

Chapter 5 Contemporary Challenges and Their Impact

Introduction

This area of study specifically connects beliefs with action. Changes in the modern world are rapid and challenging for members of religious traditions, and the traditions are called to respond. There is always a connection between the activities of the world and the activities of faith traditions within it. In the Catholic Christian tradition, the words of James summarise this connection succinctly:

‘Faith is like that: if good works do not go with it, it is quite dead.’
(James, 2, 17)

Outcome 2

On completion of this unit the student should be able to analyse the interplay between religious beliefs and the vision of each tradition for society, and the way one or more specific issues are confronted in attempting to implement the vision.

In achieving this outcome the student should demonstrate knowledge of:

- the vision of human society which is implied in the beliefs of the tradition/s studied
- the ways in which beliefs impel individuals or groups to act to transform society
- the way religious traditions respond to new challenges
- the way a specific religious community or communities in conjunction have confronted a specific major social or moral issue.

In completing your Outcome work, you would have paid attention to all of these dot points from the Study Design. Examiners consistently report that students reduce their Outcome work to a biographical account of a person or group in their exam responses, often paying less attention than appropriate to the underlying, motivational beliefs than was necessary. In preparing Study notes, it is therefore important to emphasise the vision of the ideal society held by your tradition, the way the tradition responds to challenges and the beliefs that motivate groups and/or individuals to act. It is probably true that the biographical details, particularly of individuals, are more essentially appealing and therefore easier to recall. However, in the context of this Area of Study, these details are only one quarter of the information that you need to be able to access.

Certainly, the Catholic Christian tradition has many excellent examples of people and/or organisations that respond to contemporary challenges and has a rich tradition of doing so. Whoever your person or whatever your organisation, you can be sure that his/her story or the story of the organisation is most pertinent to the Outcome and the exam. Here, it is perhaps more valuable to look in a general sense at the foundational vision of the ideal community to which Christianity aspires.

Vision of the Ideal Christian Community

From Scripture, this vision originates in the Jewish tradition:

Isaiah 2, 4-5

‘He will wield authority over the nations
and adjudicate between many peoples;
these will hammer their swords into ploughshares,
their spears into sickles.
Nation will not lift sword against nation,
there will be no more training for war.’

Isaiah 11, 6-7

‘The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and lion and fating together
and a child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together.’

Isaiah 25, 6-8

‘On this mountain,
the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.
And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;
He will swallow up death forever.
Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace
of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken.’

Then in Christian scriptures:

Revelation 21, 1-4

‘Then I saw a new Heaven and a new Earth; for the first Heaven and

the first Earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of Heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice call from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; and they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'

These scripture passages give an image of what the 'ideal community' will look like in the future – in other words, what heaven may be like. Eschatology is that area of theology that is concerned with 'the last things' – the time when humanity can look forward to living in the fullness of the love of God. However, the love of God is not a static goal to be achieved in the fullness of time. It is ever present in human existence, and humanity is in the process of coming to the fullness of the love of God. Therefore, our Christian calling now is to make this love of God present here and now, in this present earthly existence. The 'how' of doing this is expressed in the Core Beliefs (Chapter 1), and especially those that relate to the purpose of human existence. It is therefore appropriate to refer back to those beliefs for this Outcome, and if you did not use those beliefs in doing Outcome 2, Unit 4, then this is a good opportunity to revisit some of those beliefs and their expressions so that you can include them here. Some of those that are relevant are:

<p>PURPOSE OF HUMAN LIFE</p> <p>To love one another</p> <p>To build the reign of God here on Earth</p>	<p>Sacred Text: Matthew 20, 1-16</p> <p>Sacred Story/Text: Story of the Good Samaritan – Luke 10, 29-37</p> <p>Sacred Text: Matthew 24, 14; Mark 13, 10; Nicene Creed</p> <p>Ritual: Funerals</p> <p>Sacred Text: Amos 5, 23-24; Luke 22, 26-7; John 13, 34; James 2, 1-4</p> <p>Social Justice teachings of the Church:</p> <p>Gaudium et spes, Populorum Progressio, Pacem in Terris</p> <p>Sacred Texts: Genesis 1, 26-28; Genesis 2, 15</p>
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BELIEFS IN ACTION – SOME SCRIPTURAL CONNECTIONS

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captive and recovery of the sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.

