



# CHRISTIANITY IN THE WORLD

## THEOLOGICAL NOTES

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### KEY IDEA 1: RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND IDEAS SHAPE PEOPLE'S THINKING AND ACTIONS

*As central to their mission and ministry, Lutheran schools seek to nurture individuals, aware of their humanity and open to the influence of the Holy Spirit, who are growing in and living according to a cohesive worldview.*

(Core statement, Lifelong Qualities for Learners)

### THE CURRENT LUTHERAN SCHOOL CONTEXT

Since their early beginnings in Australia, Lutheran schools have found themselves responding to an ever-widening and ever more complex context. The small German-speaking Lutheran village primary school of the first German settlers in Australia had to learn to speak English and adapt to the mainly anglo-celtic community that surrounded it. It constantly had to respond to changes as more and more non-Lutherans and non-Christians came into its community. The Lutheran school now relates to a context including both the global community and also the multicultural and multi-faith local community. Many Lutheran schools are enrolling increasing numbers of students from various religious backgrounds, including from the major world religions. If the education provided through the school is to be relevant for its students and prepare them for life in the local and global communities, then students must be helped to understand and interact with those communities.

#### The challenge for Christian Studies

Students come into the Christian Studies classroom with a wide diversity of religious and philosophical perspectives as well as a range of Christian denominational traditions. Some would see themselves as 'spiritual' but not 'religious' (cf **CW2**). Students need to be helped to see that all of these perspectives are to be respected, as well as other local, national and global worldviews. Not to deal with this complexity is to fail seriously in the responsibility of care for the students. It may also lead students to reject religion as having any relevance to the world in which they live and study and in which they will continue to interact throughout their lives.

### A COHERENT AND COMPREHENSIVE WORLDVIEW

Within this multi-faith, multicultural context, Lutheran schools 'seek to nurture individuals, aware of their humanity and open to the influence of the Holy Spirit, who are growing in and living according to a cohesive worldview' (Core statement, Lifelong Qualities for Learners). Religious beliefs and ideas are an integral and fundamental part of this worldview.

Students may or may not be aware that they hold a set of assumptions and presuppositions about the nature of reality (a 'worldview'). They may need to be helped to become aware of these assumptions and presuppositions through self-reflective processes. Their worldview will also be continually developing and expanding as students respond to new insights and experiences and make informed choices which will provide the basis and motivation for living. It will become the integrating framework for all learning and life in the school.

This worldview may, or may not, include a personal faith in Jesus Christ. However, even those who do not identify with a Christian worldview can experience in the Lutheran school a consistent and coherent Christian worldview. If they reject it, they need to know why they do so and their decision must be respected. [Note that Jesus himself in his teaching and parables warned that there would be rejection of his message as well as acceptance.] But through the work of the Holy Spirit, students engaged in a disciplined and structured enquiry to form their own worldview may be led to faith. This is the prayed-for and hoped-for outcome.

#### A Christian worldview

A Christian worldview seeks to take seriously both the revelation of God through Scripture (particularly as it reveals Jesus Christ) and what can be learned from relating to God's creation through the use of reason. It draws together relevant insights from various sources including other cultures, faiths and worldviews. In doing so, it follows examples of this process contained within Scripture itself. For example, Old Testament wisdom literature drew on input from various societies and cultures in the ancient Mediterranean world, and the psalms, which have become the prayers also of the

Christian church, adopted images, concepts and poetry from the nations around Israel. However, in the context of the Lutheran school, a Christian worldview is determined by the student's relationship with God as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier, and is centred on God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

## TWO 'DANGERS'

If students in Christian Studies are being asked to explore other religions and philosophies in order to see how religious beliefs and ideas shape people's thinking and actions, there are two extreme positions which must be avoided.

### The danger of relativism

Some teachers are rightly concerned about the danger of relativism in studying philosophy of religion and world religions. If students are introduced to the teachings and practices of other religions, is there a danger that the witness of the school to the Christian faith will be compromised? Will all religious experience be reduced to some lowest common denominator so that in keeping with postmodernist type thinking, every individual religious opinion is as valid as any other? How do we allow students to have freedom to explore and examine, but at the same time uphold the 'truth claim' of their own theological tradition?

### The danger of particularism

The opposite end of the spectrum from religious relativism is religious particularism or absolutism. This approach can lead to indoctrination, where there is the intention to impart the beliefs and values of the teacher or of the school to the students, often with the motivation that the school or the teachers is doing so in the best interests of the students. Particularly concerning is that this approach does not create and foster 'an atmosphere of respect, care and openness where students have freedom to explore Christianity, their own questions, faith and personal response' (*Christian Studies in the Lutheran School*).

## 'RESPECTFUL DIALOGUE' AS AN APPROACH FOR CHRISTIAN STUDIES

In order to avoid religious relativism and religious particularism, and to assist students to relate to their current context of pluralism, Christian Studies needs to adopt educational approaches which will encourage students to address issues of current concern and prepare them for a constructive life in the global community as they form and adapt their worldview. However, at the same time, these approaches must take seriously the importance of the faith tradition of the school and uphold the necessity for that tradition to be clearly and accurately articulated.

