

Theme C: The existence of God and revelation

From the specification:

You will study religious teachings, and religious and philosophical arguments and their impact and influence in the modern world. You need to be know contrasting (different) perspectives in contemporary British society on all of these issues.

Philosophical arguments for and against the existence of God:

- The Design argument, including its strengths and weaknesses.
- The First Cause argument, including its strengths and weaknesses.
- The argument from miracles, including its strengths and weaknesses, and one example of a miracle.
- Evil and suffering as an argument against the existence of God.
- Arguments based on science against the existence of God.

The nature of the divine and revelation:

- Special revelation as a source of knowledge about the divine (God, gods or ultimate reality) including visions and one example of a vision.
- Enlightenment as a source of knowledge about the divine.
- General revelation: nature and scripture as a way of understanding the divine.
- Different ideas about the divine that come from these sources:
 - omnipotent and omniscient
 - personal and impersonal
 - immanent and transcendent.
- The value of general and special revelation and enlightenment as sources of knowledge about the divine, including:
 - the problems of different ideas about the divine arising from these experiences
 - alternative explanations for the experiences, and the possibility that the people who claimed to have them were lying or mistaken.

The First Cause Argument for the existence of God

The First Cause argument

by *St Thomas Aquinas*

- Everything in nature is caused by something else (eg. trees are caused by seeds)
- Nothing can cause itself
- The line of causes and effects can't go back forever
- There must be a 'First Cause', that is not in nature
- The 'First Cause' must be God
- So, God must exist

Strengths of the argument

- It is based on experience of causes in nature
- The argument is logical and makes sense
- It gives a reason for the universe's existence
- Scientific ideas like the big bang show the universe has a cause

Weaknesses of the argument

- There is no real proof that there is a First Cause
- The argument contradicts itself, because it says that God doesn't need a cause
- David Hume thought that there might not be such a thing as causation
- Even if there is a 'First Cause', it might not be God

The Design Argument for the Existence of God

The Design Argument

- Things in nature are complex and beautiful (eg. the human eye, a sunset) and work with a purpose (eg. water cycles)
- Nature is too complex and beautiful to come about by accident or by chance
- It seems that the universe must have been designed
- The designer of the universe must be outside of nature
- The designer of the universe must be God
- So, God must exist

The Watch Analogy by *William Paley*

- You find a watch on a deserted island
- Because the watch is complex, you decide it must have been designed by someone and left there
- The universe is more complex than a watch
- So, the universe must have been designed too

Strengths of the argument

- It is based on experience of design in nature, with lots of examples (such as DNA)
- The argument is logical and makes sense
- It gives a reason for the complexity and beauty of the universe
- It is supported by the Bible

Weaknesses of the argument

- Evolution could explain the complexity of the universe
- There is no proof of a designer
- Even if there is a designer, it might not be God
- Some things in the universe are not complex (rocks) or are bad (diseases) – why would a designer God include these things?

The Argument from Miracles for the Existence of God

The argument from miracles

- A miracle is a good event that breaks the laws of nature and is said to be the work of God
- If miracles happen, they must be done by an all-powerful and loving being
- Only God could break the laws of nature, as he created them
- Miracles must be performed by God
- So, God must exist

Examples of miracles

- Jesus brought Lazarus back to life after he had been dead for 4 days (John 11)
- Jesus fed 5,000 men with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish (Matthew 14)
- A woman in India has a tumour and prays to Mother Teresa. A light comes from the picture of Mother Teresa, the woman feels a warmth in her and is healed

Strengths of the argument

- There are thousands of people who have witnessed miracles, they can't all be lying
- There are stories of events that can't be explained by science
- God is the only one who can break the laws of nature, as he made them
- All religions believe in miracles

Weaknesses of the argument

- Why do miracles happen for some people and not for others?
- People who 'see' miracles could be lying or mistaken
- There is no proof of the miracles in the Bible
- Miracles seem to be random, which doesn't seem to make sense if God can do anything for anyone

What Christians believe God is like

- **The Trinity** = there is one God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit
- **Omnipotent** = God is all-powerful; he can do anything, even 'impossible' things
- **Omniscient** = God is all-knowing; he knows everything past, present and future
- **Omnibenevolent** = God is all-loving; he is good to all people, equally
- **Transcendent** = God is outside of space and time
- **Immanent** = God is present and active in the world
- **Personal** = God is able to relate to people
- **Impersonal** = God is distant and unable to be understood by people

Types of religious and non-religious beliefs

Theism = believing in God

Polytheism = believing in multiple gods

Atheism = believing that God doesn't exist

Humanism = believing that God doesn't exist, and that the morally good behaviour of human beings is the main objective of life

Agnosticism = believing that there is not enough evidence to prove whether God exists or not

Monotheism = believing in one God

Arguments based on Science against the Existence of God

Scientific arguments against God's existence

- Scientific knowledge is based on proving hypotheses (theories), and ideas about God cannot be proved through experimentation
- There is no scientific proof that God exists or that miracles are true
- Ideas about God, miracles and creation do not fit with a scientific world view
- The big bang theory and evolution seem to contradict religious ideas about creation
- Religion, unlike science is not made up of logical facts and observations of the world
- In that past, things we didn't understand about the world we explained by using God; now that we understand more through science, God is needed less (The God of the Gaps theory)

