

To achieve your Aldhelm Certificate

We are delighted that you have been part of the Aldhelm Certificate course and would like to recognise your thinking, commitment and learning at the Certificate service. You have given a lot of time to the course and to round it off it is time to crystallise our thinking and to try to root it in our local Church.

In order for us to award a diocesan Certificate, we need to see some specific examples of your thinking. Please do not feel alarmed by this: we are not looking to mark or to judge (unless this is helpful for you if you are moving into further study). We recognise that for many on the course this will be the first time for some time that you have been faced by a request to write down your ideas but please do not worry about getting it 'right': this is not school!



In order to try to enable everyone to find something that will let them do this, we have suggested three different categories

- You may prefer to root your piece of work with some of the group in which you have studied. If so, consider having an extra session and choosing a task from Section A.
- You may enjoy creative or free writing and exploring your ideas on paper. If so, there are some broader, overarching essay questions in Section B.
- You may have a practical mind and would like to do some concrete analysis. If so, look at the titles in Section C.

Having read the options, you may realise you have another area you would like to explore – this is possible and run your idea past your tutor.

Whatever you choose to tackle, it needs to be about 3 sides long. That is usually about 1500 words. This is only a guideline and it can be longer or more concise, depending on the nature of what you choose. It may be typed or handwritten and if you quote books, do put the reference in (Author, title, date of publication, page number). If you use the internet, please be careful in checking the validity of the site you look at. For example, Wikipedia is not always reliable.

Section A: Group assignments

1. Imagine, as a Church, that you are trying to help baptism families to understand who Jesus was and what he did and taught.

- Within your group, select one passage from the Gospels and in preparation, write two paragraphs summarising
 - i) What the passage tells us of Jesus
 - ii) Why it stands out for you.
- Bring it back to your group and put all the passages together.
- What does the whole picture of Jesus you have constructed between you look like?
- Is this the Jesus people who come to your Church occasionally are likely to recognise either from your worship and welcome?

Put your ideas together to submit, with a written summary of your discussion. This can be in the form of notes taken within the session which one person writes up, or you could try to capture your thoughts just in the session. Your tutor will verify that each person played a part in this and we will see evidence of everyone's contributions in the written piece on the chosen passage.

2. Where do you see signs of God at work in your Church, your local community, your employment or volunteer work? How do you know that this is God at work?

Having chosen this exercise,

- Each member of the group produces a one page summary of an area which they would like to emphasise before the group work. This can include photographs or stories – be creative to create a snapshot of what you want to celebrate.
- Bring this back to the group. Put the stories together and see what they look like side by side. Can you see themes? What is there to celebrate? Where are the gaps?
- As a group, work on the question ‘How do you know that this is God at work?’
- Put your ideas together to submit, with a written summary of your discussion. This can be in the form of notes taken within the session which one person writes up, or you could try to capture your thoughts just in the session. Your tutor will verify that each person played a part in this and we will see evidence of everyone’s contributions in the one page summary that you created in preparation.

3. In dialogue with an atheist....

- In preparation for this, read Rowan Williams’ chapter on ‘Analysing atheism: unbelief and the world of faiths’ which you will find at the very end of this section. Do not worry about understanding every word, but think about what he is saying about what atheism is like. We can make as many generalisations about atheists as they make about us as ‘Christians’ and so it is important to dig beneath the surface a little before your group work.
- Jot down a brief summary of what you think Williams is saying, where you agree or disagree. This only needs to be a paragraph, but can be longer if you get into it!
- Jot down a brief character sketch – with a false name – of someone you know well who does not share your faith. It could be a family member or a friend, a colleague or someone you know through leisure activity. Try to outline what they are like and think about why they don’t share your faith.
- Bring these to the group. Share your ‘atheists’ - how do they fit in with Rowan Williams’ chapter?
- Then imagine a dialogue, where they ask you questions and you try to engage with them? Agree your responses as a group and write them down. Start with these questions that the ‘friendly atheist’ raises:
 1. *‘It’s alright for you – you’ve got your faith and you seem to know God exists. I haven’t had any experiences of God so can’t believe in him’*
 2. *‘What do you do when you pray?’*
 3. *‘Why do you keep on praying when nothing seems to change?’*
 4. *‘I get really worried when I read in the papers about terrorists. They often seem to be religious and religion has caused lots of wars in history’*

Let the dialogue continue with at least two more questions that you think may flow. It may be that *you* want to ask *them* something – in which case turn the scenario on its head and see if you can think what their response is.