What is proposed could be seen as a 'respectful dialogue' between the faith tradition of the school and the beliefs and values of other traditions and philosophies, including those which the students bring into the conversation from their own worldview. Such a dialogue would, in common with other learning areas, employ all of the usual learning experiences, and would develop skills and competencies such as critical inquiry and in-depth reflection.

Such 'respectful dialogue' begins with students and teachers becoming more aware through a self-reflective process of their own personal beliefs and religious ideas, and the language, images and metaphors which are used to express those beliefs. Real dialogue is possible only where the partners in conversation are certain of, and comfortable with, their own identity. They need to grow in their understanding of how these beliefs are shaped by the social and cultural context, and how they form the basis for a worldview and a framework of beliefs through which they interpret reality, and which help to give meaning and purpose to life. This first step is crucial if students and teachers together are going to relate positively to the pluralism which is part of their environment in the school and in general society.

For a Lutheran school, this means that it must provide a thorough grounding in confessional Lutheran theology as the beginning point for Christian Studies. Even though many students in the school may not share this confessional framework, it is the one which the school represents and which is expressed through the whole curriculum and in all activities of the school. It provides a worldview which takes seriously both the revelation of God through scripture with its central focus on Jesus Christ, and the insights gained from interacting with God's creation using the abilities God has given to us as human beings.

However, Lutheran theology also recognises that God's revelation is far greater than we as individuals can fully comprehend. God alone is infinite and absolute, and human attempts to 'understand' God are always limited by sinful human nature and the shortcomings of human reason. As St Paul remarks (1 Cor 13:12), we now see only dimly in a mirror, we know only in part. God is revealed in Jesus Christ, but God also still remains 'hidden' (cf theology of the cross, **CL2**). There is always an element of mystery about God.

As well as acknowledging that the perception of God's revelation is always limited because of human sinful nature and that there is therefore the necessity to be ready to modify any current understanding of it, it is also recognised that God operates in the world through both reason and revelation and that the Christian lives in both the world of nature and the world of grace. This not only frees Christians to operate in both of the 'secular domain' and the 'spiritual domain', but

challenges them to take seriously that they 'are in the world, but not of the world' (John 17). Since God operates in an ordered world which has meaning and purpose, it is possible to form an integrated and consistent worldview which allows individuals to come to terms with the fragmented nature of human knowledge.

Working from this as a basis in Christian Studies, and observing the appropriate developmental levels of the students, teachers and students together recognise, appreciate and value the questions addressed to their religious framework by the different attempts to make sense of the world and to search for meaning. This goes well beyond judgmental curiosity about other religions and philosophies, but does not imply adopting or absorbing the beliefs of others. It also moves beyond developing tolerance, patience and cross-cultural harmony, even though these are important in themselves. It allows for learning more about one's own tradition from the insights of other religious and philosophical frameworks and traditions.

'Respectful dialogue' requires open, honest, attentive, thoughtful, sensitive and empathetic listening to the questions, insights, understandings and practices revealed in other approaches to life and to life's ultimate questions. In doing so, individuals may be alerted to issues they have overlooked in

their own tradition; they may find challenges to the way in which they have formed their responses, shaped by their own religious backgrounds; they may discover ways of living and celebrating life which can add new dimensions to their own approaches. They will also be challenged in 'respectful dialogue' to try to communicate their own concerns so that they can be understood and appreciated by those from other traditions, and they need to be ready to answer questions which those other traditions may raise. This requires openness to the other, but faithfulness to one's own tradition.

In all this, the Lutheran school sees itself in a servant role to those within its community. It will work with the attitude of St Paul, who in his mission to the city of Athens (Acts 17:16–34), did not hesitate to challenge the religious thinking of the Athenians. He commended the Athenians for their religious practices, but was also ready to witness to them on the basis of their altar 'to an unknown God' (Acts 17:23) and to quote the Athenian poets (Acts 17:28) to support his testimony as he worked within their cultural framework. However, Paul also challenges Lutheran schools, for the sake of the gospel, to work with the servant attitude to become 'all things to all people, that [they] might by all means save some' (1 Cor 9:19–23).

### **Limitations of a phenomenological approach**

The study of comparative religions has often been presented through a phenomenological approach. This approach has looked at the way different religions or traditions deal with various aspects of their religion or denomination (for example, sacred stories, sacred texts, sacred rituals, sacred symbols, etc). While this may help students come to some understanding of both the similarities and the differences between religions, and while it may be a useful way to begin to raise awareness of other religious traditions, a phenomenological approach tends to look only at some aspects of a religion (often superficial ones) and does not treat the religion as an integrated whole with its own worldview. This approach can also tend to become a sociological examination rather than an encounter with another religion.

### **Christian denominations**

The presence of members of different Christian denominations in the Lutheran school will provide opportunities to explore various approaches to the Christian faith. This will, of course, occur through all key ideas of the CSCF as students become aware of different understandings, practices, rituals, styles and places of worship, etc. However, this key idea allows the intentional exploration of the distinctive characteristics of different denominations, particularly those represented in the school community.

