

Christian ethics

You will be asked about 'the religion you have studied', not 'Christianity'. Roman Catholic teaching is heavily influenced by Aquinas, so you can give a Natural Law response and say that many or most Catholics would agree with that position. In the Catholic church, the church's official teaching (contained in the Catechism) has the same authority as the Bible (this authority is the church's Magisterium). God appointed the Pope, and the Bible is God's word.

The Church of England is heavily influenced by scripture (the Bible has more authority than the church). Ethically, there are deontological elements in line with Natural Law, but there is also the example and teaching of Jesus (which inspired Situation Ethics). You can give a Natural Law response, saying that Protestants are more likely to consider this response than Catholics, but that most Protestants are still more comfortable with a deontological ethic.

You are well aware of the debate surrounding the importance of the conscience, and may find you can include this in an answer about religious ethics. You are not expected to know large chunks of Church teaching or biblical passages, but it would be worth learning a few on each topic. Bear in mind that some Christians say the Bible is the word of God and literally true, whilst other Christians see it as a set of writings inspired by God but written by man, often in very different societies from the world we live in today. They would say we need to understand the style and purpose of the writing as well as the social context in order to interpret what any passage means.

Sex and relationships

"Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable." Leviticus 18:22

This is an ambiguous set of words in Hebrew. As well as understanding the social context at the time it was written, we also need to be aware of the translator's situation. A different translation of the same passage read:

"Two men must not engage in sexual activity on a woman's bed; it is ritually unclean."

There are several passages that seem to rule out any homosexual act, but if read in context, they can be seen to be dealing with specific acts, such as the behaviour of Greeks in temple worship (a passage from Romans).

As well as having been written at a time when being gay was seen as something freely chosen (a view that some Christians still hold to), many Christians argue that the bible doesn't deal with the sort of committed homosexual relationships that gay Christians might choose today.

The Catholic Church encourages greater tolerance of those with a homosexual orientation (they now recognise this is not something that is chosen), but class any homosexual acts as sins. The Church of England is less specific, but clearly draws a distinction between those who have homosexual intercourse (they will not be allowed positions of authority) and those who remain celibate. Some evangelical churches condemn homosexuality more strongly, treating it as a chosen behaviour rather than an unchosen inclination or orientation.

War and peace

You should be prepared to explain why some Christians are pacifist (Jesus said 'love your enemies' and 'turn the other cheek'), and that the old testament seems to be against war ('do not kill' and 'turn swords into ploughshares'). However, 'do not kill' is clearly about murder and not about war. The swords were changed into ploughshares after a successful military conflict, a conflict sanctioned by God.

The church itself was pacifist at first, but this changed when the Roman Emperor converted to Christianity. Since then there has been the crusades and the Spanish inquisition. However, it was from the Catholic church that the Just War criteria emerged (Augustine, Aquinas and more recently the Catholic bishops). The CoE and Methodists agree with these criteria (some Methodists confusingly presenting themselves as pacifists who will support Just Wars). Quakers are entirely pacifist.

Most churches were openly critical of the recent conflict in the Gulf, suggesting that more time should have been given to finding peaceful resolutions. Pope John Paul II regularly spoke against war, although not as a pacifist.

Environment

There are many passages that say how beautiful the world is, but the easiest and first of these comes in Genesis, where God looked at what he made and 'saw that it was good'. These support a pro-environment response.

However, Genesis goes on to say that God put people in charge – humans have 'dominion' over the earth and all the animals. This idea of stewardship was meant to be a positive, caretaker role – 'the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it' – but it has been used to imply that humans, the superior species, have been given all creatures and plants for their benefit.

The Church of England has emphasised our role as stewards. The Methodists focus on the interdependence of all of nature. The Catholic Church sees the earth as a gift to be used in a positive way, not destroyed.