End with reflecting on the question: *‘What are the 3 vital things I need to do when I talk about my faith?’* This can be a group or individual answer. As a group, submit your preliminary work, one copy of the dialogue with the friendly atheist and this question. Your tutor will verify that everyone engaged in the group work.

Section B: Essay assignments

1. How would you respond to someone who asks 'What is your Church like?' What if someone were to ask you 'How would you *like* it to be?'
2. What is the 'good news' in our Church today? How can we make it better known?
3. If you needed to describe your experience of God to someone who had never heard of Him, would you use a story, a poem, or a picture? You may want to refer to specific examples which have helped you to draw closer to God (include a copy if you can). What is it about that format which enables God to speak through it?
4. Imagine a conversation between Charles Darwin and Jesus. How do you think it might go?

Section C: Analysis assignments

1. Turning to p. 4 read the Executive Summary and statistics from the Tear Fund's report on 'Churchgoing in the UK', carried out in 2007. It is widely regarded as one of the best sources of reliable statistics available. When you have read the material,

- What does it tell you about the Church today?
- What is the evidence we should be worried about?
- What is the evidence which should give us hope?
- What are the implications for your local Church?

2. Read the case study regarding genetic engineering on p. 6 .

- What are the ethical issues which you feel emerge from them?
- Can you think of Bible passages or Christian beliefs which could help us to establish the 'Christian' voice in these debates?
- 'Scientists need to be careful to remember that just because something is possible, it is not always desirable'. Do you agree? Where would you draw the line?

3. Look at the 3 accounts of the Last Supper on p.8 .

- What elements do all the Gospels have in common?
- Where are the major differences?
- Do the differences affect the picture of Jesus which comes through?
- Do you have a 'favourite' Gospel? Can you put into words why it is the one you return to time and time again?

Source material for Section C, question 1: The Tear Fund report on Churchgoing

Executive summary

This new report provides an authoritative insight into churchgoing in the UK. It is based on a representative poll of 7,000 adults. It highlights potential new audiences for churches and how Christianity is still a spiritual driving force for over half the population. It has been commissioned by Christian relief and development agency Tearfund, which for the past 40 years has been supported by local churches across the UK to help churches in the poorest communities of the world tackle poverty and injustice.

1. More than half the UK is Christian

Christianity is still the predominant faith in the UK with over half (53%) or 26.2 million adults claiming to be Christian; while other faiths account for 6%. So, three out of five people in the population are affiliated with faith and the remainder claim to have no religion (39%).

(Section 2.1)

2. 7.6 million attend church monthly (including 4.9 million weekly)

Given the competing demands for time it is reasonable to equate monthly attendance with a commitment to regular churchgoing. 7.6 million UK adults (15%) attend at least monthly. The majority of these, 4.9 million (10% of UK adults) attend at least weekly. Adding in fringe and occasional churchgoers (5 million) means that one in four UK adults

(26%) or 12.6 million attend church at least once a year. *(Section 2.2, 3.1)*



3. Nearly 3 million likely to go in future

There is a clear opportunity for churches to attract new members by tapping into the 2.9 million people (6% of UK adults) who are likely to go to church in future. The personal touch is a major trigger. A personal invite, family or a friend attending or difficult personal circumstances, are most likely to encourage people into church. *(Section 2.2, 4.3)*

4. Two thirds are out of touch with church

Two thirds of UK adults (66%) or 32.2 million people have no connection with church at present (nor with another religion). These people are evenly divided between those who have been in the past but have since left (16 million) and those who have never been in their lives (16.2 million). This secular majority presents a major challenge to churches. Most of them - 29.3 million - are unreceptive and closed to attending church; churchgoing is simply not on their agenda. *(Section 2.2)*