Luke 4, 18-19

Jesus looked at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me"

Mark 10, 21

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

John 15, 12-13

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will have mercy shown to them. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons and daughters of God.

Matthew 5, 6-9

Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?

James 2, 5

If one of the brothers or sisters is in need of clothes and has not enough to live on, and one of you says to them, "I wish you well; keep yourself warm and eat plenty," without giving them these bare necessities of life, then what good is that? In the same way faith: if good deeds do not go with it, it is quite dead.

James 2, 15-17

By the time you are answering the relevant exam question, the examiners will also be looking for the strong connection between vision, motivation and action. It is therefore important that you have the best connections between these three that apply to your particular person/organisation. Some of these examples are perhaps more general than you require, and some may be quite specific to your study. In your study notes therefore, choose wisely and make sure your connections between the three aspects of the Outcome work are clear and strong.

Sample Question

Why and how are groups or individuals within religious communities driven to develop and implement a vision of an ideal human community?

[VCAA, 2001]

Sample Response

Individuals and groups within the Catholic Christian tradition are driven to develop and implement a vision of an ideal human community. The vision is derived from the scriptural description of what such a community could be like, the why comes from their own understanding of their call as Christians, and the how varies, according to the particular gospel emphasis. For example, Caritas Australia is an organisation that works particularly for overseas aid and development.

Caritas has a vision of the ideal human community that may be taken from passages such as Isaiah 25, 6-8, or Revelations 21, 1-4, in which the ideal community is described as one where there is no war, where there is plenty of food and drink for everyone and where everyone can live in peace and harmony. Although Christians realise that such an ideal community can only be fully realised in the 'end times' (that eschatological period when God comes to reign completely), they are called to work towards building this ideal community in this world today.

In their self-description, Caritas use the call of Jesus himself, as told in Luke 4, to describe the calling of the organisation. They understand their role as to 'set free the captives, bring sight to the blind and let the oppressed go free' (Luke, 4, 18) and they take these words literally and metaphorically. Hence, not only does Caritas work involve the provision of direct aid in emergency situations, but also it includes many self-help programs, as these enable the oppressed to be 'free' in the sense that they are empowered to be self-determining in their lives. Caritas not only addresses itself to the literally poor and oppressed, but is concerned with those who have an impoverished view of life, themselves and their mission as Christians. Christians in Australia are targeted by Caritas' education program. This program enlists support for Caritas' work and also aims to give the affluent Christians of this country a deeper understanding of the Catholic Church's social mission and their call to

be part of it. Therefore, Caritas' interpretation of these few lines of Luke's gospel gives the organisation the impetus to be engaged in overseas aid and development on a range of levels.

The 'how' of Caritas Australia matches the 'why' very closely. Caritas means 'love and compassion', and the organisation believes that responding to natural disasters with immediate material goods is a literal living out of its name. Caritas focuses on Australia's nearest neighbours, and on indigenous Australians for this work, and whether it be a flood, cyclone or war, Caritas is among the aid agencies which respond to those who are left without food and shelter. Caritas' work does not stop there however. In encouraging self-reliance, Caritas supports long-term development and redevelopment programs in impoverished communities. Such programs include health education, education and literacy, programs for women's rights and skills for agriculture. Caritas works in partnership with local communities to build local skills and resources, to empower the local communities to become self-reliant. Back in Australia, Caritas lobbies government and citizens alike to make them aware of people's needs, and aware sometimes of our society's complicity in our neighbours' impoverishment. An example of this is Caritas' involvement in the campaign to forgive the debt of the poorest countries, a debt that ensures their continued poverty. Another example of Caritas' all-roundness as an Aid organisation is the situation of Iraq. Caritas is an outspoken opponent of war in Iraq, provides aid assistance to Caritas Iraq, and advocates on behalf of the women and children who are the main victims of the economic sanctions.

Caritas Australia, affiliated with Caritas Internationalis, works to promote and create an ideal human community. They are driven by the biblical image of the ideal community of peace and harmony, and they are inspired by the example of Jesus.

Review Questions

Question 18

In contemporary society, when faced with major social and moral issues, religious traditions respond in many different ways.

Identify three different ways that religious traditions respond.

3 marks [VCAA, 2008]

Question 19

Why do contemporary social or moral challenges pose a problem for religious traditions?

4 marks [VCAA, 2007]