

Equality

This section of the specification requires students to explore ethical and religious concepts of equality, focusing on issues such as gender, race, or disability. They need to examine the contributions of a significant figure in campaigns for equality in their chosen area, identify key events that have advanced equality, and analyse perspectives on equality from at least one religion and one secular ethical viewpoint.



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Introduction

Equality is a significant concept that forms a key part of debates around gender, race and disability. There are different understandings of what is meant by the concept of equality and what practical implications may be raised by how the concept is defined. Both religious and non-religious thinkers differ in their approach to the concept. The area of disability is often not explored as regularly as gender or race but is no less important. There are different understandings of disability including medical and social theories and these affect discussions of how to respond to disability. In religious thought, traditional views of disability have recently been challenged through new theological ideas such as those of Eiesland, and through the work of campaigners such as Joni Eareckson Tada.

Topics	What students need to learn	
1 Significant concepts in issues or debates in religion and ethics	1.2	Equality a) Ethical and religious concepts of equality, including the issues of gender or race or disability and the work of one significant figure in campaigns for equality in the chosen area, significant events in the progress of equality in these areas, perspectives on equality from at least one religion and one secular ethical perspective. With reference to the ideas of Martin Luther King and Joni Eareckson Tada.

Two ideas of equality

One view of equality is that equality should be understood as being treated identically. This would involve identity in terms of rights, regardless of race, gender or disability. This in turn requires equality in terms of the law, the law should not be applied differently to different people. There would also be equal participation in society – so someone would not be denied their right to vote based on their race, gender or disability. This idea of equality is found in the Bible in passages such as Genesis 1:27 which suggests that all human beings regardless of gender are made in the image of God. Similarly in the New Testament, in Galatians 3:28 Paul states there is neither Jew nor Greek, male or female, slave or free, but all are regarded equally in Christ.

Other thinkers do not think the above view of equality goes far enough. Society is not equal and if we merely treat everyone exactly the same then we will continue to build in disadvantage for some groups including those with disabilities. This leads to the idea that equality needs to be about equality of opportunity. This is famously defended by the Philosopher John Rawls (1921-2002) in his book 'A Theory of Justice'. In order to help us see what equality of opportunity might look like, Rawls offers a thought experiment where he invites us to imagine that before we are all born, we are behind a 'veil of ignorance' we don't know what the circumstances of our life will involve: not knowing whether we will be black or white, male or female, able bodied or having a disability, in wealth or in extreme poverty. If this were the case, Rawls argues that we would want universal basic human rights (similar to the identity view of equality), but we would also want a system that works to address disadvantage. This would involve those who are wealthy and privileged paying more to enable those who are struggling to have a better chance e.g. scholarship programmes to help under-represented groups to get to good universities.

Those supporting the definition of equality of opportunity note that Jesus is presented, particularly in Luke's gospel, as being on the side of the marginalised and oppressed. His interactions with women, his positive presentation of the Samaritans and his statement that 'the first will be last and the last will be first' all show that Jesus is aiming to reverse disadvantage. In terms of disability, Jesus in John's gospel corrects that common belief of his day that suffering, or disability was a punishment for sin. In the healing of the man born blind (John 9) Jesus states that it is not the man's sin that has caused blindness.

Resource

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights is a document worth looking at in terms of considering the extent to which different groups actually possess the rights listed. John Rawls 'A theory of Justice' is a long work. A good summary is found in the Stanford University dictionary of Philosophy entry for Rawls. Section 4 on Justice is particularly helpful <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rawls/>



Understanding models of disability

One way of understanding what is meant by 'disability' is the medical model. This views a disability as something that is a deviation from normal human functioning and thus is a harmful condition. This carries with it two implicit ideas – that it is better to be 'able bodied' than to have a disability, and that disability is something where possible to be cured or prevented. This view raises a number of ethical concerns: It is possible to cure deafness in some cases by providing a cochlea implant but not all members of the deaf community welcome the implication that they 'should' have this treatment. It is possible to screen foetuses in pregnancy for conditions such as downs syndrome and parents may then elect to have a termination, why is this seen as normal whereas rejecting a potential child on the colour of their eyes would not be? Disability rights campaigners also worry about potential changes around the laws on assisted dying, they cite the disproportionate use of DNRs on those with learning disabilities during the Covid pandemic as evidence that relaxing the laws on euthanasia may cause significant harm to those with disabilities

A second model for understanding disability is the social model of disability which was primarily developed by people with disabilities. Whilst recognising that a disability is a difference, this model rejects the idea that this is a medical problem to be fixed. The differences only become 'problems' or cause disabled persons to live worse lives because of how society is arranged. Use of a wheelchair is only problematic if organisations don't provide wheelchair access. Similarly, deafness becomes problematic if there is no sign language interpreter, or a speaker turns away when speaking and cannot be lip-read. In this model the issues are not a deficiency in the person with the disability but a deficiency in society's ability and willingness to accommodate.

