

5

The existence of God and revelation

5.1

The Design argument

■ Did God create the universe?

Scientists have sent powerful telescopes and cameras deep into outer space to try to understand how the universe came into being and how the conditions for life arose.

Many questions remain: Did everything come about by chance? Did a power (God) create the universe? If God or many gods exist, can you describe 'him' or 'them'? Does life make sense without belief in God? Is it possible to prove or disprove that God exists?



▲ Are the heavenly bodies kept in place by God?

Theists believe in God and most agree that the universe and life was created for a purpose by God; that the universe did not come about by accident or random chance. Theists argue that nature is so intricate and complex that God must have designed it. Most Christians believe that the Genesis 1 account of creation supports the **Design argument** because it shows that God planned the development of the universe:

“ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ”

Genesis 1:1 [NIV]

An **atheist**, who does not believe in God, would say that the universe has evolved naturally and was not created. Theists are not able to produce God as evidence of their belief and argument. An **agnostic** would say that it is impossible to know for certain that God exists.

■ William Paley's Design argument

William Paley, an eighteenth-century English philosopher, used the Design argument (sometimes called the Teleological argument) to prove the existence of God. He argued that if we found a watch, even if we did not

Objective

- Consider the Design argument, including its strengths and weaknesses.

Key terms

- **theist:** a person who believes in God
- **Design argument:** the argument that God designed the universe, because everything is so intricately made in its detail that it could not have happened by chance
- **atheist:** a person who believes that there is no God
- **agnostic:** someone who thinks there is not enough evidence for belief in God

Discussion activity

Discuss the questions to the left of the image in small groups. Report your initial opinions to the class. Later, when you have considered the Design argument, reflect back on what you said. Did any views change?

Links

To read more about the creation stories in the Bible, see Chapter 1, pages 14–15.

know its function, its intricate workings would show that it had been put together deliberately for a purpose. Its pieces could not have come together by themselves. Someone must have designed and made it: a watchmaker.

Just like the watch, there is evidence of design in the natural world. Paley used examples of things that are just right for their purpose, such as the eye for sight, birds' wings for flight and fish gills for breathing underwater. The universe is far more complicated than a watch and, like the watch, must have had a designer: God.

■ Isaac Newton's Design argument

Try tying your shoelaces or signing your name without using your thumb. The opposable thumb gives the hand precise and delicate movement only found in humans and some primates. Every thumbprint is different and unique to the individual. For these reasons, Isaac Newton (1642–1726) thought that the design of the thumb was sufficient evidence of God's existence.

■ Thomas Aquinas' Design argument

Thomas Aquinas, a thirteenth-century philosopher, said that only an intelligent being could keep things in the universe in regular order. The planets, sun, moon and stars rotate in the solar system in a set pattern because God holds them in place.

■ A modern Design argument

In the 1930s F. R. Tennant argued that God designed the world so that everything was just right for human life to develop. He said that if things like the strength of gravity and the power and speed of the explosion caused by the Big Bang, or the difference in size between a proton and a neutron, had been just a tiny bit different, then life would not exist. Everything is so finely tuned it appears to have been deliberate.

■ Objections to the Design arguments

- Since the process of natural selection (the fittest survive, the rest die out) happens by chance, species designed themselves over time. The thumb, the eye and birds' wings are all the result of evolution, not a designer God.
- If God designed the universe, why is there so much suffering in the world? There is beauty but also cruelty within nature. Why would God allow pain, wars, disease, earthquakes and so on? Would God have created evil?
- The order in the universe is necessary to support life, so it merely gives the appearance of design. Humans impose the order or structure in nature to explain it.

Activities

- 1 How does Genesis 1 show Christians that God planned the world?
- 2 Draw a table with two columns, one headed 'Strengths' and the other 'Weaknesses'. Fill in the columns with the strengths and weaknesses of the Design argument. Do the strengths outweigh the weaknesses? Give reasons for your opinion.



▲ The intricate workings of a watch could not have designed themselves

“ In the absence of any other proof, the thumb alone would convince me of God's existence. ”

Isaac Newton

Links

For more details on the problem of suffering and evil, see Chapter 1, pages 10–11, and Chapter 7, pages 150–151.

★ Study tip

When answering questions about the Design argument, it would be helpful to expand your answer by mentioning the different ideas of Paley, Newton, Aquinas and/or Tennant.

Summary

You should now be able to explain and discuss the Design argument, including its strengths and weaknesses.

5.2 The First Cause argument

■ The First Cause argument

It is part of human nature to seek explanations for why events take place, to find out what caused them. The same is true for the origins of the universe. Some theists would use the existence of the universe to prove that God exists. They would argue that:

- Everything that exists or begins to exist must have a cause.
- The universe exists and began to exist, so it too must have a cause.
- There had to be something **eternal** that was not caused by anything.
- The eternal first cause is God.
- Therefore God exists.

The **First Cause argument**, also called the Cosmological argument, relies on the belief that the universe had a beginning and a cause like all other things that exist. For example, if you trace the events of your life back to your birth, you can continue back to when your parents met, and so on. If you keep going back in time, there are two possibilities: either there is a starting point when the universe began, or there is no starting point or beginning. The universe goes back into infinity.

