Questions posed by Wellington Students for the Chaplain.

1. Is it wrong to not believe in God?

I don’t see this as a moral issue. For us, religious belief is a matter of intellectual and experiential opinion. There have been times in history when religious belief has been a political matter, when a person must show solidarity with the state, and to fail to do so has been punishable by death. E.g. Reformation England.

1. Why would you pick Christianity over any other religion?

What religion you are very often depends on cultural background: be born in India, you’d likely be Hindu; in the Arab States or Pakistan, likely Muslim; in Europe or America, likely Christian, in Thailand, likely a Buddhist. This school has a massive Anglican Chapel because of its cultural heritage – the religion of its founders.

Why do I choose Christianity? I was brought up that way. But also Christianity helps to make sense of life – I have an intuitive sense that there is an ultimate reality and Good – which we call God.

I wrote a best-selling book called ‘Christian Atheist’ which explores why some people who struggle with the metaphysical claims of Christianity – what in chapel I have called ‘impossible things’ – still are attracted to Christianity because of its Moral Compass, its promotion of Community and community values, and the art and music Christianity has generated, which they find a helpful aid to thinking about what’s important in life. Choral Evensong, funnily enough, comes high on that list.

1. 100 years ago, homosexuality was criticised by the Church. Now that LGBTQ+ is socially acceptable, it seems that God’s view on homosexuality has changed. How?

Well, many in church still criticise homosexuality, especially conservative evangelical churches!

I would say, it is we who actually decide on what is morally acceptable – hopefully in the light of faith.

I think the New Testament story of Jesus suggests there are overriding moral imperatives: love, faithfulness , and rather than setting out a whole list of rules and regulations about how to behave, these big moral ideas are about how to behave in relationships, which is much more important than what relationships you should have. Compassionate Christianity now recognises that being human can involve very different sexual feelings and very different attitudes to gender identity, which must be honoured and respected.

Many theologians and philosophers claim that God is ‘immutable’ i.e. being perfect cannot change. God doesn’t change God’s mind: we adapt our ethics in the light of our understanding of God’s purpose.

1. The next four questions all boil down to what we call the ‘Problem of evil’.

If God is all-forgiving why is there a hell?

If God is omnipotent, why is there pain and suffering?

If God created the world, why does evil exist?

Is all the chaos and disaster in the world a sign of God’s absence?

(Yes, many argue that it is, and constitutes a compelling argument against the existence of God)

Problem of Evil.

If God is all powerful and all loving, then why does God allow evil?

What we imagine as a perfect world would be very different from what we know. No disease, no thought of moral right and wrong because everything and everyone would act perfectly.

If you played golf you’d always get round in 18. What would be perfect weather? Constant sunshine – too dry. Rain, too wet. What temperature for the crops etc.

That last question poses the dilemma: we need seasons for food. We need ice caps N and S for balance of water on planet. We need tides to help clean the oceans. We need the moon to keep the earth stable in its orbit. Life is a balancing act. And physical life is dangerous. It involves vast forces and we are vulnerable creatures – we see that at the moment with the COVID19 crisis.

Maybe this life we experience is the best that is possible

Maybe God must within the constraints of physics.

We want simple answers. Scientists and philosophers want answers, but often have to live with paradox – mystery, blurred lines – few things are black and white.

Literature recognises this. James Joyce’s Ulysses, for example, is partly about paradox, conflicting and confusing experience and the sheer inconsistency of experience. There are many ways of truth-telling: scientific, legal, poetic, literary, philosophical, religious etc.

Most of this discussion begs the question: What is God anyway? Male or female? Like a human – an old man in the sky with a grey beard? Love? Pure Goodness? Out there? The ground of our being. The verb to be? Being itself?

Final point: Free will defence against the Problem of evil. God has given us free will so that we choose; so that we are moral beings; so that we can realise the values of love, peace, honesty, compassion, generosity of spirit. Noble qualities that greatly enhance human life. In a perfect world these values would not be necessary.

But there’s a weakness to this attractive argument: does God give us free will to murder, rape and torture? That would surely be immoral of God. Perhaps free will only works when we are choosing between lesser evils.

Also, there is the problem of natural ‘evils’: volcanoes, tsunamis, plagues, earthquakes etc. In the insurance business, natural disasters are sometimes unfairly referred to as ‘acts of God’.

1. Thank you for your questions.