

# Is God real?

Age range: 9-11

## Background knowledge for teachers

This unit explores a key question for RE, about the existence of God. It is set up in the form of an enquiry, and there is scope for you to extend this enquiry in other directions, as suits your context. As with many good RE enquiries, there is no agreed answer to this question! The use of a detective sets up a context for asking the questions, although the activities reveal that this question is not the kind of dispassionate, disinterested investigation that might be carried out about the puzzle of some ancient crime: the question about the existence of God has implications for the vast majority of human beings. You should not expect your pupils to come to a clear conclusion. Some may, of course, but be prepared for tentative conclusions and look for an understanding of the evidence.

## Essential/core Pupil Knowledge

Pupils should know that when Christians talk about God, they are not talking about a little old man on a cloud. Most Christians believe God is Spirit, omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), benevolent (all-good), eternal, compassionate, just, loving, creator and sustainer of the universe and all life. The Bible offers many names, metaphors and similes to convey something of the nature of God, but most Christians would say that God can be most fully known by looking at Jesus, God incarnate (in the flesh).

Pupils should also know that few Christians believe because of arguments. Most are Christians because of upbringing or because of their experience of the impact of their faith in their daily living. Many would say they have experienced the presence of God in one way or another through their lives, whether through worship, prayer, celebration, community, or nature, for example.

## Links across curriculum

- **enquiry skills**, including interpretation, evaluation, reflection and application
- **SMSC**, including developing awareness of their own and others' beliefs, increasing ability to reflect on the impact of faith in people's lives, and an increasing desire to explore their own and others' views
- **literacy**, including developing skills in non-fiction report writing, using evidence and argument.

## Assessment for learning: Can you...?

- Define the terms theist, atheist and agnostic and give examples of statements that reflect these beliefs (B1).
- Give two reasons why a Christian believes in God and one why an atheist does not (A3).
- Outline clearly a Christian understanding of what God is like, using examples and evidence (A2).
- Express thoughtful ideas about the impact of believing or not believing in God on someone's life (B1).
- Present different views on why people believe in God or not, including their own ideas (C1).
- Enquire into what some atheists, agnostics and theists say about God, expressing their own ideas and arguments, using evidence and examples (C1).

**NB: These outcomes are selected from Waltham Forest Agreed Syllabus 2021 Unit U2.1. These are not all of the outcomes for the unit.**

## Chapter 1

The envelope landed on my desk. 'It's for you,' said the boss. 'This case has been hanging around for a long time. Clear it up. I want a report on my desk in 7 days.'

I opened the envelope and drew out a single sheet of paper. Printed in big letters:

# Is God real?

A Big Question, I thought.

Sure, I thought; this is the job for an Expert Investigator. One who can ask all the right questions. Who can talk to all the right people. One who will sift the evidence and come to a balanced answer. To the Truth. One who can be trusted to tell it how it is. In short, an Expert Investigator like me.

I made a list. Start at the beginning, I said to myself.

Who are these people who believe in God and why do they believe? If everyone believes God is real, perhaps we can get to the answer fast.

### Activity 1:

- Find out who believes that God is real and why  
Look at the census data for Waltham Forest (see syllabus p.4). Find out how many people believe and don't believe in God in Waltham Forest and in England and Wales.
- Learn the words for people who believe there is a God or not: theist, agnostic and atheist.  
Ask pupils to think of some reasons why people do or don't believe that there is a God. Compare with the suggestions in Investigation File 1. Place these ideas on the continuum between theist and atheist.

### Notes:

Buddhists do not believe there is a God.  
Note also that not all religious believers agree about what 'God' is like; some say all religions are worshipping the same God, they just have different views of God; others say that there is one God but not all religions have the correct understanding.



# Investigation File 1

## Atheist

An atheist is someone who believes that there is no god.

## Agnostic

An agnostic is not sure whether or not there is a god; they may say that it is not possible to say if God exists or not, so they do not decide one way or the other.

## Theist

A theist is someone who believes that there is a God.



