

The Spectrum article promised a series of questions about religious beliefs, to be used by discussion groups of all sorts, multi-faith, single faith, or no faith, and hopefully by the UK Government's PREVENT policymakers.

1. Beliefs

1a. Doubt and uncertainty. Do you agree that the only certainty we have is death, not religious certainty?

1b. Provisional. Do you agree that beliefs are temporary, expressing your current thinking rather than what you will always think? We change our jobs, few of us ending up where we began; could beliefs change too? Young adults may be confidently dogmatic but later discover things are more complex and less clear-cut than before.

1c. Do you think it is embarrassing or shameful to change your mind or to reject the views of your parents and family? [8]

1d. Which religious beliefs do you think are major or fundamental? And which are minor, with nothing important hanging on them, so they can be put in the background? [9]

1e. Science. Should religious beliefs be kept in a separate compartment, insulated from modern science where all truths are provisional not timeless? New evidence may disprove previous theories, partly replacing Newton with Einstein. Our daily lives rely on science and technology, so for what reasons would we want to shut it out of our religion?

1f. 'Ought' - how we should or ought to behave. The Jews gave the world the Ten Commandments, and it continues to be a powerful religious and moral compass. Do you believe the ten are authoritative rules that tell you how you should act today in every situation or do they require re-interpretation and give you some flexibility or wriggle room?

Which texts in your Scriptures amend or add to the list of ten? [10]

2. Authority.

2a. Where does your ultimate authority lie, in your own mind, or family, your religion, your Scriptures, religious leaders, tradition, or a mix of all?

2b. If there is disagreement between them, how would you like it resolved?

2.1 Scriptural authority.

How do you know that your Scriptures are God's Word? Is it because it says so - it is self-validating - or is there some external evidence that supports it? [11]

Muslims are much more united on the answer to my question than Jews and Christians, believing the Qur'an is the reliable Word of Allah, and beyond criticism. What the Qur'an says, Allah says.[12]

2.2 Scriptural interpretation.

2.2a. Is the meaning of Scripture always self-evident, transparent, or is interpretation often difficult and ambiguous? Give examples of any obscure texts.

2.2b. If some historical sections are irrelevant today, can they be ignored, so that what matters is contemporary truths?

2.2c. Which important texts are understood not as literally true but as poetic or symbolic truth? This is complicated, because if texts are not taken at their face value, but are open to different interpretations, is your interpretation as good as anyone else's?

Whose interpretation is correct? [13]

2.3 Scriptural consistency.

2.3a. Give examples of texts that look as though they contradict another (perhaps partly from translation difficulties).

2.3b. If there are contradictions, how do you decide which text to believe and obey, especially on important subjects? [14]

2.4 Finished Scriptures.

2.4a. Are your Scriptures a complete guide today, telling you all you need to know about how to behave and serve God and be with him for ever?

2.4b. What else would you want the Scriptures to tell you? Some Christians believe in ongoing revelation, so they slightly amend and add to the Bible where it omits guidance about today's religious, moral, or gender problems.

2.4c. 'Change' is the signature or hallmark of our evolving universe. Does that pose a problem for all three religions of how to change with the times? As the Qur'an is unalterable, is the problem greater or less? Could a religion be better by not admitting change? - why? [15]

3. Tolerance and free speech.[16]

3a. What are the most famous Scriptural texts that encourage tolerance and hospitality towards immigrants, different races, and unbelievers? Tolerance gives permission for differences to exist; it means tolerating patiently what we may not like or endorse. [17]

3b. Multiculturalism and Assimilation. Which texts, if any, encourage mixed marriages and social integration between different cultures? Which texts require separatism between those of different faiths?

3c. If tolerance is always good, do you want everyone to have the right to wear, write, do, speak, and believe what they like? Or are there legitimate limits on human rights and freedom, where your increased freedom reduces mine, so one gains and the other loses?

3d. Good intolerance. The Ten Commandments imply it is *good* to be intolerant of ten things. Are there other things your Scriptures do not tolerate and perhaps punish? eg. some beliefs, words and actions in your home, community and country?