A theist would say that the universe had a beginning and that God was the start of the chain of events, which led to the present. If the universe did not have a beginning, there would be no adequate explanation for its existence.

Most scientists accept that the universe began as a result of the Big Bang. But where did the material that was created at the Big Bang come from? What existed before the Big Bang? There must have been a cause for the Big Bang and the start of the universe. Modern theists would argue that God was the eternal, uncaused cause of the Big Bang.



▲ Did God set the universe in motion?

Objective

- Examine the First Cause argument for the existence of God, including its strengths and weaknesses.

Key terms

- **eternal:** without beginning or end
- **First Cause argument:** also called the Cosmological argument; the argument that there has to be an uncaused cause that made everything else happen, otherwise there would be nothing now
- **creation:** the act by which God brought the universe into being

Discussion activity

With a partner or in a small group, discuss this statement: 'The idea that God always existed does not make sense; if there is a God, he must have been created.'

Activities

- 1 Read Genesis 1:1-3. How does this support the First Cause argument?
- 2 'If the universe has a beginning, it must have a creator who began it.' Evaluate this statement. Be sure to include two points of view and refer to Christian beliefs and teachings in your answer.

■ Thomas Aquinas' First Cause argument

Thomas Aquinas, a thirteenth-century philosopher, said he could prove the existence of God. He argued that everything we observe is caused to exist. Nothing can become something by itself. Nothing equals nothing and remains nothing unless something is added. For example, a vacuum remains a vacuum forever unless some air is let into it, and then it ceases to be a vacuum.

Since nothing we observe can cause itself to exist, there are only two possibilities:

- there is an infinite chain of effects preceded by causes
- there must be a first cause which by definition must be uncaused.

However, an infinite sequence of causes and effects is impossible since it would have taken an infinite amount of time to reach us. Therefore there must have been a first cause which was not itself caused by anything else.

Aquinas believed the first cause of the universe was God. We can plainly see that the universe exists, so, Aquinas argued, it must have had a creator to begin with, God.



▲ Did God cause the Big Bang?

■ Objections to the First Cause argument

- Atheists say that the argument contradicts itself: if everything that we see in the world has a cause, what caused God?
- If you say that God is eternal and has always existed, why cannot the universe always have existed too?
- Just because events or things have causes does not mean that the universe itself has a cause.
- The Big Bang was a random, spontaneous event, not an action by God.
- Religious **creation** stories are just myths (stories which tell a spiritual, rather than actual, truth).

Theists would counter the above by saying that only God is eternal, beyond time and space. The cause of the Big Bang is not yet known. Why couldn't it be God?

“ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. ”

Genesis 1:1-3 [NIV]

Research activity

Using the Internet and/or a library, find out more about Thomas Aquinas' First Cause argument.

Links

To remind yourself of beliefs about creation, look back to Chapter 4, pages 86-87. Christian beliefs about creation are also discussed in Chapter 1, pages 14-15.

★ Study tip

It would be helpful to explain how an atheist would challenge a belief in the existence of God, and how a theist would respond to these challenges.

Summary

You should now be able to explain the First Cause argument and discuss its strengths and weaknesses.

5.3 The argument from miracles

What is a miracle?

Stairwell B, 11 September 2001

Sixteen people survived the collapse of the North Tower of the World Trade Center during the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. The fact that these people survived when nearly 3000 people died makes many people regard this as a miracle. Others argue that they survived because they were protected by the stairwell and ended up near the top of the debris.

Do you think it was a true **'miracle'** or a fortunate coincidence that the sixteen people on stairwell B survived? Theists use the term 'miracle' to refer to an event performed by God that may appear to break the laws of nature. It may be a cure from a fatal illness that doctors cannot explain, or survival from certain death by a freak occurrence. Theists would argue that there is a religious significance or purpose to the event, such as to strengthen faith or show God's love.

Some people use the word 'miracle' to describe wonderful things that happen, like the birth of a baby. However, this is not really a miracle. Babies are born every day and science can explain the process. But suppose a mother is told she can never have children. She prays hard for a family and then conceives a child. She could well describe this as a miracle. She would believe that God had answered her prayers. Whether something is a miracle often depends on interpretation and the faith of the witnesses.

Types of miracles

There are two types of miracles:

1. Events that break natural laws and cannot be explained by science; for example, Jesus is said to have turned water into wine at the marriage in Cana.
2. Happy coincidences in which no natural laws are broken but a coincidence occurs at just the right moment to cause a good outcome; for example, a train stops just in time to avoid hitting a toddler who has wandered onto the tracks.

The argument from miracles

Theists argue that if there is no scientific explanation for an event, then it must be supernatural, in other words, caused by something outside nature. Since only God is outside nature, then it must be the result of God's intervention in the world. Therefore God exists.

Objective

- Examine the argument from miracles for the existence of God, including its strengths and weaknesses.

Key term

- **miracle:** a seemingly impossible event, usually good, that cannot be explained by natural or scientific laws, and is thought to be the action of God



▲ Was it a miracle that 16 people survived in Stairwell B?