### **Judaism**

The study of Judaism provides the opportunity to understand an important current world religion and one which has had a profound role in western history. However, it also allows students to explore the Old Testament background to the Christian religion as well as the influence of Jewish beliefs, practices, celebrations and culture on the Christian church. Important here will be not only those things held in common between Christianity and Judaism (eg the Old Testament Scriptures), but also significant differences in understanding and practice, particularly relating to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

### **Islam**

The rapid rise of Islam in Australia, the proximity of large Moslem countries such as Indonesia, as well as current world political situations, makes the study of Islam particularly relevant. It is important that students gain a sympathetic understanding of Islam and the various expressions of Islam will need to be addressed so that the extreme forms so often represented in the media are not the major source of information for students. Significant here will also be the difference in the understanding of Allah in the Koran and the biblical teaching of the triune God (cf **CB1**).

## Other world religions

This key idea also allows for the exploration of the worldview represented by other world religions (eg Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Sikhism) and the way in which different cultures influence and are influenced by those religions. The way in which these religions address questions such as the origin, meaning and purpose of life and the nature of human beings can also be examined, and dialogue can be established with relevant Christian teachings. Indigenous religions, especially those of the Australian Aborigines, also need to be considered here, as well as elsewhere in the framework (eg **CW2**).

## The gospel as inclusive and exclusive

While sensitive and respectful dialogue can occur in the area of various religions with tolerance for other worldviews and the opportunity to modify one's own perspective, the inclusive and exclusive nature of the Christian gospel must come through clearly in the Lutheran school in order that the Christian faith on which the school is based is clearly and unapologetically presented. On the one hand, God 'desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim 2:4). However, Jesus claims, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6). And Peter testifies, 'There is salvation in no one else [than Jesus Christ], for there is no other name given among mortals by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12).

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY PHILOSOPHY

Religion is not the only source of insights into questions about the meaning of life and the understanding of the world. Philosophy raises its own questions as well as challenging insights from religion. Philosophy has also had a profound influence on the way theology has been expressed.

There are a number of areas of philosophy, each raising their own issues and insights and each looking for answers. Through the centuries different philosophical systems and traditions have provided answers for these questions (eg idealism [Plato], realism [Aristotle], modernism, existentialism, postmodernism, etc). Students need to become aware of philosophical frameworks which impact thinking in current societies and to be able to analyse and critique the underlying values and concepts on which those approaches are based. The dialogue with Christian responses to these issues and questions needs to be encouraged in ways appropriate for the developmental level of the students.

### Metaphysics

Metaphysics deals with the nature of reality: 'What is ultimately real?' There are a number of different areas of investigation, including:

#### *cosmology*

- the study of theories about the origin, nature, and development of the universe as an orderly system
- How did the universe originate and develop? by design? by accident?
- Is the universe moving towards a particular purpose?
- Is the material cosmos all that there is to reality?
- What is the nature of time and space?

#### *theology*

- conceptions of and about god
- Is there a god, or gods?
- If there is a god, how can god be described?
- If god is both all good and all powerful, how is it that evil exists?

#### *anthropology*

- the study of humankind where humankind is both the subject and the object of the study
- Is a human being anything more than a highly complex machine?
- What is the relationship between soul and body?
- Are people born good, evil, or morally neutral?
- Do people have 'free will' or are their thoughts and actions determined?

#### *ontology*

- the nature of being or existence
- Is there a spiritual realm?
- Is reality found in spirit or in matter? Is reality a mental construct?
- Does chaos reign supreme, or is chaos somehow related to order and harmony in our world?
- Is reality fixed and stable, or changing?

- What happens to a person at death?
- Why are human beings on earth?
- Is there a meaning and purpose to human history?
- Can human beings make the world a better place?

### **Epistemology**

Epistemology deals with the nature, source and validity of knowledge. It is an important area of philosophy relating to the process of education. Questions raised in this area include:

- Is it possible to know anything?
- How do we come to know what we know?
- How can we be sure that what we know is reliable and true?
- Is truth relative or absolute?
- Is knowledge subjective or objective?
- What are the limits to human knowledge?
- Is there truth independent of human experience?
- What sources of truth can we rely on? (empirical, revelation, authority, reason, intuition)

### **Axiology**

Axiology deals with what is 'good' or preferable. Important here is also the contrast between what people say they value and what they *act out* in their daily life, what they in fact prefer and what they feel they ought to prefer. There are two important areas of concern:

#### *ethics*

- what should I do and why (cf **CW3**)
- Does the end justify the means?
- How do we know the difference between what is 'good' and what is 'evil'?
- Are ethical standards and moral values absolute or relative?
- Do universal moral values exist?
- How do we make ethical decisions?

#### *aesthetics*

- searching for the principles governing the creation and appreciation of beauty and art
- What is 'beautiful'?
- Should art imitate reality or should it be the product of the private creative imagination?
- How does art help us to perceive 'reality'?
- Are there objective standards to determine what is 'beautiful' and what is 'ugly'?
- Should art deal with the ugly and grotesque as well as the good and the beautiful?
- Does beauty inhere in the art object itself, or is beauty supplied by the eye of the beholder?
- How do social and cultural differences relate to the appreciation of beauty?
- What is 'Christian' art? Is it determined by the content, the artist, the viewer or listener?