### Some reasons why someone might believe or not believe:

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| I was born into a Christian/Muslim/Jewish/Hindu/atheist etc family and I follow the traditions of my family.                                   | I think the universe is so amazing it could not have happened by accident – I think there must be a designer, God.  | I think there is no evidence for God – you cannot see God.  |
| I think that religions are created by human beings. There is no God beyond the universe who has communicated with humanity.                    | I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind.   | I have experienced God in my life, when I have prayed and worshipped. I know God's presence, guiding and helping me when times are tough. |
| I'd like to think there is a God. I think that there is more to life than just living and dying – we must have a bigger reason for being here. | I'm not sure. There doesn't seem to be certain proof, but I have friends who are convinced. And I can see good and bad sides to religion <i>and</i> to atheism. | I am inspired by the life of Abraham/Jesus/Muhammad. I follow him.  |
| There are so many different beliefs. It is too confusing. If there really is a God, it would be much more obvious!                             | I prefer to look to science for the answers to life. You can use science to check whether things are true or not. You cannot check our God in the same way.     | There is too much suffering in the world. There cannot be a god.  |

## Chapter 2

*Ok... so people don't agree... I'm going to have to keep investigating. I need to write down all the questions buzzing around my head...*

### Activity 2: What questions?

List all the questions that you think you will need to answer if you are going to solve the Big Question.

#### Investigation File 2: Questions, Questions

*Here are some of my questions. Which ones are the good ones? Which ones are a waste of my time and the boss's money?*

Who is this God?

What kind of God are we talking about here?

What God are we not talking about here?

Are there any witnesses for this God?

Can I trust them?

Where can I find these witnesses?

Why do some people say this God is real?

Are there witness against this God?

Why do some people think God isn't real?

What's God's shoe size?

Why doesn't God just zap the bad people?

How can God hear everyone when they pray?

*Hang on, I can't ask some of those questions **before** I've answered the Big Question. Hmm... This is going to be bigger than I thought, I thought.*

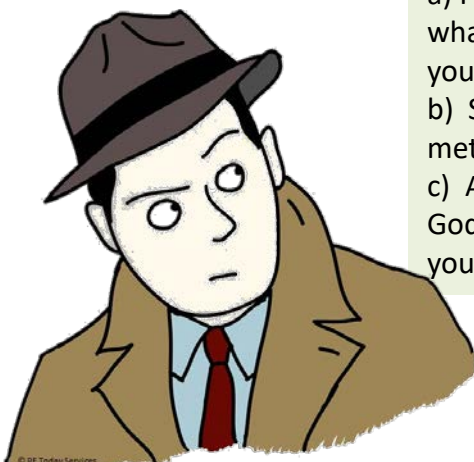
*Right - I've decided. I'm going to have to deal with the God of Christianity, that one's big enough. When I've solved that one, I'll have a look at God in Islam, Hinduism, or Sikhism. Unless they are all the same. Are they all the same?*

*Wait! One Big Question is enough for now!*

*So what is this God supposed to be like, this 'Lord God Almighty'? How can I find out?*

### Activity 3: What kind of God?

- Firstly, list the things you are going to need to do to find out what this God of Christianity is supposed to be like. Where will you go for your information?
- Secondly, use the Investigation File 3. What do each of these metaphors or similes tell you about Christian ideas of God?
- And thirdly, if you had to put together a 'Wanted' poster for God, you wouldn't be able to draw this character, so what would your description say? What is this God like?



### Investigation File 3: God's Big Book

I started with the 'book of God'. Some Christians say that God wrote the Bible. Others say that he inspired it. They agree that it talks about God a lot, describing what God is like and how he deals with people. Is this evidence that he is real? I guess so, but is it strong evidence?

There I go again, asking more questions! Let's stick with what kind of God the Bible describes.

Here are some of the names, similes and metaphors the Bible uses. A good place to start, I figured. What kind of God is the God of Christianity? Be careful, though! Are these similes or metaphors? Metaphors should not be taken literally!