Activities

- 1 Explain the term 'miracle'.
- 2 Are miracles really 'happy coincidences'? When would a happy coincidence be considered a true miracle by a religious believer?
- 3 Read the case study on page 111. Marie Bailly's case was declared a miracle by the Catholic Church. What would be the most convincing evidence to prove that her cure was a miracle?
- 4 'Miracles prove the existence of God.' Evaluate this statement.

Objections to the argument from miracles

Atheists might argue that miracles cannot prove God's existence because:

- miracles are no more than lucky coincidences
- they may have scientific explanations not yet discovered
- miracle healings may be the result of mind over matter on the part of the sufferer, or a misdiagnosis by doctors
- some 'miracles' are fakes, made up by people who want fame or money.

David Hume, an eighteenth-century philosopher, argued against miracles by saying that there can never be enough evidence to deny the laws of nature, and that witnesses to miracles are unreliable as most of them are primitive, uneducated people. Religions depend on miracles to prove they are true but all the religions cannot be right.

Some theists object to miracles because they seem to show God as unfair by picking and choosing who is helped. For example, why save someone from cancer and allow thousands to die in a natural disaster? Since God is all-just and all-loving, miracles do not happen.

Christian responses

Christians believe God works in the world through miracles. Jesus performed miracles that showed the power or love of God, or revealed that Jesus was God in human form. The incarnation and resurrection of Jesus are the most important miracles in the Christian faith. There have been many miracles recorded, for example at Lourdes, that have been fully investigated by the Church. The Catholic Church has to date officially recognised 69 miracles to have taken place at Lourdes. Some atheists or agnostics have converted to faith in God because they experienced miracles. Christians believe that these experiences show the miracles are genuine.

Marie Bailly

Marie Bailly was from Lyons in France. Her parents had died of tuberculosis and she suffered ill health from 13 years of age. Finally, aged 22, she was diagnosed with tubercular peritonitis, a condition which made her abdomen swell, and she was unable to eat anything. She pleaded to be sent to Lourdes where she believed she would be cured. Upon arrival she was taken to hospital in a critical condition. After no improvement the doctors told Marie she was dying, so she asked to be taken to the baths where the holy waters were poured on her abdomen. She prayed to Mary, the mother of Jesus and declared, 'I am cured.' Her colour returned, her abdomen reduced in size and although she was very thin, she returned to good health. The cure took place on 28 May 1902.



▲ The grotto at Lourdes where Marie Bailly prayed for healing

Research activity

Read the account of Jesus turning water into wine in John 2:1–9. With a partner or in a small group, discuss what you think is the religious significance or purpose of Jesus turning water into wine.

Study tip

Try to learn an example of a miracle. Choose one in which there is a clear religious significance or purpose.

Links

For more about Lourdes, see Chapter 2, page 47.

Contrasting beliefs

You should be able to explain contrasting beliefs about miracles from Christian and non-religious perspectives.

Summary

You should now be able to discuss and evaluate the argument from miracles and consider contrasting beliefs on miracles, with reference to Christianity and a non-religious perspective.

5.4 Further arguments against the existence of God

■ The importance of faith to belief in God

In this chapter we have looked at three arguments for the existence of God: Design, First Cause and the argument from miracles. For some believers these arguments alone do not provide **proof** that God exists. They are important to theists because they strengthen the **faith** they already have in God.

Atheists use the following arguments to make the claim that God does not exist.

■ How science is used to challenge belief in God

Some atheists and humanists use the developments in scientific knowledge to challenge belief in God. In the past, the origins of the universe and life on earth could not be explained, so people thought that God created and controlled everything in the universe. Floods, crop failure or disease were believed to be God's punishments for wrongdoing. Now that science can explain things that people in the past could not understand, people no longer look to religion for answers and have turned away from belief in God. Atheists argue that there is no need to invent a God to make sense of what we do not know at the moment. Eventually, science will have all the answers. Also, science is now close to creating human life. Atheists see this as further evidence that God does not exist.



▲ In the past earthquakes were seen as punishments from God

Many Christians see no conflict between science and religion. If the Bible's creation stories are not taken literally, then science can be seen as revealing the laws by which God created the universe. However, fundamentalist Christians think it is wrong to change religious truths to fit scientific laws as this could lead to the rejection of other teachings in the Bible. The Pope expressed what most Christians believe when he spoke at the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in 2014.

Objective

- Examine arguments against the existence of God based on science and on the problem of suffering and evil.

Key terms

- **proof:** evidence that supports the truth of something
- **faith:** a commitment to something that goes beyond proof and knowledge, especially used about God and religion
- **evil:** the opposite of good, a force or the personification of a negative power that is seen in many traditions as destructive and against God
- **suffering:** when people have to face and live with unpleasant events or conditions

Links

To remind yourself of the creation stories in Genesis, see Chapter 4, pages 86–87 and 96–97. Christian beliefs in creation are also discussed in Chapter 1, pages 14–15.