Resource

'Ethics and the Contemporary World' edited by David Edmonds contains an excellent chapter by Guy Kahane exploring the two models of disability given above



Theology and Disability

Traditional Christianity has at times drawn on the medical model of disability. In the Old Testament there are regulations that prevent some people with disabilities from serving in the temple of God. Whilst Christians might argue that these regulations are replaced by the new covenant brought in by Jesus, Jesus' interactions with those with sicknesses and disabilities primarily involves healing and removing of the disability. Some modern Christians, particularly in the more evangelical tradition, will hold healing services where the sick including those with disabilities are prayed for to be healed.

1.2 Equality

For those where healing does not occur, this can lead to feelings of inadequacy and incompleteness compared to able-bodied Christians

One challenge to this view has come from Barbara Eiesland's 1994 book 'The Disabled God'. Eiesland, who herself has a disability, makes reference to the resurrection stories where the disciples meet the risen Jesus and touch his wounds. She argues that the resurrected Jesus is himself disabled and wounded. He has taken on the identity of a disabled person; he is able to be in solidarity, standing with those who are disabled. He is not outside disability trying to heal it but shares in the experience of disability. Disability is not a barrier to being in the image of God. Eiesland's work in this sense uses the social model of disability. It draws on the insights of liberation theology: just as Jesus identifies with the poor and commands his people to address the injustice of poverty, so too Jesus identifies as disabled and invites his followers to change their attitudes to disability

Resource



The research report 'Who is the God We Worship? Theologies of Disability; Challenges and New Possibilities' by John Swinton is widely available online and contains summaries of various Christian perspectives on disability including the views of Barbara Eiesland.

Joni Eareckson Tada

One of the most famous Christian speakers and writers on disability is Joni Eareckson Tada (1949-). Joni was severely injured in a diving accident aged 17 becoming paralysed. After initially struggling to come to terms with her disabilities, she has gone on to inspire others through her artwork, her writing and her radio broadcasts. She has set up 'Joni and Friends ministries' which aims to reflect the work of Jesus in Luke 14 where he states that he has come primarily for 'the poor, the crippled and the lame'. The organisation works to provide wheelchairs for poorer countries where they might be in short supply. She has also been involved in training for churches to ensure that they are better able to meet the needs of disabled people within the church and the local communities. Prior to her accident, Joni had prayed to God to change her life. Although not necessarily blaming God for what happened, she sees her life since the accident as an answer to that prayer.

Summary of key ideas



- Everyone agrees that equality is a good thing but there is disagreement about what this means
- Some thinkers understand equality as treating all people the same whereas others such as John Rawls believe that true equality requires a commitment to equality of opportunity
- There are different understandings of disability: the medical model focuses on the difference as a limitation to be fixed whereas a social model sees disability as raising issues that are caused by society not the disability itself
- Some Christians may view disability as something that should be healed or cured either now through prayer and the miraculous, or in the next life in heaven
- Other Christians such as Barbara Eiesland emphasise the role of Jesus in identifying with persons with disabilities.
- The life and writing of Joni Eareckson Tada are seen as inspirational for many Christians as an example of coping with suffering and also prompting them to work harder to meet the needs of the disabled

Discussion Questions

- 1. What limitations are there with the view that equality should be understood as treating everyone the same?
- 2. How might John Rawls' ideas be used in the area of disability? How might disadvantages that some disabled persons face be reversed?
- 3. How does the medical model of disability differ from the social model of disability?
- 4. How might Christians use the medical model of disability? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this model?
- 5. What does Eiesland mean when she says that Jesus is disabled? How might this affect how a Christian views disabled persons?
- 6. What lessons might a Christian take from the life and work of Joni Eareckson Tada?

Equality and Disability – Possible Biblical References



There are no prescribed texts for this aspect of the specification, but the following passages are alluded to in this resources and/or may be useful for discussion:

- Humans created in the image of God, Genesis 1:26-31
- Rules on serving at the altar Leviticus 21:16-23
- The Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37
- The Great Feast, Luke 14: 15-24
- The healing of a man born blind, John 9
- All one in Christ, Galatians 3:26-29

Useful introductions to Equality and Disability



The following resources relate to the ideas mentioned in the specification and/or this resource:

- <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rawls/> contains a useful summary of the ideas of John Rawls
- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-56435428> article on the use of DNRs and the disabled during Covid 19.
- Swinton, J. 'Who is the God we worship? Theologies of disability: challenges and new possibilities' (widely available online)
- <https://joniandfriends.org/> is the website of Joni Eareckson Tada's organisation

Wider Reading



Wider reading on the topic of Equality can be found in a number of sources including those below:

- Eareckson Tada, J 'Joni: an unforgettable story Zondervan 1976
- Eiesland, B 'The Disabled God' Abingdon Press 1994
- Kahane, G 'Disability' ch 18 of Edmonds, D 'Ethics in the Contemporary World.' Routledge 2019
- Rawls, J 'A theory of Justice' Harvard 1971