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| <p><b>Father</b></p> <p>As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.</p> <p>Psalm 103:13</p>              | <p><b>Creator</b></p> <p>In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.</p> <p>Genesis 1:1</p>  | <p><b>Rock</b></p> <p>Praise the greatness of our God! He is the Rock, his works are perfect and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong; upright and just is he.</p> <p>Deuteronomy 32:3-4</p> |
| <p><b>Shepherd</b></p> <p>The Lord is my shepherd. He leads me... guides me...comforts me.</p> <p>Psalm 32</p>   | <p><b>Fortress</b></p> <p>The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer... my shield... He is my stronghold, my refuge and my saviour.</p> <p>2 Samuel 22:2-3</p> | <p><b>Light</b></p> <p>God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.</p> <p>1 John 1: 5</p>   |
| <p><b>Jesus</b></p> <p>Jesus is the image of the invisible God... In Jesus, all the fullness of God dwells in bodily form.</p> <p>Colossians 1:15; 2:9</p> | <p><b>Eagle</b></p> <p>He shielded them and cared for them, like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young...</p> <p>Deuteronomy 32: 10-11</p>        | <p><b>Spirit</b></p> <p>'God is spirit,' said Jesus.</p> <p>John 4:24</p>   |
| <p><b>Eternal</b></p> <p>To the King, eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory, for ever and ever. Amen.</p> <p>1 Timothy 1:17</p>  | <p><b>Potter</b></p> <p>O Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter. We are all the work of your hand.</p> <p>Isaiah 64:8</p>                     | <p><b>Everywhere</b></p> <p>'Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?' declares the Lord. 'Do not I fill heaven and earth?'</p> <p>Jeremiah 34:24</p>   |
| <p><b>Almighty</b></p> <p>With God, all things are possible.</p> <p>Matthew 19:26</p>  | <p><b>Holy</b></p> <p>Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.</p> <p>Isaiah 6:3</p>  | <p><b>Judge</b></p> <p>God has set a day when he will judge the earth with justice.</p> <p>Acts 17:31</p>   |

### Chapter 3

*So, I've got an idea of this God of Christianity but it's not very clear. I think I'll try and clear my thinking a bit, using the Negative Way. Remember that? Medieval thinkers like Moses Maimonides said that you can't talk positively about God, because God is beyond our ability to make sense of the idea. So we need to use the Negative Way, and say what God is not. I wonder if that will help...*



### Chapter 4

*Well, that kind of helped. I guess that this God cannot easily be pinned down by words.*

*But is God real? That's my question! I know the kind of God most Christians believe in, but does this God exist? I'm going to have to ask some folks. People with different ideas. And then weigh up the evidence.*

#### Activity 4: God is not...

a) Firstly, you might build this up by thinking about the wind first. In pairs, come up with as many ways of finishing this sentence starter as you can: **The wind is...** (e.g. strong, dangerous, cooling).

Now think about this and write some ideas: **The wind is not...** (e.g. in one place, in pieces, still).

b) Secondly, you've already heard some things that Christians think God is... so have a go at what Christians might say that God is not...

**God is not...** e.g. a man, in a cloud, evil, tall, pink, selfish, etc.

c) Thirdly, take all the ideas from your class. Write them on a large piece of card or on the whiteboard, leaving a large space in the middle. Do your descriptions about what God is **NOT** like help to make more sense of what Christians think God **IS** like? Why?

#### Activity 5: Witnesses

a) Firstly, as a class, talk about who you would like to have as witnesses in this investigation – witnesses for *and* against. Make a list of people from history and today. Who would be the best witnesses and why?

Are there any local people who would come in to your school to answer some questions?

b) Secondly, now you know a little more about belief in God, what questions would you ask them? In a pair, make a list of your interview questions. Share these with another pair and decide your best three questions. Then share these top questions with the class and decide your most important ten class questions.



#### **Investigation File 4:**

*I asked a load of folks, “Do you think that God is real?” Here are some of their responses. An interesting bunch. Not sure how reliable they all are, so you might need to find some of your own witnesses.*

I believe that God is real. I believe that the Bible describes what God is like, and that God came to earth in human form, in the person of Jesus. If I want to know what God is like, I look at Jesus. For me, the only sufficient explanation of the power of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection is that it is true. When I look at the amazing, beautiful creation, I see God’s work in it. I have also experienced God’s love and care in my life. I try to worship God through my words and actions.

*Chris*

I was brought up in a Roman Catholic family, so the idea of God has always been part of my life. When I was younger, I didn’t really question whether it was true, I just got on with living a Christian life. It seemed to make sense. Now I am sure that it is true. The Church gives me a pattern for my life, reminding me that I need to say sorry for bad things and to try to put them right. Taking care of people in need is an important part of being a Christian.