“ The big bang [...] does not contradict the divine act of creation; rather, it requires it [...] When we read the creation story in Genesis we run the risk of imagining that God was a magician, with a magic wand which is able to do everything [...] But it is not so. He created beings and let them develop according to internal laws which he gave every one, so they would develop, so they would reach maturity. ”

Pope Francis, speaking at the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, 2014

■ Evil and suffering as an argument against the existence of God

There is no doubt that we live in a world full of **evil** and **suffering**. Every day the news has stories of crimes committed against innocent people, and natural disasters that destroy lives. Atheists point to the existence of suffering and evil as evidence that God does not exist. The argument goes like this: Christians believe God is all-knowing, all-powerful and all-loving. Therefore God should be aware of evil, should be able to prevent it and would want to do so. God does not do this, so God does not exist.

Atheists would also point to cruelty within the animal kingdom and natural disasters as evidence of poor design. Why would a good God create humans that choose evil over good?

For Christians, suffering and evil are a result of human free will. Adam and Eve's disobedience brought evil and suffering into God's perfect world.

Christians believe that God did not create robots that were programmed to do good all the time, but gave people free will despite the risk that they would use it to hurt others. They might also argue that if there was no good and bad, the richness of life would be reduced because people would not be able to show their human qualities to the full. They would not be able to demonstrate compassion, and learn from mistakes, and make the choice to do good over evil.



▲ Does the suffering of people show that God does not exist?

Activities

- 1 What is the difference between faith and knowledge?
- 2 Explain why atheists use science to deny the existence of God.
- 3 'The existence of evil and suffering proves that God does not exist.' Evaluate this statement.

Links

To read more about issues related to suffering turn to Chapter 1, pages 10–11, and Chapter 7, pages 150–151.

Research activity

Read the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Write down two punishments given to Adam and two punishments given to Eve for their disobedience.

★ Study tip

Remember that there are differences of opinion within Christianity about whether science conflicts with belief in God.

Summary

You should now be able to discuss the arguments against the existence of God based on science and on the problem of suffering and evil.

5.5 Special revelation and enlightenment

What is meant by the divine?

Discussion activity

How would you describe who or what 'God' is to someone who had never heard the word before?

Every religion accepts that there is an **ultimate reality** that is eternal and unchanging. Ideas about **the divine** include God, gods or ultimate reality. Some, like Buddhists, think of ultimate reality as an eternal truth or principle that governs the universe. Others, like Hindus, worship one God (Brahman) through different gods and goddesses that reveal different aspects of God. Christians describe this ultimate reality as a personal being, God, who makes himself known in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

How may God be known?

Some theists say God cannot be known because God is beyond human understanding and cannot be described using the limits of human language. While Christians accept that God is beyond our limited understanding, most think it is possible to know something of God's nature and purposes through **revelations**. Humans can only know God if God chooses to reveal himself to people, not through any efforts of their own.

There are two main kinds of revelation: **special revelation** and general revelation.

Special revelation

Special revelation is when people experience God directly in a particular event. It might be a dream, a **vision**, a prophecy, a miracle, or hearing 'God's call', and experienced either alone or with a group of people. These experiences usually have a huge impact on people and can change their lives. All the major world religions, apart from Hinduism, were founded on revelations received by the founders of their faith, which are preserved in the religion's sacred writings. Special revelations are rare and many Christians believe in God all their lives without experiencing such events.



▲ Mary received a special revelation from the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:26–38)

Objectives

- Examine special revelation as a source of knowledge about the divine.
- Examine enlightenment as a source of knowledge about the divine.

Key terms

- **ultimate reality:** the supreme, final, fundamental power in all reality
- **the divine:** God, gods or ultimate reality
- **revelation:** God showing himself to believers; this is the only way anybody can really know anything about God
- **special revelation:** God making himself known through direct personal experience or an unusual specific event
- **vision:** seeing something, especially in a dream or trance, that shows something about the nature of God or the afterlife
- **enlightenment:** the gaining of true knowledge about God or self, usually through meditation and self-discipline; in Buddhist and Hindu traditions, gaining freedom from the cycle of rebirth

Research activity

Use the Internet or a library to research descriptions of the visions Bernadette Soubirous experienced at Lourdes. How did these visions affect her sense of faith?

Visions

A vision is a form of special revelation that comes in picture or image form, for example seeing holy people or angels. A vision holds a deep meaning for the person receiving it and enables them to become aware of reality in a new way or with a new intensity.

There are many examples of visions in the Bible. The Jewish prophets experienced vivid visions that gave them messages to pass on about God's dealing with the people (see Isaiah 6:1–10). Saul, who later became known as Paul, received a vision on the Damascus road that completely changed his life (see Acts 9:1–19). The apostle Peter had a vision that influenced his ideas about 'unclean foods' (Acts 10:9–16). The Bible teaches that people were given visions and dreams for specific reasons, but some atheists believe that visions are merely the result of food or sleep deprivation, or drug intake.