### **Some issues and questions for discussion and reflection:**

- Examine current areas of conflict in the world in terms of the religious elements of those situations. How can an understanding of the religious beliefs and ideas which shape individuals, societies and nations help to provide insights into these situations?
- How will issues of religious prejudice be explored in the school?
- Will we confuse young children by introducing other religions to them too early?
- How would you respond to the following scenario?
- A year 12 student, who has been outspokenly negative to the whole question of a religious commitment throughout his/her schooling, confides in you that, after the study of world religions, he/she has been led to become a Buddhist.
- How can we avoid the danger of religious relativism if we take seriously the claims of other religions?
- How can this key idea help students deal with the relativism which they encounter in society?
- How can Lutheran schools maintain an authentic Lutheran worldview based on Lutheran confessional theology, but dialogue respectfully with other denominations and religions?
- How do we help students distinguish between understanding truth claims and the personal acceptance of such truth claims? How far can a teacher go in witnessing to her/his personal beliefs without imposing them ('indoctrinating') on the students?

- Consider some of the questions raised by philosophy and explore the interaction with theology.
- What examples of a 'Lutheran culture' can be identified in the school? Is this culture based on theology or tradition? Does it help to strengthen the school community?
- How is the faith tradition of the Lutheran school explored within the school community? What stories, symbols, rituals, etc are important for this exploration?
- Explore the relationship between 'wisdom' and 'knowledge'.
- Has 'virtual reality' changed our concept of 'reality'?

### References and further reading:

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## KEY IDEA 2: PEOPLE EXPRESS THEIR SPIRITUALITY IN VARIOUS CONTEXTS WITHIN AND BEYOND CHRISTIANITY

*O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you.*

*(St Augustine (354–430), Confessions I i)*

### HUMAN BEINGS ARE SPIRITUAL

God created humans as spiritual beings, beings who are able to relate to God and to respond to God's revelation of himself. Humans seem to have an instinctive awareness of the existence of a supreme being. They have a 'natural knowledge' of God. This is sometimes referred to as a 'God-shaped hole' which every human being seems to have and which can only be filled by God (Acts 17:27–28; Rom 1:19–20). This spiritual dimension distinguishes human beings from the animals and the rest of creation (cf 'animism', which sees all creation as possessing 'spirit').

Human beings have a need to experience awe, mystery, and a sense of the transcendent. They look for ways to experience and express these emotions and feelings. The question is not whether a person has a spirituality, but rather what kind of spirituality they reflect and express.

Other factors also contribute to human spirituality. Creation suggests the existence of a creator. God's operation in nature and human history point to his existence. So also does human conscience, the awareness of right and wrong. The existence of various religions shows that human beings have a natural tendency towards religious experiences and that they want to live in harmonious relationship with a supreme being, whatever their understanding of the deity may be.

Christians acknowledge that 'natural' religion is the human reaction to God's revelation of his power and wisdom. However, they also believe that only in Jesus Christ do human beings come to know God and live in harmonious relationship with him as a loving and merciful Father (John 14:6).

### EXPRESSIONS OF SPIRITUALITY

There has been an increasing interest in spirituality during the past decade. Very often this is not associated with any specific Christian denomination nor with any formal religious context or practice. The remark is often heard: "I am 'spiritual', but I am not 'religious'". As trust in modernism with its positivist paradigm has faded and the postmodernist critique of former meta-narratives of the western world has placed increasing emphasis on ways of knowing beyond the scientific and objective, so an increased interest in spirituality has developed.

#### Interest in spirituality

Some examples of this interest in 'spirituality' include:

- valuing mystical experiences or moments of awe and wonder
- sensing 'the sacred'
- searching for meaning, identity and purpose (hope) in human existence
- emphasising relationships, trustworthiness and connectedness
- seeking for a sense of wellbeing and happiness
- sensing the interconnectedness of the world as part of the universe
- attraction to eastern religions through their emphasis on meditation
- exploring stillness and silence
- reacting to materialism and secularism
- exploring Indigenous spirituality
- fascination with the occult, satanism, witches, etc
- addressing the affective dimension in religious education
- exploring communication through art, music, dance, drama, etc
- investigating the mysterious and the miraculous

#### Approaches to spirituality

Individuals may express their spirituality in very different ways based on different presuppositions and approaches to life. Their attitudes and values are reflected in the way in which they live and how they relate to other people. Their spirituality will be influenced also by the cultural context and society in which they live. Examples (in addition to Christian spirituality considered below) include the following:

- humanistic spirituality, which sees human beings as the centre of the universe and human reason providing sufficient answers to the questions of life
- secular or materialistic spirituality, which maintains that there is nothing beyond our material existence
- social or cultural activities which provide some level of meaning for an individual – eg sport, media, ‘reality TV’, sex, etc
- altruistic spirituality, which actively pursues the welfare of others and is an inspiration for others
- selfish, hedonistic spirituality, which is concerned only with gratifying one’s own desires and wishes
- evil, demonic spirituality
- mysticism, which leads to the attempt to feel at one with god through direct contact with god, lifting oneself into the presence of god through self-denial, asceticism, meditation, etc
- meditation leading to complete ‘emptiness’ – eg Buddhism
- meditation which tries to connect ‘god within us’ with ‘god outside of us’ – eg Hinduism
- New Age spirituality, which tries to create one’s own reality

Members of the school community, both students and staff, need the opportunity to explore and express their own forms of spirituality. The school can provide a safe environment in which such formation can take place and in which different approaches can be evaluated. Critical will be a sensitive presentation of insights into Christian spirituality while respecting other approaches to spirituality.