5. Nearly 1 million adults attend ethnic majority churches

This is composed of 9% black majority, 1% Asian majority and 2% Chinese or other ethnic majority. The largest denomination groupings among ethnic majority churches overall are Pentecostal (23%), Roman Catholic (23%) and Church of England/Anglican (19%). Regular churchgoing is particularly high among adults of black ethnic origin at 48% - over three times the proportion among white adults (15%). *(Sections 2.3, 3.4)*

6. 22% of London goes to church

Despite being a multi-cultural city with more people of other faiths (20%) than anywhere else in the UK, Greater London also has one of the highest numbers of regular churchgoers (22%), second only to Northern Ireland. *(Section 2.3)*

7. 45% go to church in Northern Ireland

There are significantly more regular churchgoers than average in Northern Ireland (the highest at 45%). Scotland has slightly above average regular churchgoers (18%), followed by England (14%) and Wales marginally below average (12%). In Scotland and Wales those with a tradition of churchgoing at some point in their life outweigh those with no experience of church at all, whilst the reverse is true in England. *(Section 2.3)*

8. The devoted core

The following are all more likely than average to be regular churchgoers:

- Women (19% attend at least monthly)
- Social group ABs (21%) (professionals, senior and middle management)
- Over 55 year olds (22%)
- Those of black ethnic origin (48%)

Key

- **Regular churchgoers:** 15% of UK adults go to church at least once a month. This is equivalent to 7.6 million regular churchgoers in the UK.
- **Fringe churchgoers:** 3% of UK adults go to church less than monthly but at least six times a year. This is equivalent to 1.6 million fringe churchgoers in the UK.
- **Occasional churchgoers:** 7% of UK adults go to church less than six times a year but at least once a year. This is equivalent to 3.4 million occasional churchgoers in the UK.
- **Open de-churched** 5% of UK adults do not go to church but they used to attend in the past and are very or fairly likely to go to church in future. This is equivalent to 2.3 million adults in the UK who are open de-churched.
- **Closed de-churched** 28% of UK adults do not go to church, used to attend in the past but say they are not very or not at all likely to go to church in future. This is equivalent to 13.7 million adults in the UK who are closed de-churched.
- **Open non-churched** 1% of UK adults have never been to church in their life, apart from weddings, baptisms or funerals yet say they are very or fairly likely to go to church in future. This is equivalent to 0.6 million adults in the UK who are open non-churched.
- **Closed non-churched** 32% of UK adults have never been to church in their life, apart from weddings, baptisms or funerals and are not very or not at all likely to go to church in future. This is equivalent to 15.6 million adults in the UK who are open closed non-churched.
- **Other religions** 6% of UK adults, equivalent to 3.2 million people, belong to religions other than Christianity.
- **Unassigned** Only 162 respondents (2%) were “unassigned” because they did not answer the question on prior church attendance, although none of these had been to church in the last 12 months. A third of them attended church less than once a year or never, whilst two thirds declined to state their frequency of attendance.

Source material for Section C, assignment 2: The Telegraph, 26.12.2010

It is perhaps the most priceless present a child can give his sibling: the precious gift of life. This Christmas Max Matthews, little more than 17 months old, has done just that for his big sister Megan, who is nine. Toddler Max has become the first "saviour sibling" to be created in this country specifically to provide his sister, who has a rare blood disorder and was not expected to live beyond seven, with a life saving tissue transplant. Six months ago, just as Megan's brave battle to survive seemed all but at an end, stem cells harvested from Max's umbilical cord when he was born, along with his bone marrow, were transplanted into his sister at Bristol Royal Hospital for Sick Children. And now doctors have told the little girl that she can come off the medication she has taken since birth and that her recovery seems assured.