Saul on the Damascus road

Many Christians consider the story in Acts 9:1–19 an example of a vision. Saul, who had sworn to wipe out the new Christian Church, was traveling with colleagues to arrest any followers of Jesus in the city of Damascus. On their way they were all struck by a blinding light, but only Saul was spoken to by Jesus. Saul's life-changing experience on the Damascus Road led to his baptism, changing his name to Paul, and his new-found commitment to the Christian faith.



▲ While on the Damascus road, Saul was blinded by a vision of the risen Jesus

Enlightenment

Buddhists do not believe in God or gods. They seek understanding of what is true and what is not, which is ultimate reality. Buddhists are seeking **enlightenment**: how to end suffering and achieve happiness by escaping the cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

“ When there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, reveal myself to them in visions, I speak to them in dreams. ”

Numbers 12:6 [NIV]

Contrasting beliefs

Use the Internet or library to find out about a contrasting non-religious belief about visions.

Activities

- 1 Explain, using an example, what is meant by a 'special revelation'.
- 2 Why do some people say that God cannot be known?
- 3 Write a detailed account of a vision, explaining its impact on the person receiving it.
- 4 Explain, using an example, what is meant by 'enlightenment'.
- 5 'Visions are just illusions.' Evaluate this statement. Give an example of a religious view and a non-religious view in your answer.

★ Study tip

It would be helpful to know one example of a vision that you could write about in detail.

Summary

You should now be able to discuss what is meant by special revelation, including enlightenment and visions.

5.6 General revelation

■ What is general revelation?

Not everyone receives a direct, personal message from God (a special revelation). Many people come to know God through **general revelation**, that is, through ordinary, everyday human experiences. General revelation comes to people through seeing God's presence in **nature** or through a person's reason, conscience or sense of right and wrong. People say they experience God when they worship or when they read the **scriptures** of their religion, or through the lives and work of religious leaders who seem particularly close to God. These experiences are available to everyone, but they do not convince everyone that God is real because they depend on people's interpretation of them.

Some examples of revelation can be both general and special, depending on the circumstances. For example, reading scripture is open to anyone (general) but it may be the means of a direct personal experience of God for an individual (special).

■ Nature as a way of understanding the divine

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”

Psalms 19:1–4 (NIV)

We have already considered the arguments for God's existence based on the design of the universe. The beauty and order of the natural world, the power of storms and the sea, the wonder of a newborn baby, and the complexity of the human body lead many to believe in God. Christians believe God is revealed to them as present within creation. Just as a painting gives an insight into the artist, so nature gives believers an insight into God.

By looking at the world around them, believers think God is shown as creative, artistic, clever, powerful and awesome. This leads to feelings of awe and wonder at the power of God to create and to destroy. In contrast, a traditional humanist argument would be that the works of nature are not a divine revelation but they are special because they can lead to a greater understanding of the world through human observation and science.



▲ Does nature reveal the power of God?

Objective

- Examine general revelation, including nature and scriptures, as a way of understanding the divine.

Key terms

- **general revelation:** God making himself known through ordinary, common human experiences
- **nature:** the physical world including plants, animals and landscape; the environment or natural world
- **scriptures:** the sacred writings of a religion; for Christians these are the Old and the New Testament

Contrasting beliefs

Use the Internet or the library to find out more about a non-religious belief about nature as revelation.

■ Scripture as a way of understanding the divine

Religious scriptures tell what God is like, how God acted in the past and how God wants people to live. For Christians, the Bible tells the story of God's covenant with the Jews (Old Testament) and the life and teaching of Jesus (New Testament). It contains poetry, myth, history, law, letters and prophecy. God's nature is revealed as powerful, loving, just and forgiving. To Christians, the greatest revelation of God's nature was in Jesus.

While all Christians believe the scriptures are inspired by God, they interpret the Bible in different ways. Some Christians believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible, and think that it contains God's actual words, which must not be changed and should not be questioned. Others who take a more liberal approach see the Bible as inspired by God but able to be interpreted for people today. They believe the text provides insights into God but it needs to be seen in its social context and historical time. The truths about God found in the Bible need to be understood differently in today's world.

Some people would argue that scriptures cannot reveal anything about God because they are merely their authors' opinions and these could be wrong about God. However, even if what the Bible teaches about God cannot be proved, the writings reflect a deep human awareness of the nature of God that shows itself in the language the writers use. When Christians listen to the words of the Bible or read it for themselves, they hope to get a better understanding of the teachings of Christianity and to receive spiritual strength from God's words.



▲ The Flood and Noah's Ark – literally true or symbolic?

Activities

- 1 Explain what nature might teach Christians about God.
- 2 Explain, using a Bible text as an example (such as the story of Noah and the flood in Genesis 6:9–9:17), how Christians may interpret the Bible differently. How do these different ways of understanding the Bible affect ideas about God?
- 3 Explain why an atheist and a Christian may have different views about nature as a way of understanding the divine.

Discussion activity

'Without scriptures, Christians would know very little about God.' With a partner or in a small group, discuss this statement. Share your ideas with the class.

★ Study tip

Try to make sure you can explain the differences between special and general revelation. Remember that scriptures can be an example of both general and special revelation, depending on the circumstances.