### Indigenous spirituality

There is an increasing awareness of the importance of an understanding of Indigenous spirituality in Australia for all Australian citizens. Aboriginal spirituality needs to be appreciated in its own right as a response to human spirituality. It can also be explored for points of contact with Christian spirituality. Local resources may be available in the school, and some general introductory references are listed below.

## CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

### The response to God’s action

Christian spirituality does not begin with human action. It is not a process of individuals trying to experience God or attempting to open up a way to God (cf tower of Babel: Gen 11:1–9). Christian spirituality is not trying to ascend to God, but recognising that God descends to us. Christian spirituality is therefore the response of the believer to what God has already done, and it leads the Christian into a life of discipleship and practical Christian living. Christian spirituality is the life of sanctification lived by the power of the Holy Spirit.

### Based on the work of Jesus Christ

Christian spirituality is based on God’s action in Jesus Christ. Through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, God has revealed himself as a God of love and forgiveness and has opened up the way to himself (cf **CB2**). This is the action of God’s totally undeserved grace which restores the Christian into a right relationship with God once again. This is the only foundation for Christian spirituality and creates the freedom to live in response to God. Christian spirituality means *to be in Christ* and *to live in Christ*. It embraces both *being* and *doing*, who Christians are and how that determines how they live.

### Centred on the word of God

God has revealed himself and his gift of salvation to us in his word (cf **CC1**). This means that God’s word is central for Christian spirituality. It is God’s word which reveals Christ to us and implants Christ in us. God’s word is the power (Rom 1:16–17) which makes Christian spirituality possible. For this reason, remaining in contact with that word is crucial for a life of Christian spirituality.

The link between reading the word, meditation and prayer is important here (for prayer of **CC3**). A very helpful treatment of this is Luther’s ‘A simple way to pray’ (cf Schubert’s paraphrase). An understanding of the particular nature of Christian meditation in contrast to other forms of meditation will also require consideration here (cf article by Kleinig). Christian meditation has its focus on God and his word rather than on any potential within the individual. The person stands under the word of God and listens to the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking through that word with the outcome of a joyful response to God in confession, prayer and praise rather than finding one’s ‘true self’ or solving one’s personal problems. Martin Luther spoke of a three-fold approach to meditation. First comes prayer for the Holy Spirit to speak through the word of God and inspire our thoughts. Secondly comes meditation, which Luther practised by reading and repeating the word aloud so that the word moves from the tongue to the ear and to the heart (not from the eye to the brain!). Thirdly, Luther identified the process of testing as the word has its impact on one’s life and the difficulties and suffering (also from the temptation of the devil) which lead the Christian back to Christ and the gospel.

Crucial for the Christian disciple is worship (cf **CC3**). In worship God speaks his word of law and gospel; the gospel is enacted in the sacraments, the Holy Spirit is at work through the word, and the community of the faithful is created and renewed. Christian spirituality is always focussed on God and his word.

### **Being shaped by the Holy Spirit**

Christian spirituality in the life of the individual leads to God shaping or forming the person. St Paul (Rom 12:2) speaks about Christians being ‘transformed’ by God (the passive voice in the Bible indicates God’s activity). Spiritual formation means that Christ is formed in Christians (Gal 4:19) as they come to fullness of life in Christ (Col 2:10), grow ‘to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ’ (Eph 4:13), and gain ‘the mind’ of Christ (Phil 2:5).

Christian spirituality leads to a life of faith and obedience in which all of life is lived in dependence on the grace of God and is empowered by the Holy Spirit. It relates to the inner life of the Christian (growth in Bible reading, Christian meditation, prayer, etc), but it must not become simply introspective. It is intensely personal, but must not become focussed on self.

A healthy Christian spirituality is concerned with life in the faith community and in the world in general. It is relational and communal and expresses itself in service to others and not in retreat from the world. Christian spirituality is theology of the cross in action (cf **CL2** and **CL3**). It operates through the gifts of the Holy Spirit which are given to each Christian individual through which they carry out God’s work in the world as faithful stewards (Luke 17:7–10).

### **Some traditions of Christian spirituality**

Through the centuries, a number of different traditions have developed in the practice of Christian spirituality. Different approaches appeal to different individuals, but it is important that no one tradition is emphasised to the detriment of the others. Individuals need to be helped to develop expressions of spirituality which are relevant for themselves and their circumstances.