Does the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights mean that genocide, rape and child abuse are offences that no decent human would ever tolerate? If so, the prohibition is *absolute*, always binding. That 'ought' may seem firm ground on which to build the common good. Its opposite is the shifting sands of what is called 'relativism', where instead of an agreed standard, right and good are relative to different cultures and times, and vary from person to person, and each person's opinion is equally valid.

Geneva Convention rules of war exist.[18] They forbid the bombing of civilians, so the UN has often called for bombing in Syria and Yemen to stop to allow humanitarian aid and evacuation.

4. Killing

4a. Is it ever permissible to kill another, despite the 6th commandment given Moses? "Do not commit murder".[19]

4b. Which texts command believers to expand or defend the faith by force, and to punish blasphemy and unbelievers?

4c. Retaliation. When provoked, which texts justify killing, especially in solidarity with Muslim brothers? eg. against Western military operations in Muslim countries.

Is there a contradiction between a religion of peace and what Christian countries did in WW1 and WW2, including the Holocaust? While fighting each other, each country felt it was morally right and God was on its side.[20]

4d. Consequences. If self-defence involves random punishments or killing (as presumably white extremists threatened on "Punish a Muslim Day"; or when Isis shot not only Western soldiers but - accidentally - some innocent Muslims and children too) which texts in your Scriptures would approve?

4e. As a last resort, can war be justified as the least evil alternative?

5. Suicide

5a. Is suicide permitted in your Scriptures? If so, which texts, and for what reasons?

5b. What are the best arguments for and against taking your own life? Some who once believed in suicide as the best option, later say they are glad they failed.

6. Martyrs

6a. Is the best martyr one who dies not for reward but for the sake of others? [21]

6b. **Guarantee:** which texts make it clear that brave acts of terrorism or martyrdom for the faith cancel previous misbehaviour and guarantee entry to heaven? Without a guarantee, what does the bomber have to gain by suicide, especially if his motives are mixed and many innocent victims die with him?

6c. **Equality:** which texts promise an equal paradise for both sexes? Scriptures were written in patriarchal times, when male not female rights were paramount. But in fairness, are we entitled to interpret Scriptures as wanting equal rights for women too? [22]

7. Life after death.

7a. Can we be certain that death is not the end, even though "you are dust and to dust you will return?" [23]

7b. Do your Scriptures make it clear whether the afterlife is an eternal physical or spiritual existence? There is little evidence in the Hebrew Bible of personal survival and identity, yet Old Testament Jews still believed in God. Cremations, not burials, are now the preferred choice for most Protestant Christians, without - it seems - destroying belief in the possibility of a new future identity, or a mysteriously transformed resurrected 'body'. But Orthodox Jews and Muslims choose burials, preferably soon after death.

7c. **Merit or gift.** In your Scriptures does heaven have to be earned by good behaviour and charitable acts? If so, can anyone be certain they have done enough to merit a place, especially if they have done terrible things? If entry depends on the unknown discretion of God at the Last Judgement who will have mercy on some but not others, is it true that the terrorist has no more chance of entry than anyone else? [24]

7d. If the afterlife is physical, do humans have resurrected bodies similar to our present sexual bodies, capable of reproducing and expanding the population in heaven, but without ageing?

Jesus and the Qur'an seem to have different answers here. When asked about husbands and wives in heaven, Jesus replied that in eternity life was different, asexual "like the angels".[25]

The Qur'an and the hadiths believe sexuality continues. [26]

7e. What scientific or other evidence is there that suggests a physical afterlife on planet Earth which sooner or later will itself die, along with the Sun?

Finally, it is important to stress that these questions are not intended to evangelise or show one religion as superior to others but rather to increase respect for each other's faith - and to value the differences, from which I benefited during my nine years teaching in multi-cultural Uganda.

The questions are offered to PREVENT for a productive experiment, offering participants an enjoyable opportunity to reach a more mature understanding of their own and another's faith. As a result, participants who previously believed violence was the only solution, may become empowered by PREVENT to find more reasonable, non-violent routes to achieving good goals.

