deceased person is now present in the light of God. Incense is used as a sign of reverence for the body that is considered to have been the temple of the Holy Spirit since baptism.

Different denominations of Christianity have different beliefs about the intermediate state between death and the general resurrection at the end of time. Catholic theology teaches about a cleansing or purging of sin and selfishness in purgatory which is a temporary state and guarantees eventual access to heaven. Prayers for the dead are encouraged especially on a special day called All Souls Day on the 2nd of November each year. Other Christian denominations reject the notion of purgatory and prayers for the dead, teaching that the cleansing of the soul before heaven is instantaneous through God's grace.

Muslim funeral rites and life after death

According to Islamic belief, the immortal soul separates from the body at death and the soul is questioned by two angels to see if the person has led a good, moral and religious life. The answers determine the soul's destiny at



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the end of the world. As they wait for the last day, the souls of the dead are pressed down into the grave in proportion to the weight of their sins. The body should not be cremated because it is believed that the soul could sense the destruction of its former body by fire. The body is considered an essential part of the human person and is required for resurrection of the body at the end of time when the person will be completely restored body and soul. According to the Qur'an, there will be a final Day of Judgement when everyone will be judged according to the life led: those who have followed the will of Allah will go to paradise and those who have not will be punished and condemned to hell.

Buddhism

The Wheel of Life is a theological statement on life and death. Because life is cyclical for a Buddhist, each lifetime is only one stage of the journey which may involve hundreds or thousands of rebirths. This cycle of samsara (reincarnation) provides the explanation for suffering and misfortune in the world. Karma is measured by the extent to which a person overcomes ignorance, greed and selfishness which drives the wheel of rebirth. The ultimate goal for Buddhists is to escape the cycle.

Acknowledgement: Unless otherwise specified, some of the content of this Teacher Background, particularly regarding the teachings of world faith traditions other than Christianity has been adapted and or paraphrased from the work of Dr Peta Goldberg (2012) in *Exploring religion and ethics: Religion and ethics for senior secondary students*. Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.