- **contemplative tradition** – stresses the importance of silence, of discipline, of resting in God rather than performing (eg the monastic movement)
- **holiness tradition** – emphasises the importance of living a holy life, often also withdrawing from ‘the world’ and taking vows of poverty, chastity and obedience (eg monastic communities, Lutheran pietism)
- **charismatic tradition** – focuses on the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian and on living an active, healthy Christian life (eg Pentecostal movement)
- **social justice tradition** – stresses the importance of being involved in the world of human society and creation, bringing God’s justice to bear on the evils of a world suffering the results of human sin (eg the Salvation Army)
- **evangelical tradition** – stresses saving faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and saviour and the centrality of the Bible as the source of knowledge about God and salvation; it responds to the call to witness to the gospel in the whole world (eg the great missionary movements)

A Lutheran approach to spirituality may identify with elements from any of these traditions, but particularly with the evangelical tradition. A Lutheran approach to spirituality is grounded in the gospel and in the freedom which comes in Jesus Christ. It is focussed on hearing the word of God as both law and gospel and living constantly in dependence on the grace of God. While a Lutheran approach to spirituality emphasises the importance of personal practices of Bible reading, meditation and prayer, it also recognises the centrality of communal worship and the blessings of word and sacrament in that worship. While it appreciates the value of stillness and silence, it does not retreat from the world, but seeks to express itself in service of others, using the gifts God gives through the working of the Holy Spirit. All this is God’s work in and through the individual.

### **Some issues and questions for discussion and reflection:**

- What do people imply when they claim they are ‘spiritual’ but not ‘religious’?
- What are some of the expressions of spirituality which are evident in the school community?
- How does the school help students and staff to explore their own spirituality?
- How are members of the school community encouraged to reflect on and share their experiences of spirituality?
- How can Christians in the school community be helped in their spiritual formation without causing division and discrimination in the school?
- What use can be made of stillness and silence in the school?
- Is meditation practised in the school? If so, on what basis and in what form?
- What understanding is there of Indigenous spirituality in the school community? What resources are there in the school to help to explore this area?

## References and further reading:

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The following references relating to Aboriginal spirituality have been provided by Christine Reid, Indigenous Education Facilitator, Lutheran Schools Association, SA, NT & WA:

### **Dreaming stories – focus spirituality**

TITLE: Australian Dreaming: 40,000 Years of Aboriginal History

AUTHOR: ISAACS, J.

TITLE: Aboriginal Sky Figures

AUTHOR: ABC Books

TITLE: Djugurba: Tales from the Spirit Time

AUTHOR: Bunug, N et al

TITLE: Flinders Ranges Dreaming

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## KEY IDEA 3: PEOPLE MAKE DECISIONS USING A RANGE OF RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES AND ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS

*Jesus said: 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.'*

*(John 8:31–32)*

### MAKING DECISIONS

Throughout their lives, human beings make many decisions. They make these decisions for many different reasons. Sometimes the choices they make are carefully thought out and based on specific well-developed values, at other times the decisions may be made much more spontaneously and without much concern for the consequences. As people interact with others, they begin to define themselves by their choices. They take more and more responsibility for their life and the decisions they make.

It is important that people in the school community are helped to develop a coherent view of life with supporting values so that they can work from this base in their decision-making. Within the school community there will be a wide range of religious perspectives and ethical frameworks which individuals will use for their decision-making. Through their interaction within the school community people will be challenged in their decision-making and in evaluating the basis on which they make those decisions.

### WHAT IS MEANT BY 'ETHICS'?

Ethics is a process of reflecting on and distinguishing between good and evil, right and wrong, with regard to what we do, think, say, feel, believe, how we act, etc. It is also applying these guidelines to concrete life situations and circumstances. It involves thinking about and evaluating the consequences of particular actions and behaviours. Ethics is more than knowing what is right and wrong (ethical knowledge); it is also doing what is right (ethical behaviour). Knowing what is right is not a sufficient condition for doing what is right.

Ethics needs to be distinguished from 'morality'. Morality is a code of behaviour for a group or society which defines how that group is to act – a list of right and wrong conduct for that group. It guides members of the group in what is considered appropriate and inappropriate behaviour.

Ethics has also been developed as an area of philosophy. Various ethical frameworks have been proposed. For example Aristotle developed ethical theory based on happiness as the highest good. Happiness was to be sought by the path of virtue, through the practice of courage, temperance, wisdom and justice.

#### Values and truth

Values and truth need to be distinguished. Values designate what we regard as having value for us. Values will vary greatly from person to person. Truth, on the other hand, relates to absolutes which do not depend on whether or not we accept them. In the current postmodern climate, there is a reluctance to speak in terms of truth and absolutes. However, some ethical frameworks, including Christian ethics, presuppose absolutes.

A related issue is to distinguish between what is legal and what is ethical. Certain activities and practices may be legal, but some people would not regard them as ethical. Vigorous debate can occur when matters such as euthanasia and same-sex marriage are viewed in terms of their legal and ethical perspectives.

#### Some ethical frameworks for making decisions

Throughout human history, various ethical frameworks have been developed. Some of these include:

- **hedonism** – the highest good is what gives the greatest pleasure for the individual; this may be intellectual pleasure, or sensual pleasure, and its impact on others is not a prime concern;
- **utilitarianism** – this works with the principle of 'the greatest good for the greatest number of people', what will bring the greatest pleasure for the greatest number of people or the most good for the most people;
- **naturalistic ethical systems** – what is natural and is consistent with nature is right and good; we should follow our natural instincts (which are always good), and what is not natural to society or to individuals is not good;
- **systems based on duty** – these are based on an accepted authority figure or a set of laws, as seen for example in Old Testament legalism (based on the law of Moses) and Islam and also in approaches such as the 'categorical imperatives' of the philosopher Immanuel Kant. There are also systems based on total obedience developed by fundamentalist religious groups and authoritarian governments;