For the Matthews family from King's Lynn in Norfolk treatment, a medical first in this country, has been a roller coaster of emotion. "Nothing can describe how happy our family is this Christmas," Katie, 33, the children's mother says. "It's the first year that we here able to look forward to Christmas and enjoy it without worrying whether Megan will be well or not."

No one can fail to be moved by the joy of the Matthews family. But for one other British family, who fought a long and arduous legal battle that paved the way for their medical miracle the heart-warming story must surely be tinged with bittersweet yearning for what might have been.

Seven years ago Shahana Hashmi, then 39, stood in the High Court clutching a photograph of her son and made the most passionate and important plea a mother: for the legal right to save the life of her child. Her son Zain, then four, suffers from a rare and terminal blood disorder. He endures painful and invasive treatments daily but his only long term hope of survival is a bone marrow transplant or an infusion of stem cells from the umbilical cord of a baby who is genetically similar.

In 2001 the couple, from Leeds, won consent from the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) to create a baby, using In Vitro Fertilisation, that would become Zain's "saviour sibling." In essence, they were given the green light to create several embryos which would be tested, using a process called Pre-Implantation Genetic Diagnosis to ensure they did not have the same disease, and when doctors isolated one that was healthy, have it implanted in Mrs Hashmi's womb - thus creating a child with matching tissue type that could save Zain.

But after just two unsuccessful attempts the pro-life campaign group Comment on Reproductive Ethics (CORE) brought a successful court action claiming the HFEA has acted out with it remit and questioning the medical ethics involved in creating a child specifically to save its sibling's life. Thus the Hashmis were legally denied any further opportunity to use the highly controversial treatment, the ethics of which became a political hot potato.

When Mrs Hashmi made her poignant court plea in 2003, she told the three Appeal Judges: "We have heard a lot about the ethical, moral and legal wrangles here. But Zain is a little boy who suffers desperately day in and day out and we have to watch him suffer. We would please like you to consider that our son will die a terrible, painful death if we are not given permission to save him."

After a welter of ethical debate, 18 months later Mrs Hashmi was granted permission. But the years lost while the legal battle had slowly ground its way through the system have taken a devastating

toll. By then into her forties her egg production was much decreased, as was the eggs' quality. After five attempts which ended in miscarriage she has been finally forced to accept that, in reproductive terms, she is now too old to have the child that would save Zain's life.

"Our life revolves around hospital trips, gruelling treatment after treatment, and the pain and suffering of a precious little boy who doesn't understand why we are doing this to him," Mrs Hashmi said shortly after deciding she had no choice but to abandon treatment. "Our intention was never to create a designer child. It was to create a much loved child who could help his brother."

For Dr Simon Fishel, from the CARE clinic where both Mrs Hashmi and Mrs Matthews were treated the delight that for the first time the procedure has been carried out completely in this country has been tempered by the fact that for all too many of his patients time has run out.

"Naturally I am overjoyed that there has been a happy outcome for the Matthews family," he says. "But I am deeply saddened and disappointed that it has taken so long, because of the legal challenges, to be able to deliver this treatment to British couples. For women like Mrs Hashmi, who had a tough court battle, time simply ran out and that is the real tragedy. The triumph, however, is that the door is open now to have all the treatment carried out in Britain. In my opinion there is simply no ethical case to answer. This treatment is now approved and seen as ethically positive medicine."

But while the Matthews joy has been widely welcomed this week the lobby group CORE who launched the first legal challenges nine years ago is still seeking to have the ruling overturned. Its spokeswoman Josephine Quintavalle firmly believes that the creation of child to save the life of another is morally wrong.

"Naturally I am happy for the Matthews family in that their daughter's life has been saved," she concedes, "but I cannot help but deplore the manner in which it has been done. A child should be wanted for itself alone. To create one whose sole raison d'être is to medically save its sibling is against nature. "I appreciate that the Matthews did undergo a world wide search for a tissue match before resorting to this treatment but the fact is that if umbilical cord blood banks were established there would not be the need for this procedure. Unlike with blood transfusions where an exact match is necessary, with tissue there is some leeway."

