Religion and Utilitarianism

1. **What** is the relationship between religion and utilitarianism?

The relationship between religion and utilitarianism is characterised by tension. Religion can be broadly defined as an organised system of beliefs, teachings, and practices regarding human beings and their relationship with the divine or sacred. On the other hand, utilitarianism is a teleological ethical theory, which promotes actions that produce the most good for those affected by them. Typically, religious beliefs are derived from sources of authority like sacred texts (e.g. the Bible); when the commands delivered by these sources of authority do not produce good for those affected by them, most utilitarians strenuously resist religious teachings.

Candles: a symbol for hope, life, and revelation used in numerous religions.

However, the relationship between religion and utilitarianism was not always so confrontational. In the United Kingdom, several Christian priests and theologians arose with proto-utilitarian ideas during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They were all born before Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) first formulated utilitarianism in An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation. Still, their ideas are all distinctly utilitarian and likely influenced the early development of classical utilitarianism. Nevertheless, during the intervening decades, most Christians have rejected utilitarianism instead of embracing it. The principle of utility can be used to justify abortion, euthanasia, and even murder in certain cases, all of which are actions the Church refuses to accept as ethical under almost any circumstances.

2. **How** does the relationship between religion and utilitarianism work?

Historically, the relationship between religion and utilitarianism, or at least between Christianity and utilitarian ideas, was considerably closer than it is today. Senior priests in the Church of England appear to have endorsed something approximating the principle of utility. Several theologians generally agreed that God created human beings with the capacity to experience pain and pleasure as a natural guide towards good. Similarly, some prominent members of the Church of Scotland also advocated a form of proto-utilitarianism along such lines. Together, these priests and preachers assumed the good and the pleasurable significantly overlapped.

Richard Cumberland (1632-1718): Richard Cumberland was a famous Christian philosopher who was appointed as Bishop of Peterborough in 1691. He claimed that "The happiness of each individual… is derived from the best state of the whole system, as the nourishment of each member of an animal depends upon the nourishment of the whole mass of blood diffused through the whole." His thoughts betray some of the hallmarks of utilitarianism; principally, he believed that actions that are good for society are good for the individual. Consequently, his writings suggest that people should act in the best interests of their communities, whatever they may be.

William Paley (1743-1805): William Paley was the incredibly famous priest who devised the watchmaker analogy to support his argument for the existence of God from design. He claimed that "God, when he created the human species, wished their happiness; and made for them the provision which he has made, with that view, and for that purpose."

Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746): Francis Hutcheson was a presbyterian preacher and founding father of the Scottish Enlightenment. He may have been a direct influence on Jeremy Bentham with the words, "That action is best which procures the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers; and that worst, which, in like manner, occasions misery."

The Assembly Hall: the headquarters of the Church of Scotland.

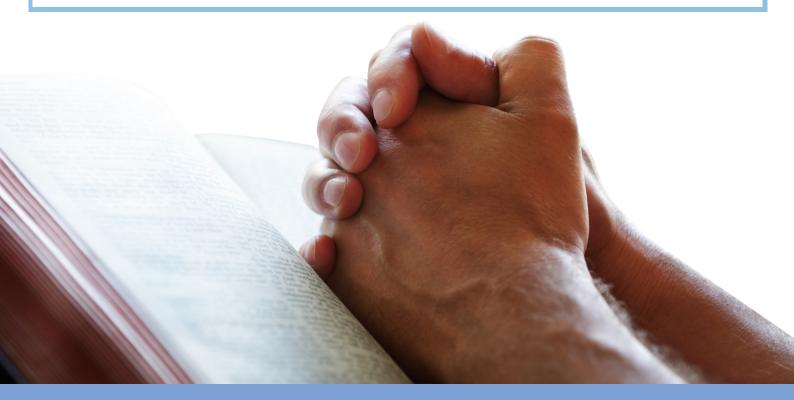3. **Why** is the relationship between religion and utilitarianism important?

There are several different reasons why the relationship between religion and utilitarianism is important. Arguably, the most significant is the effect this fractious interaction has on policy and legislation in the United Kingdom. Data from the 2011 census reveals that Christianity is the largest religious group in the country (with 33.2 million followers), and only a quarter of the population is non-religious (14.1 million people). The professed religiosity of British citizens may be a significant contributing factor to relatively strict abortion regulations and the continued prohibition of euthanasia. These medical procedures contravene Christian teachings about the sanctity of life; this tension may have affected the pace of legal change around these issues.

Beyond this, the relationship is important for three further reasons. First, it is changeable: Christian and utilitarian thinkers shared a considerable amount of common ground in the past. The challenging relationship of the present may give way to greater agreement in the future. Second, it is consequential: the nature of the relationship has a significant effect on society. Generally, Christians object to utilitarian ideas about animal rights, the environment, and genetic engineering (as well as abortion and euthanasia). Finally, it is contrary: presently, the relationship is marked by conflict on several issues, which creates something approaching a stand-off between religious believers and non-religious people (who often accept utilitarian principles).

George Thinks

The relationship between religion and utilitarianism is really complicated. We've focused entirely on Christianity here, so our discussion hasn't even scratched the surface of the full range of this complexity (even though both Islam and Judaism share similar positions). Nevertheless, what I hope emerges from our cursory consideration of the risky engagement between Christians and utilitarians is that it really matters. It's tempting to write off the importance of religious beliefs, given the fact that many organised religions are in steep decline, but this would be a mistake. In the United Kingdom, we have an official state religion that most of the population claims to follow; religious teachings really do temper the effect utilitarianism might otherwise have on society.

Nailing my colours to the mast here, I also think that religions should revisit their utilitarian (or proto-utilitarian) traditions. In Christianity, I'm deeply sceptical of the assertion that Jesus would condemn assisted suicide for the terminally ill (or "mercy killing", as it's sometimes called) if he walked the Earth today. To my mind, there are several ethical positions in the Christian tradition that radically depart from the teaching of Jesus (the Church support for war and punitive criminal justice systems are a couple of others). Revisiting the principle of utility and the works of Richard Cumberland, William Paley, and Francis Hutcheson may help Christians find the compassionate responses to these modern ethical dilemmas that I think Jesus would today.