- **situation ethics** – based on what is seen to be the most loving response in a situation. This will vary from situation to situation, depending on who judges what is most loving in a particular situation (Joseph Fletcher: ‘love will lead us to do the right thing’);
- **Confucianism** – right actions flow from a right character. Emphasis is not so much on what the person does but rather on the nature of the person as being gentle, cultured, and benevolent;
- **Buddhism** – five precepts for all adherents: do not kill (any living thing), steal, indulge in forbidden sexual relations, lie, drink intoxicating liquors. Buddhist priests have additional regulations to follow;
- **Taoism** – all things have their balancing opposites (yin or yang). Life is the greatest of all possessions, it is to be lived in simplicity, and glory and fame are to be despised.

All of these different systems have some positive aspects which may be incorporated into an individual’s personal ethical framework. Some are also consistent with a Christian ethical approach.

## CHRISTIAN ETHICS

### Foundations

Christian ethics begins with the acknowledgement of God as creator and the recognition of the will of God in creation. Despite the advent of sin, the will of God is still seen in creation (Rom 1:18–32). God still protects creation and provides his law (‘political use of the law’) to help people know how to live.

Christian ethics also presupposes the sinful nature of human beings (cf **CB3**). Since the fall, a realistic view of individuals and society operates with the recognition of the reality of sin and the impact of sin on all relationships. This is in strong contrast to idealistic views of human beings which are current in society.

Christians ethics exist in and grow out of the community of faith. They are communal rather than individual, although they impact on the life of the individual. Ethical decisions are made within the communal context and affect the community in which they are made. The resources of the community contribute to the decision-making as responses to situations are formulated through prayer, searching the Scriptures, discussion and striving for consensus. They attempt to develop a distinctively Christian way of life as an influence and model for the whole of society of how God intends people to live in relationship. For the Christian, this is the life of discipleship.

A problem which can occur in dealing with Christian ethics is to try to define the Christian life by developing a set of acceptable behaviours for Christians, to define Christians by what *they do*, rather than by what *they are*. In John 6:28–29, Jesus speaks about ‘doing the work of God’ as ‘believing in him [Jesus] whom God has sent’. Disciples of Jesus Christ (those who believe in him) do by the power of the Holy Spirit what Jesus Christ wants them to do.

### The use of the Bible

The Bible is the single indispensable resource for Christian ethical reflection. However, it is important to recognise that the Bible provides biblical principles for ethical decision-making rather than specific answers for particular ethical situations. It is important to remain open to possible misinterpretation of the scriptural sources and also to new insights gained and additional relevant biblical texts. In all this it is important not to develop a legalistic or fundamentalistic approach to scripture which seeks to determine all matters by the quotation of particular verses of Scripture. In ethical considerations, the gift of reason (the reflection of the believing community) and the common experience of all humanity needs to be considered (cf the example of Old Testament wisdom literature, which draws insights from many different societies and cultures).

### The law of love

The law of love (‘third use of the law’) is fundamental for disciples. Jesus taught that the ‘greatest commandment’ is: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’ and: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ (Matt 22:37–38). The ten commandments spell out what it means to love God and other people. For example, it means valuing God above anything or anyone else (cf Matt 6:19–33), using God’s name with respect, honouring and obeying parents and other representatives of God, regarding human life as sacred, being faithful in marriage, not being jealous.

The law of love and the ten commandments are ‘moral absolutes’, that is, they can never be put aside (Matt 5:17–20); they apply in every situation. However, the application of these moral absolutes may vary from situation to situation. Jesus’ disciples are called to listen carefully to the word of God, so that, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they have ‘the mind of Christ’ (1 Cor 2:16). St Paul appeals to Christians ‘in view of God’s mercy’: ‘Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will’ (Rom 12:1–2).

## A LUTHERAN APPROACH TO ETHICS

A Lutheran approach to ethics is based on the relationship between law and gospel.

The gospel provides the motivation for the new life in Christ as a response to what God has done in and through Jesus Christ (Rom 1:16–17). The Christian life is built on justification by grace through faith by which we receive new life and a new status as God’s children. It is the life of sanctification by the power of the Holy Spirit.

While the gospel provides the motivation for the new life in Christ, it is the law which gives shape and form to that new life. A Lutheran approach recognises the ‘political use of the law’, which is part of God’s work of creation. It is the gift of God for creation and provides protection and direction for creation – the way God intended it to function. This use of the law applies to all people whether Christian or not and can be seen, for example, in the ten commandments.

God’s law also has the ‘theological function’, which exposes sin and shows the need for salvation in Jesus Christ (cf **CB3**).

However, Lutheran theology recognises that Christians are not only holy (‘saints’ through faith in Jesus Christ) but also remain sinners (cf **CB3**). They will always be struggling against their ‘old nature’, Satan and the powers of evil, and therefore are always in need of forgiveness (Rom 7:15–25). They are not on a steady progress towards perfection, but a daily return to repentance and forgiveness – a daily return to baptism – to be reclaimed and renewed by God’s mercy.