She has, however, other concerns. When bone marrow is harvested from the saviour sibling (usually at the age of one) the child must undergo an extremely invasive procedure. "There can be no element of seeking permission from the child," she says. "And what if more treatments are needed in future? When the child grows older, turns 18 for example, does he or she have the right to refuse to help? And what psychological effect would that have on the child and, indeed, on the sibling?"

For the Matthews family there has been no such moral debate. "There is no question that we have done the right thing," says Mrs Matthews. "Max both completed our family and gave his sister the chance of a normal life. It has triggered a really special bond between them. They are always together and it is really lovely to see.

"We had always wanted at least three children and the only reason we didn't have another baby after Megan was because there was a one in four chance that we could pass on the disease again as, although we didn't know until Megan was diagnosed, both me and my husband Andy are carriers. This Christmas we have been given a very special gift. I doubt there is mother in the world who would not have done what we did. We feel we are blessed."

The Last Supper in Mark 14	The Last Supper in Luke	The Last Supper in John 13
<p>17 When it was evening, he came with the twelve. ¹⁸And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.' ¹⁹They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, 'Surely, not I?' ²⁰He said to them, 'It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. ²¹For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.'</p> <p>22 While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.' ²³Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. ²⁴He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. ²⁵Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.'</p> <p>26 When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. ²⁷And Jesus said to them, 'You will all become deserters; for it is written, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered." ²⁸But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.'</p>	<p>14 When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵He said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; ¹⁶for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' ¹⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, 'Take this and divide it among yourselves; ¹⁸for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.' ¹⁹Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' ²⁰And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. ²¹But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. ²²For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!' ²³Then they began to ask one another which one of them it could be who would do this.</p> <p>24 A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. ²⁵But he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. ²⁶But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. ²⁷For who is greater, the one who is at the</p>	<p>Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' ⁷Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' ⁸Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' ⁹Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' ¹⁰Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' ¹¹For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'</p> <p>12 After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell</p>

²⁹Peter said to him, 'Even though all become deserters, I will not.'³⁰Jesus said to him, 'Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.'³¹But he said vehemently, 'Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.' And all of them said the same.

table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

²⁸'You are those who have stood by me in my trials;²⁹ and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom,³⁰ so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

³¹'Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat,³² but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.'³³And he said to him, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!'³⁴Jesus said, 'I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me.'

you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.

¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.¹⁸I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfil the scripture, "The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me."¹⁹I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he.²⁰Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.'

²¹After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, 'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.'²²The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking.²³One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him;²⁴ Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking.²⁵So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, 'Lord, who is it?'²⁶Jesus answered, 'It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.' So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot.²⁷After he received the piece of bread, Satan entered into him.

*Analysing atheism:
unbelief and the world of faiths*

In the year 156 of the Christian era, Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, was arrested and brought before the magistrate, charged with being a Christian. He was in his eighties, and his age and frailty prompted the magistrate to offer him a quick discharge if he would acknowledge the divine spirit of the emperor and say 'Away with the atheists.' The latter, at least, you might think would not be difficult for a bishop; but of course at this period an atheist was someone who refused to take part in the civic cult of the empire, to perform public religious duties and take part in the festivals of the Roman city. Christians were atheists, by this definition; Polycarp had a problem after all. His response, though, was an elegant turning of the tables. He looked around slowly at the screaming mob in the amphitheatre who had gathered for the gladiatorial fights and public executions, and, says our eyewitness chronicler, he groaned and said, 'Away with the atheists.'

The magistrate did not fail to grasp the theological point, and Polycarp was duly condemned to be burned alive. But this poignant story is one well worth pondering for reasons beyond the study of early Christianity. It is a reminder that 'atheism' may be a less simple idea than either its defenders or its attackers assume. People often talk as though 'atheism' were a self-contained system, a view of the world which gained its coherence from a central conviction – that there is no transcendent creative power independent of the universe we experience. But the story of Polycarp reminds us that to understand what atheism means, we need to know which gods are being rejected and why.

