

Is religion good for society?

Overview

This unit provides activities which help students explore the huge question of whether religions contribute positively to life. The position that 'I don't believe in religion because religions cause war' is commonly encountered by teenagers, and accepted by many of them. The work in this unit does not, of course, coerce anyone to change their position, but it does take this sentence as simplistic and seeks to encourage a fuller understanding of the positive and negative impacts of religions and beliefs on society.

RE is centrally concerned with the exploration of diverse positions and views. Here, students will be challenged to engage with views opposite to their own in reasonable ways, using evidence, reasoning and arguments.

Essential knowledge

The arguments that rage around this topic cannot be fully explored by young teenagers, but the activities here introduce some key strands of understanding in relation to these questions and positions:

- **Does being religious make people happier and contribute to their well-being?** But if it does, then might this happiness be based on an illusion?
- **Are 'all religions the same' in having both a benign and a potentially harmful impact on society?** Do all religions inspire both potential saints and heroes *and* potential terrorists and killers? Obviously, students aged 14 are not in a position to do 'relative merits' exercises comparing Voodoo with Buddhism or Paganism with Islam, so how can they even begin to approach the question?
- **Is it religion as such that causes war, or can inter-religious conflict be explained in other ways?** For example, governments prepare for and start wars for economic, political and social reasons, but often against nation-states with a different religion. Who's to blame?
- **Is being religious normal for humans?** Can John Lennon's world, alluded to in the song 'Imagine', ever really exist? Are the alternatives to religion – different forms of atheism and agnosticism – more or less murderous and harmful, or beneficent and peaceable?

Essential teaching and learning

This unit explores questions including: Does religion do more harm than good? Is it a cause of conflict or a power for peace? What role has religion had in some conflicts across the world recently, and why? What do I believe about conflict, war and peace?

The focus is on the complex study and analysis of facts, ideas and examples of peace and conflict, related to religions, thus enabling students to think for themselves about the questions. Students are encouraged to consider what can be learned from different religions and from non-religious belief systems and to enquire into examples and teaching while also referring to their own experiences, beliefs and values.

The unit will provide opportunities for students to consider a diverse range of views and examples about questions of conflict, war and peace and about the role of religion in conflict and peacemaking. From the study of sources of wisdom and authority within religions, students will be able to examine and develop reasoned viewpoints about how religion may or may not be good for society.

12–15

Context

GCSE Religious Studies includes study of the role of the church in the local community, the importance of the worldwide Church, including working for reconciliation and the work of development charities, and the idea of Jesus as a role model of social justice. Content for other religions cover similar territory, which connects to this unit of study.

Resources/ links

The Trussell Trust operate food banks through Christian churches. It offers a useful study to see religion's positive impact in Britain today.
www.trusselltrust.org

A good starting point for accounts of the negative about religion, this also gives a positive alternative to religion in Humanism:
<https://understandinghumanism.org.uk/area/society/>

This Christian apologetics site offers some ideas for these arguments:
www.bethinking.org



Examples of student work using the ideas and resources from the following pages can be downloaded by NATRE members or REtoday subscribers.



Learning activities

1 Religion and conflict: What do we know? What do we think?

- Ask small groups, and then the whole class, to identify conflicts in personal, national and global terms, and ask about the role of religion in conflict. How many wars do they know? How many of them have a religious dimension? How many peacemakers can they name? How many of them believed in a religion? Use p.26 as a 'fill-in' copiable sheet for this, perhaps best enlarged to A3. Invite students to collect ideas and questions. Ask students to list and discuss good questions about peace, conflict and religion.
- Ask students to write an initial paragraph to say whether they think 'religion causes wars'.

2 Taking in a range of sources and perspectives

One major aim and purpose in these lessons is to challenge knee-jerk reactions, whether they are 'pro-religion' or 'anti-religion'. On pages 28 and 29 we have provided a 'Pinterest'-style set of ideas and quotations – call it 'REinterest' if you wish. Copy this page onto A3 or larger for students in pairs to use.

- Ask first: read them all, and say which ones support the case that religion is bad for society and which are against the case.
- Structure a class discussion into a formal debate about the question, getting students to use the items they have read to develop arguments of their own.
- Ask students to research additional quotations and evidence to pin to the REinterest wall. Finding quotations for and against religion would be one part of this (although care needs to be taken with this, rather than allowing an open search: there is much unpleasant bigotry just a click away online). Evidence for the work of religious and non-religious organisations in bringing justice would be relevant. Try the Pew Research Centre www.pewforum.org as a start.
- Using the material they have found, ask students (for homework?) to create a third page's worth of quotes, ideas and items of interest to contribute to the debate, and present it in 'Pinterest' style.
- In the following lesson, ask students to compare their 'third pages' in small groups. Discuss the most interesting or thought-provoking information they have discovered. How strongly do they argue for one side or the other – religion as cause of harm, or source of good?