However, since Christ has fulfilled the law and defeated the powers of evil, Christians can live without fear and in good conscience, even though they still struggle against the ‘old nature’. They know the outcome of the struggle, because in Christ they have forgiveness of sin, eternal life and salvation. The new life in Christ (Gal 2:20) is no longer lived under the slavery to the law, but in the freedom of the children of God (Gal 5:1); it is lived within the freedom of the gospel, not the fear of the law.

It is in this context that the so-called ‘third use of the law’ has its function for Christians. This approach recognises that God’s commandments are not limits on the life of Christians, but guides for the ‘good life’. They are in keeping with the desire of the ‘new nature’ and are the logical consequences of how people are created. Christian freedom is not simply *freedom from* the law (because Christ has fulfilled the law) but is also *freedom for* the law. It is freedom to obey God’s commands, because through them Christians are moulded by Christ and the Holy Spirit through the means of grace to become more Christ-like in mind and heart, living according to the guidelines of Scripture. The Holy Spirit gives the power to live the life of sanctification according to God’s commands in relationship with God, themselves, other people, and all of creation.

It is in this discussion of ‘The freedom of the Christian’ that Martin Luther makes these two seemingly contradictory statements (Schubert, 5):

- Christians have complete freedom and power over everything, and are under no obligation to anyone.
- Christians are servants of all, and under complete obligation to everyone..

On this basis Luther develops his understanding of service (cf **CL2** and **CL3**) and also the responsibility of Christians to be aware of causing offence to others by their actions (cf 1 Cor 8).

In living the ethical life, the focus for Christians must always remain on the gospel and not on human performance. Because God has made them holy, Christians live the holy life (the life of baptism), doing ‘good works’ which spring from faith active in love (Gal 5:6) and which are the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

## CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN THE WORLD

Although the Christian lives in the world, and may draw insights from sociological studies, opinion polls, pressure groups, etc, only the Bible understood in the light of Jesus Christ provides the foundation for a Christian system of ethics. This Christian framework may include moral imperatives which can claim to be universal (eg sanctity of life) or insights in common with other ethical systems (eg respect for the individual).

However, a Christian system applies only to Christians. It is inappropriate for Christians to try to impose specifically Christian ethical standards on society as a whole. To do so is, according to Lutheran theology, to misunderstand the implications of the teaching of the ‘two kingdoms’ (cf **CL2**). However, Christians need to exert a positive influence on the moral standards of society through example and through individual Christians acting as responsible citizens in their society, being salt and light in the world (Matt 5:13–16).

## ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

As well as developing an ethical framework for themselves, students need to experience the process of ethical decision-making. They need to be helped to learn how to make choices and be responsible for their decisions, whether they operate from a Christian ethical framework or not. While it is crucial to protect the vulnerability of children, they cannot be protected from human interaction and the consequent need to make choices on their own behalf.

As they learn to make choices, students will recognise that issues are often grey rather than black and white. They also need experience in ethical decision-making where the choice is between two 'goods', between short-term and long-term gains, and between individual and group benefits. Teachers also become vulnerable as they make choices and reveal reasons for their choices and also because there is no guarantee what choices students will make.

Students will also need experience in constructing arguments and evaluating different views which may be presented in discussion and in learning to accept critical evaluation of their own positions. They also need experience in analysing the reasons for their particular decisions.

Christian students need to learn how to deal with the saint/sinner tension in their lives as they struggle to conform their will to the will of God because that is their choice and not because they see their response in some legalistic sense. Christian students can also be encouraged to engage confidently in ethical decision-making knowing that, by faith, they think and act under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and within the context of God's grace and forgiveness. They can, therefore, dare to make decisions also in difficult ethical issues.

Christian students need to be assisted in seeing their role in witnessing to society (being 'salt and light') on the basis of their ethical values, especially where there is a conflict of values.

The following outline of a process for ethical decision-making may be helpful:

- identify the problem – what is the real concern?
- analyse the situation – what is the context of the problem?
- identify the options – what are the possible solutions?
- evaluate the options – what should we do based on our ethical framework?
- make a decision – what must be done?
- implementing the decision – how and when do we carry out the decision?
- evaluate the decision – what effects did the decision bring? What could have been done better?

### Some issues and questions for discussion and reflection:

- What values are held in common in current Australian society? Would any of these be regarded as absolutes?
- Examine some issues of current concern in terms of what is 'legal' and what is 'ethical' (eg stem-cell research, mandatory detention of 'refugees', abortion, etc).
- Consider the different responses to an ethical dilemma on the basis of various ethical frameworks.
- 'Christian freedom is practising the commandments of God as a way of life.' How can we understand this statement?
- Do Lutheran schools **reflect** the values of society or do they **shape** them?
- How can the ten commandments be seen positively in the life of the Christian?
- 'God accepts you just as you are.' What is true and not true about that statement?
- How can students be helped to see the importance of ethics across all areas of study in the curriculum – integrating ethics into all key learning areas?
- Are there any differences between what is taught and what is lived in the school? (Dealing with cynicism where there is lack of congruence.)
- What modelling of ethical decision-making is there in the school?
- How can the school show sensitivity in dealing with differences between the ethics in the student's home, the peer group, society and the ethics in the school?
- How can students be helped to see the importance of ethics in areas such as business ethics, the use of science and technology, health and welfare, etc?

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