Summary

You should now be able to discuss what is meant by a general revelation and how nature and scripture reveal the divine to some people.

5.7 Different ideas about the divine

■ Descriptions of God's nature

As we have already seen, it is difficult to describe the unseen, infinite God within the limits of human language. One thing all the major world religions (apart from Buddhism) agree upon is that there is only one God who is creator, controller and maintainer of the universe.



▲ God depicted as creator on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Rome

God is seen as **omnipotent** (almighty), capable of doing anything, for example, creating the universe. God is seen as **omniscient**, aware of everything that happens, past, present and future. God is seen as **benevolent** (all-loving and all-good) in providing everything people need for survival on earth.

“ ‘Why do you ask me about what is good?’ Jesus replied. ‘There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.’ ”

Matthew 19:17 [NIV]

Religious thinkers use immanent, transcendent, personal and impersonal to describe different ideas about God.

- An **immanent** God is present in the universe and involved with life on earth. People are able to experience God in their lives. God acts in history and influences events.
- A **transcendent** God is beyond and outside life on earth and the universe. God is not limited by the world, time or space. God existed before the universe he created so is separate from it. God does not act within the world or intervene in people's lives.

Objectives

- Investigate the different ideas about the divine that come from revelation.
- Know and understand qualities of God such as omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent, personal, impersonal, immanent and transcendent.

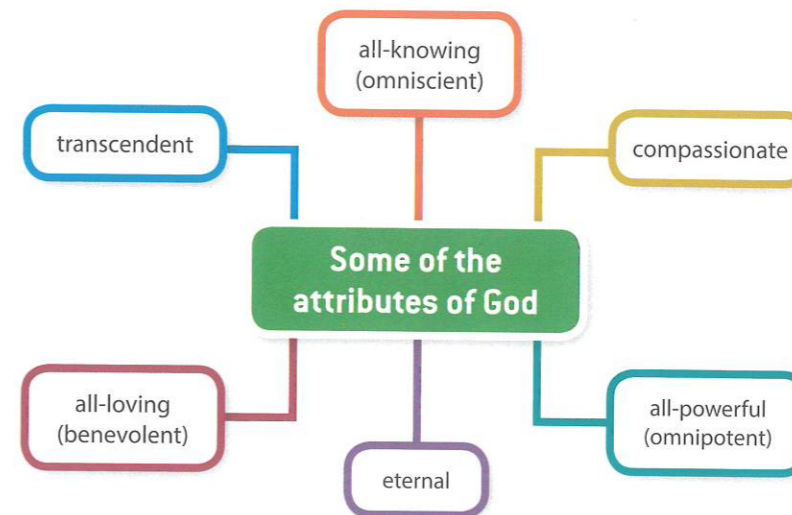
Key terms

- **omnipotent:** almighty, having unlimited power; a quality of God
- **omniscient:** knowing everything; a quality of God
- **benevolent:** all-loving, all-good; a quality of God
- **immanent:** the idea that God is present in and involved with life on earth and in the universe; a quality of God
- **transcendent:** the idea that God is beyond and outside life on earth and the universe; a quality of God
- **personal nature (of God):** the idea that God is an individual or person with whom people are able to have a relationship or feel close
- **impersonal nature (of God):** the idea that God has no 'human' characteristics, is unknowable and mysterious, more like an idea or force

Links

Christian beliefs in God are also discussed in Chapter 1, pages 10–11. To remind yourself of why the existence of suffering and evil makes some people question these qualities of God, see page 113 in this chapter.

- People who believe God is **personal** think of God as having human characteristics (like 'merciful' or 'compassionate'). They believe God loves and cares about every individual and that they can have a relationship with God through prayer.
- An **impersonal** God is the opposite – God does not have human characteristics. God is more like a force or an idea like a prime number (a number that can only be divided by itself and 1). This God is an absolute being, who is only understood in terms of itself.



■ Can God be immanent and transcendent, personal and impersonal?

Many religious people believe that they can experience God and have a personal relationship with him (immanent and personal) and at the same time believe that God is the eternal, unlimited creator of the universe (transcendent and impersonal). Some religions emphasise one description more than another, but others say that all these aspects of God's nature are true even though they seem contradictory. God is a mystery, beyond human understanding.

Christians believe that God's immanence is revealed in Jesus, who is God made man, and in the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Yet they also believe God is transcendent, creator of the universe without whom nothing would exist. As we have seen, Christians regard God as personal, a Father who loves and cares for his children and with whom they can have a relationship through prayer.

“ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ”

John 3:16 [NIV]

Discussion activity

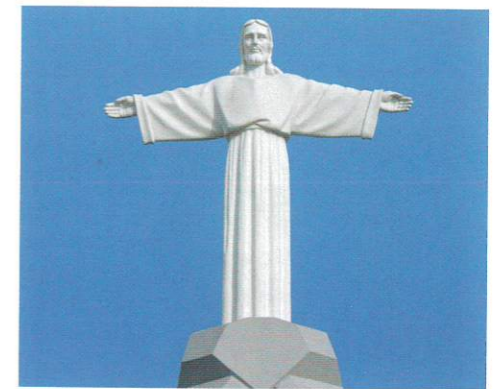
With a partner or in a small group, discuss why you think people sometimes feel God is personal and at other times describe him as transcendent. Can both be true?