Religious responses to science

- Lots of religious theories are based on experience and observation, such as the First Cause argument
- There is not proof that God *doesn't* exist
- Lots of scientists do believe in God
- You can combine religious ideas about creation and science, such as saying that God made the big bang happen and started evolution
- There are logical arguments in religion, like the design argument
- Religion is about faith, not facts, so it is not the same as science
- Lots of people have personal experiences of God that count as proof, such as visions

The Problem of Evil as an argument against the Existence of God

The problem of evil and suffering

- **Natural evil** = suffering caused by nature, such as earthquakes and illness
- **Moral evil** = suffering caused by people, such as murder and bullying
- If God exists, he is supposed to be all-powerful and all-loving
- If God is all-powerful, he can stop evil and suffering
- If God is all-loving, he would want to stop evil and suffering
- But, evil and suffering exist
- So, God doesn't exist, or if he does he is not all-powerful and/or all-loving

Religious responses to the problem of evil

- God gave people free will because he loves them. So, suffering is people's fault and not God's.
- God gave Adam and Eve a choice; they chose to disobey him and eat the forbidden fruit. This damaged the earth and was the start of suffering
- Evil and suffering are tests from God to see if people really trust and love him
- Evil and suffering help people become better people and better Christians by giving them strength and chances to help others
- We need evil in the world to appreciate all of the good things that are in the world too

Special Revelation

Special Revelation =

God making himself known directly, to one person or a small group of people

Visions as special revelation

- Visions are when people see or hear God, or something divine such as an angel
- Examples include Saul (who persecuted Christians) seeing a light on the road to Damascus and hearing Jesus speak to him. Saul then became a Christian and preached about Jesus (as Paul). Also, many people say they have seen the Virgin Mary (such as at Lourdes where she appeared to St Bernadette)
- These personal encounters of God, or God's messengers, persuade people that God must exist

Enlightenment as special revelation

- Enlightenment means 'awakening' and is usually associated with Buddhists, who believe that the Buddha was enlightened when he understood the meaning of life and the mysterious truths of the universe
- People who believe in God may seek enlightenment so that they can gain a better knowledge of what God is like
- Religious believers might reflect on religious texts, pray about these and meditate so that they can gain insight into the ultimate reality

Problems with special revelation

- Special revelation is personal and so it can only teach one person about God
- If God is **transcendent**, **impersonal** and **omniscient**, how is it that people can understand and relate to him? How can he be **personal** and **immanent** at the same time and appear to people in visions or teach them through enlightenment? This seems to be a contradiction, so suggests that special revelation isn't genuine if God is beyond our world and our understanding
- Visions and enlightenment sometimes seem to be confusing and mysterious, meaning that it's hard to understand what people are actually learning about God
- There is no scientific evidence of visions or enlightenment really happening
- If God is supposed to be **omnipotent** how can he appear to people in simple and **personal** ways? Surely he is too powerful to just be seen by ordinary people?
- People who say they have had visions might be imagining them because of wishful thinking, hallucinations or tiredness
- People who say that have seen or heard God may be drunk, on drugs or mentally ill
- Usually only people who already believe in God have visions, so they are more likely to have made them up (this is called religious bias)

General Revelation

General Revelation =

God making himself known indirectly, to everyone in a universal way

Scripture as general revelation

- Scriptures are sacred texts used by religions, such as the Bible in Christianity
- Christians believe that the Bible was 'divinely inspired' because God directed people to write the books within it
- Some parts of scripture were dictated by God specifically (prophecies) and others tell stories about what God did (gospels) or talk about him (psalms)
- Lots of different truths about God are revealed in the Bible
- *This teaches that God is **omnipotent, omniscient, transcendent, immanent and personal***

Nature as general revelation

- Christians believe that God created nature, so can make himself known through nature
- For example, a beautiful sunset or flower inspires people to think about God's love, complex parts of the universe like the human eye show God's omniscience and design, and powerful waves or the size of space show God's power in creation
- Seeing the power, complexity and beauty of nature teaches Christians important truths about what God the creator is like

Problems with general revelation

- General revelation is all about the interpretation of an individual – some people see God in creation, but others don't; also, some people understand the Bible, but others don't
- Different parts of scripture seem to contradict themselves – sometimes it says that God is **transcendent** and **impersonal**, (Genesis 1) but sometimes God is **personal** and **immanent** (Genesis 2). How can God be both, as these are exact opposites of each other?
- Usually only people who already believe in God see God in nature, so it isn't teaching them anything new (this is called religious bias)
- As well as beauty and complexity in nature, there are also lots of bad things such as natural disasters and disease – what do these teach about God, as they don't suggest he is **omnibenevolent**?
- There is no proof that God created the universe, so we can't definitely see him in creation
- There is no proof that the Bible really comes from God; it could just be different people's ideas about God and not reveal God himself