*Marie*

I was christened as a baby. My parents took me to our local Anglican church regularly and I used to enjoy it. As I got older I drifted away. I suppose I had an idea that science explained life and you don’t need God. But I can’t let go of the idea completely. I’d like God to be real. Even if God doesn’t exist I still pray every now and again. I think that there probably is more to life than just living and dying and that’s it.

*Shelley*

I came to know that God exists when I was 21. I had no religious beliefs. I knew about religion from my RE lessons but I wasn’t bothered at all. Other people could believe what they wanted. But then I was going through a tough time with my own illness and a good friend dying. I was really upset and desperate, I would say. So I called out to a God I didn’t believe in to help me – and I felt this amazing sense of love and power overwhelm me! It was incredible! I felt such peace! Since then I have found out more about the God of love at my local Pentecostal church. He changed my life.

*Sam*

I can’t believe that God is real – it doesn’t make sense! The universe happened by chance, we exist because of evolution. People believe in God because they want some protection in the universe – they are scared of dying and there being no life after death. Religion stops people from making the most of life. I think this life is amazing! I want to know as much as I can and live life to the full. I think that we should treat others as we would like to be treated. We don’t need a ‘God’ to tell us that.

*Phil*

I can only speak from my own experience and in the uncertainties of the world and in my own life I need something to hold on to. For me that rock is Jesus – and about everything else I try to keep an open mind. It is in the life and teaching of Jesus that I begin to see the spirit of Ultimate Truth in a human form. With that simple statement I may claim to be a Christian. As a Quaker I see life as a spiritual quest, part of an inward journey in which we open our hearts to God.

*Richard*

#### **Activity 6: Interrogation!**

- a) Firstly, imagine a line on your desk, going from “Yes, God is real” to “No, God is not real”. Take the six witness statements from Investigation File 4 and place them on the line where you think they fit. Compare them with Investigation File 1 – can you find any of the same reasons why people believe or don’t believe?
- b) Secondly, work in pairs and interrogate the witnesses. Ask your partner
  - I. what do each of these people think God is like?
  - II. why do each of them believe or not believe?
  - III. what difference do their beliefs make to how they live?

## Chapter 5

*It's deadline day. I've got to give my boss the Report. It's been an interesting ride but this one has me stumped! A Big Question, alright! People spend their whole lives trying to find the answer to this one, so I'm not likely to get the Answer in just few days. Well, that's what I'll tell the Boss!*

*I've found that people believe in God for different reasons, and perhaps in different gods. I've focused on the God of Christianity, just as a start. I've also found that this Big Question contains a whole heap of other big questions. I've found out a little about what kind of God it is that Christians believe in. That's helped me make sure I'm looking in the right place, not up on some cloud, somewhere in the sky!*

*And I've talked to some people who have an idea about the Answer. Some of them are convinced, others are not so sure.*

*So... what do you think I should put in my Report? I've got to satisfy the Boss by giving good reasons, even if I can't give him the Answer he's looking for.*

*Can you help?*



### Activity 7: Report

Now it's time for you to put together a report. Use at least two of the sentence starters from each column.

## Final Report: Is God real?

| Introduction   | On the one hand...  | On the other hand...  | Conclusion  |
|--|---|---|---|
| This question is..   | Most Christians say that God is...  | Some people believe that God is not real because...                               | For most Christians, the strongest evidence for God seems to be...              |
| This is an important question because...                       | This means that God is not...   | Another reason is ...   | For atheists, the strongest evidence that there is no God seems to be...        |
| This is a big question because...                              | Some people believe this God is real because...   | This is a strong /weak argument because...  | Believing in God is a big part in millions of people's lives because...         |
| When the question says "God", most Christians mean...          | Others believe because...   | Some people think no one should believe in God because...                         | Arguments don't always persuade people to believe or not to believe, because... |
| In order to answer this question I have had to...              | This is a strong/weak argument because...   | Some people are quite happy for others to believe, even if they don't, because... | This is an important question to explore because...                             |
| The main question leads to lots of other questions, such as... | Believing in God is very important for some people, for example...                                | Believing that there is no God might affect how a person lives, for example...    | I think... because...   |
|  | Believing in God can have a big impact for some people because...                                 |   | I am not sure about the answer to this question because...                      |
|  | Many people who believe in God don't think you can actually prove God's existence but they say... |   |   |