Activities

- 1 Copy the diagram on this page, showing some of the attributes of God. Learn the terms on the diagram and make a note of the meanings of each.
- 2 Give two reasons why describing God in these ways has limitations.
- 3 'God cannot be omniscient if people have free will.' Evaluate this statement.

“ You have searched me, LORD, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. ”

Psalm 139:1–2 [NIV]



▲ Christians believe that God became immanent in the form of Jesus

★ Study tip

It would be helpful to be able to explain in your own words the ideas about God's nature and the ways in which they help people to understand God.

Summary

You should now be able to explain and discuss different ideas about the divine that come from revelation and understand some of the qualities that are used to describe what God is like.

5.8 The value of revelation and enlightenment

■ The value of revelation

Revelation is of great value to believers as it is one of the ways in which they come to know God, or in the case of Buddhists, attain enlightenment. Revelations of the divine can come in many different ways. People can learn about God through general revelation in scripture or through nature, they can be enlightened through prayer and meditation, or they may receive a special revelation. Revelation can:

- provide theists with proof of God's existence
- help start a religion
- enable believers to have a relationship with the divine
- help people to know what they must do to live as God wishes.

Christians believe that God can be revealed through the lives of other people, particularly those who have a deep faith. Revelations can have a huge impact on those who receive them, often changing not only their religion but also their entire way of life.

Nicky Cruz



▲ Nicky Cruz

Nicky Cruz was leader of the 'Mau Mau' gang in Brooklyn, NY in the 1950s. His life revolved around drugs, alcohol, and brutal violence. When his friend was stabbed, beaten and died in his arms, he began to have nightmares. He was arrested many times and a court-ordered psychiatrist said that Nicky was 'headed to prison, the electric chair, and hell.'

No one in authority could reach Cruz – until he met a Christian street-preacher named David Wilkerson. David showed Nicky something he'd never known before: love, care and interest. This was despite the fact that Nicky

beat him up, spat on him and once threatened to kill him.

At a religious meeting which Nicky attended with his gang, Wilkerson's preaching of the gospel message of Jesus' love and forgiveness got through to him. He felt called to go up to the front with some of his gang where he prayed with the preacher and asked God to forgive him. He and some other gang members converted to Christianity and handed their weapons in to the police. Nicky subsequently went to Bible college and became a minister in his old neighbourhood, even converting the new leader of the Mau Maus to belief in Jesus.

Objectives

- Investigate the value of revelation and enlightenment as sources of knowledge about the divine.
- Understand difficulties in accepting the reality of some examples of revelation.

■ Revelation: reality or illusion?

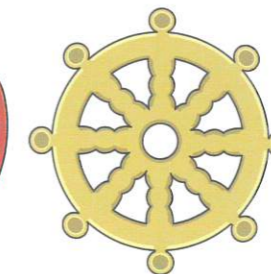
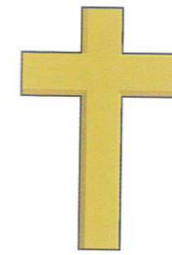
Revelations may be difficult to prove because they are subjective, open to different interpretations and not open to scientific testing. When an atheist and a theist look at a beautiful landscape, one just sees nature and the other sees God's creation.

Discussion activity

With a partner or in a small group, discuss the case study of Nicky Cruz. Do you think the revelation he received was genuine? Explain your reasons.

How might someone know if a revelation is real? A religious believer might ask:

- Does the revelation match the real world? For example, if the revelation makes a claim that people can fly, it is less likely to be real than if it makes a claim that water in a particular place can cure people and then it does.
- Does it fit with other earlier revelations accepted by the religion? If it contradicts the beliefs of the religion, some would say it was not real.
- Does it change an atheist or agnostic into a believer in God or convert someone from one religion to another? If so, it may be genuine.



▲ If every revelation is genuine, why are there so many different ways of worship?

■ Different ideas about the divine arising from these experiences

Atheists argue that religions have conflicting revelations and therefore they cannot be real. Buddhists do not believe in God, and within other faiths there are different understandings of God. Even within a religion there may be different interpretations of the meaning of particular revelations. For example, Christians do not always agree on the interpretation of Biblical texts or how these should be applied to moral issues.

■ Alternative explanations for the experiences

Atheists argue that a revelation, such as a vision, could be brought about by alcohol or drugs, or the person could be so desperate to have a revelation that it is just wishful thinking. The person may be suffering from a physical or mental illness that makes them hear voices or makes their mind play tricks on them.

There is also the possibility that the people who claimed to have revelations were lying in order to achieve fame or money or they were merely mistaken.

Activities

- 1 Explain the value of (a) revelation and (b) enlightenment to religious believers.
- 2 'There are too many different ideas of God for revelations to be true.' Evaluate this statement. Be sure to include more than one point of view and refer to Christian beliefs and teachings in your answer.

Research activity

Find out about the case of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, televangelists in the 1980s, whose claims of revelation were exposed as fraudulent.