If PREVENT declines my course questions, there are wider audiences as I mentioned at the start, for believers in all three religions to engage in critical thinking, and dialogue within and between religions. With good publicity, the course list might appeal to youth groups, 6th forms, universities, U3A, and professional groups like Probus and Rotary. Above all, it may well appeal to numerous members of synagogues, churches and mosques, and their house groups. Though single-religion groups will feel safer arenas for most people, the most enjoyable learning will occur in multi-faith groups. The course questions might encourage an expansion in the network of inter-faith house groups, to promote greater understanding of each other's faith, in a friendly atmosphere with refreshments.

8 Some of the most intelligent people I know have changed their minds on big issues. Teenage rebellion against parents has always been true of all cultures - we all like to do things our way, not only in religious beliefs, but in dress, haircuts, marriage, jobs, where to live, etc.

9 My own 100 word creed on my website shows what I think is central to Christianity, omitting less vital beliefs. www.contemporarycreed.org.uk

10 The word 'texts' is used throughout to include verses (ayat) and chapters (suras).

11 I use the word 'God' to include the Jewish 'Jehovah', the Islamic 'Allah' and Christian 'Father'. "The Lord" revealed himself to Abram (*Genesis 12*) and when he called Moses he said "I am the God of Abraham" (*Exodus 3:6*).

12 The worldwide Christian evangelist Dr Billy Graham (who died in 1918) repeatedly used "God says" and "The Bible says" as identical. For centuries many Christians believed the same and still do. But perhaps many churchgoers today are less fundamentalist and more critical, thinking some parts of the Bible are inappropriate today, and believe the Word of God is not a book but the living Jesus.

13 All three religions accept revealed beliefs, God's revelation of himself and his purposes. So the Ten Commandments are taken as the words of God, not Moses' invention. But the opening pages of the Bible are less clear-cut: probably most Christians no longer read them as a scientific diary of creation and accept the evolution of our universe, after its birth nearly 14 billion years ago.

Old Testament prophets, instead of saying "I say", would often give their own words greater authority by saying "God says". But sometimes appalling things were put into God's mouth: Samuel ordered the slaughter of Israel's enemies, including women and children, for offences in previous centuries (*1 Samuel 15*). To put it simply: a God who is Good, better than anything we can imagine, would be unlikely to command what the UN would call genocide, as if he were less moral than humans! So to avoid mistakes, deeper re-interpretation of the Scriptures is needed for good theology: here the writer meant *Samuel believed* it was God's commandment - but we can all make mistakes!

14 If at times the hadiths (reports of the prophet Muhammad) disagree with parts of the Qur'an, is the Qur'an always supreme?

15 Clearly the Scriptures are not intended to be a sufficient *technical* guide to get to the Moon or use a mobile or the social media!

16 If you think these are about behaviour not belief, I hope what follows will show their importance to religious belief.

17 My asking a question does not mean I approve or disapprove. I am here a neutral questioner whom I hope you can tolerate.

18 Or IHL, international humanitarian law, as it is known formally.

19 Exodus 20:13.

20 To avoid excessive revenge, Moses limited retaliation to only one "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (*Exodus 21:24*). But Jesus replaced it. "You have heard it said 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy'. But I say to you 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'." (*Matthew 5:38-44*).

21 Stephen, a Jew, was the first of many Christian martyrs (*Acts 7*).

22 Gender equality and LGBT rights are issues that have divided Christians. Only recently have women been ordained as priests and a few become bishops in the Anglican Communion but not in the Roman Catholic Church.

23 *Genesis 3:19*.

24 In Christianity, heaven is not merited but a free gift on offer in this life by God's grace and forgiveness through Jesus. Some opponents say this is unfair, because belief is easy but earning heaven by continual charity is hard work.

25 *Matthew 22:30.*

26 Though Quranic texts describe Paradise, partly sensual, there is no mention of an actual number of virgins given as a reward. One of the six major hadith does report a number but I am told that this report is unreliable.