Thus an early Christian was an atheist because he or she refused to be part of a complex system in which political and religious loyalties were inseparably bound up. 'Atheism' was a decision to place certain loyalties above those owed to the sacralized power of the state. But, moving across the world of faiths, Buddhists are sometimes described as atheists by puzzled observers, aware of the fact that

Buddhist philosophy has no place for a divine agent and that Buddhist practice concentrates exclusively upon the mind purifying itself from self-absorption and craving; here, 'atheism' is a strategy to discipline the mind's temptation to distraction by speculative thought. Whether or not there is a transcendent creator is irrelevant to the mind's work; preoccupation with this is a self-indulgent diversion at best, and at worst a search for some agency that can do the work only we can do.

Neither of these has much in common with the atheism characteristic of Western modernity, which draws much of its energy from moral protest. The God of Jewish and Christian faith is seen as an agent who has the power to prevent the world's evil yet refuses to do so, so that there is the appearance of a moral incoherence at the heart of this tradition. Or he is seen as an arbitrary tyrant whose will is inimical to the liberty of human creatures; or else as an impotent and remote reality, a concept given a sort of ghostly existence by human imagination. In all these instances, it is clear that the refusal of belief in God is something essential to human liberation. We cannot live with a God who is responsible for evil; we cannot grow up as human beings if what is demanded of us is blind obedience; we cannot mortgage our lives and our loving commitment to an animated abstraction. Atheism here is necessary to maturity, individually and culturally.

Even those who argue at length about the simply conceptual inadequacies, as they see it, of Western religion, classically, writers in the Bertrand Russell style, will frequently deploy the language of moral revolt as well. 'Protest atheism', as it is often called, has become a familiar element in the armoury of modern intellectual life, perhaps more often repeated than expounded, but culturally very powerful. The more austere objection to belief found in the positivism of the early to mid-twentieth century (that it is equally without meaning to affirm or to deny the existence of an agency whose existence could never be empirically demonstrated) has an ironic resonance with Buddhism, but is another component in the mind of Western modernity, even when the philosophical system from which it arises no longer has much credibility. This is atheism as the mark of supreme intellectual detachment, with the intellect defined as a mechanism for processing checkable information only, with everything else reduced to emotive noise. But the other great modern version of atheism is that which exposes religious talk as ideological – as an instrument of social control whose surface conceptual structure is designed to obscure its real function and to divert thought, emotion and energy from real to unreal objects. This is the essence of Marxist atheism, but it also has some relation to Nietzsche's unforgettably eloquent polemic against Christian faith.

The point is that atheism is to be defined as *a* system only by some dramatic intellectual contortions. A number of intellectual and spiritual policies involve or at least accompany the denial of certain versions of the divine, especially the divine as an active and intelligent subject; but in each case the denial is not intelligible apart from a specific context of thought and image, representation and misrepresentation of specific religious doctrines, and the overall system of which the denial is a part is not necessarily shaped by it. This is why the recent proposal in the UK that religious education in schools should give attention to 'atheism and humanism' as 'non-faith belief systems' alongside the traditional religions was based on some serious conceptual confusions and category mistakes. In the background is the pervasive assumption of modernity that the intellectual default position is non-religious; but what this fails to see is that non-religiousness is historically and culturally a complex of refusals directed at specific religious doctrines, rather than a pure and primitive vision invaded by religious fictions. And if this is so, either religious education has to locate non-religious positions in relation to what it is that they deny, or it will end up treating atheism as the only position not subject to critical scrutiny and the construction of a proper intellectual genealogy: not a welcome position for a rationalist to be in.

In fact, the incorporation of critical positions into religious education is to be applauded. To see where the points of strain are to be found in a religious discourse, and to seek to understand how a thoughtful and self-critical tradition can respond to them, is essential to a proper grasp of religious identities. One of the weaknesses of the kind of religious education now common in schools (in the UK at least) is that it tends to describe the positions of faith communities as finished systems for which questions have been answered rather than (to borrow Alastair MacIntyre's phrase) 'continuities of conflict', in which the moral, spiritual and intellectual tensions constantly press believers towards a fuller, more comprehensive statement of their commitments.