★ Study tip

In this section you might also be asked about 'enlightenment', as well as revelation. This term is more commonly used in Buddhism.

Summary

You should now be able to explain the value of revelation and enlightenment for religious believers and discuss the difficulties in accepting the reality of some examples of revelation.

Philosophical arguments for and against the existence of God – summary

You should now be able to:

- ✓ explain and evaluate the Design argument, including its strengths and weaknesses
- ✓ explain and evaluate the First Cause argument, including its strengths and weaknesses
- ✓ explain and evaluate the argument from miracles, including its strengths and weaknesses
- ✓ describe one example of a miracle
- ✓ explain and evaluate the arguments against the existence of God posed by science and by the problem of evil and suffering.

The nature of the divine and revelation – summary

You should now be able to:

- ✓ explain what is meant by special revelation and enlightenment as sources of knowledge about the divine (God, gods or ultimate reality)
- ✓ describe one example of a vision
- ✓ explain what is meant by general revelation, including nature and scripture, as a way of understanding the divine

- ✓ explain the different ideas about the divine that come from revelation
- ✓ explain the meaning of qualities of God such as omnipotent, omniscient, personal, impersonal, immanent and transcendent
- ✓ explain the value of revelation and enlightenment as sources of knowledge about the divine
- ✓ explain and evaluate the problem of different ideas about the divine arising from these experiences
- ✓ explain and evaluate alternative explanations for the experiences and the possibility that the people who claimed to have them were lying or mistaken
- ✓ explain contrasting perspectives in contemporary British society to all the above issues
- ✓ explain contrasting beliefs in contemporary British society to the three issues of miracles, visions, and nature as a source of revelation, with reference to the main religious tradition in Britain (Christianity) and non-religious beliefs such as atheism or humanism.

Sample student answer – the 12 mark question

1. Write an answer to the following question:

'Revelations cannot teach people anything about God.'

Evaluate this statement. In your answer you:

- should give reasoned arguments to support this statement
- should give reasoned arguments to support a different point of view
- should refer to religious arguments
- may refer to non-religious arguments
- should reach a justified conclusion

[12 marks]
[+ 3 SPaG marks]

2. Read the following sample student answer:

"Revelations cannot teach people anything about God because God is beyond human understanding. No one can really know for certain what God is like. There is also the problem that revelations are difficult to prove. A lot of people who say they had a revelation from God are just making it up. They just want the publicity and possibly money. People who claim they had a vision could be on drugs or having hallucinations. In addition, the different religions all claim to have revelations that describe God or gods in different ways, so how can they all be true? For example, Hindus believe in different deities but Muslims believe in the oneness of God. Christians believe

God is a Trinity of three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. With all these different ideas about God, how can we be sure that a particular revelation is right? God is not real, anyway, so revelations cannot teach anything about God.

Religious people might say that revelations are real because so many people have had them and they cannot all be lying or on drugs. Revelations can change people's lives and convert them to a religion. Sometimes people understand, as a result of a revelation, that God is personal and compassionate and so start living a good-life, like a man who was a gang leader becoming a Christian.

In conclusion, there is little evidence that revelations are real. Most are just tricks of the mind and people who believe in them are usually not well-educated or are from places that have a lot of superstitions."

3. With a partner, discuss the sample answer. Consider the following questions:
- Does the answer focus on the question asked?
 - Does the answer refer to religious beliefs and teachings and if so what are they?
 - Is there an argument to support the statement and how well developed is it?
 - Is a different point of view offered and how developed is that argument?
 - Has the student written a clear conclusion after weighing up both sides of the argument?
 - Are there logical steps in the argument?
 - What is good about this answer?
 - How do you think it could be improved?
4. What mark (out of 12) would you give this answer? Look at the mark scheme in the Introduction (AO2). What are the reasons for the mark you have given?
5. Swap your answer with your partner's and mark each other's responses. What mark (out of 12) would you give the response? Refer to the mark scheme and give reasons for the mark you award.

Practice questions

- 1 Which **one** of the following best expresses the idea that the divine (God, gods or ultimate reality) is all-knowing?
A) Omnipotent B) Omniscient C) Transcendent D) Immanent [1 mark]
- 2 Give **two** types of special revelation. [2 marks]
- 3 Explain **two** contrasting beliefs in contemporary British society about the Design argument for God's existence.
In your answer you must refer to one or more religious traditions. [4 marks]
- 4 Explain **two** religious beliefs about visions.
Refer to sacred writings or another source of religious belief and teaching in your answer. [5 marks]
- 5 'The First Cause argument proves that God exists.'
Evaluate this statement.
In your answer you:
- should give reasoned arguments to support this statement
 - should give reasoned arguments to support a different point of view
 - should refer to religious arguments
 - may refer to non-religious arguments
 - should reach a justified conclusion
- [12 marks]
[+ 3 SPaG marks]

★ Study tip

You should aim to develop two different points of view. Contrasting viewpoints can show differences between those who believe that God is the First Cause of the universe and those who think that the First Cause argument does not prove that God exists.