3 So – is religion good for society or bad for society?

The final task here is to do a piece of extended writing. The focus is on reasoned and balanced perspectives, so the multiple-choice writing scaffold on page 27 below needs careful introduction. Students construct their essay to be at least 12 sentences in length, using at least four of the prompts from the three columns of 'Yes / Maybe / No' sentence starters. This gives your students a lot of structure, and enables them to concentrate on their thoughts and reasons. They can make up their own prompts as well, of course, or use more than four per column.

Students should write an argumentative and reasoned account of their reaction to the debate about whether religion is good or bad for society. They describe, explain and analyse the philosophical and ethical ideas in the question, using some examples to explore both sides of the case.

Outcomes

Students can demonstrate achievement in these activities if they can say 'yes' to some of these 'I can' statements.

Description of achievement

I can ...

All can...

- express with reasons my ideas about whether religion does more harm or more good in society
- weigh up different perspectives in a thoughtful and balanced manner.

Most can...

- argue coherently for my own views about the ways in which religion contributes peace or conflict to society today
- develop and express insights into the arguments of others.

Some can...

- analyse the impact of teaching from sacred texts on ways religious people seek to make a social contribution
- use the language of different religions and of religious studies to evaluate critically the impact of faith on issues of peace and conflict, both personally and impersonally.

Scotland

In Scotland, this work will enable achievement in relation to the credit level of the Standard Grade certificate: 'With reference to Christianity and one other religion, give a developed explanation of key concepts and aspects and of the interrelationship of these; the candidate has also been able to appreciate different viewpoints on complex religious and moral issues in contemporary society.'

Religion, conflict and evil: What do we know? What do we think?



Six wars we know about:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

Did they have any religious dimensions?

Questions about peace, conflict and religion – choose your favourite questions to answer:

- Why is religion involved in war if it preaches peace?
- Can we imagine a world without religion?
- Does religion cause war? How? Why?
- Should all religious people be offered the chance to become atheists or, if they refuse it, be excluded?
- Can religion stop war?
- Why doesn't God stop war?
- When people say, 'God is on my side' does it make them fight better?
- Is religion more good than evil?
- Will religion decline or grow in the next 50 years?
- Will conflict decline or grow?
- Are some religions better than others at peacemaking?

In this box, note down four or more further good questions about religion, peace and war:

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

Does religion cause war?

Write your initial thoughts in the box on the right. Consider: what examples do you know of? Is religion the cause, or just a factor? Why does religion contribute to particular conflicts? What about 'non-religious' worldviews and wars (e.g. do atheists start wars as well?)?

I think ...

Both sides of the story

This work will challenge you to think about the arguments of others, so whether you are religious or an atheist, get ready to face the challenge: The strongest argument I disagree with is ...

So – does religion cause conflicts and wars, repression and harm?



Use the 'REinterest board' and other sources to gather ideas and information.

In your essay, select **at least four prompts from each of the three columns** below to write in a balanced and reasonable way.

Yes, religion causes conflict and evil because ...

- I think religion is bad for us because ...
- Religion can be negative because it makes people irrational. For example ...
- Religions matter so much to people that they are willing to fight over their beliefs ...
- Religion can do a lot of harm. For example ...
- Everyone thinks 'I'm right, you're wrong', so conflict occurs ...
- My main reasons for thinking religion is evil are ...
- When religion is interpreted too strictly or too narrowly, then ...
- Religion often claims certainty, or 'God is on our side', which makes religious conflict harder to resolve. For example ...
- Some religious people let their beliefs make them bigoted, for example against gay people. This is wrong because ...
- Too many people are unreasonable about their religion, and this leads to ...
- I hope religion dies out in the next 50 years because ...
- Religion can be damaging for society when ...
- British society would be better if it was less religious because ...
- The world would be a much better place without religion because ...

Sometimes religion can be harmful ...

- Maybe religion is a bit of both ...
- I think that religion is human, so it can be both good and evil. For example ...
- You cannot get rid of religion, because people always need something to believe in, so we must try to ...
- It may be good to die for your beliefs, but it is always evil to kill for your beliefs because ...
- Sometimes religion 'goes bad'. For example ...
- The existence of bad religion (e.g. religious terrorists) should not suggest that there is no such thing as good religion. For example ...
- Religion is often a factor in conflicts. For example ...
- Religion often contributes to peacemaking. For example ...
- You can never separate religion and politics, so maybe it is the politics that causes the conflicts ...
- You may like or dislike religion, but it is here to stay, so ...
- Society benefits from religion whenever ...
- Religion harms society if ...
- British society has benefited from religion through ...
- British society has been harmed by religion. For example ...

No, religion isn't evil or the cause of war because ...

- I think the real meaning of 'religion' is ...
- To me, my own religion is good for society because ...
- Religion makes positive contributions to society, including ...
- Some say, 'All religions teach peace, harmony and love. It's selfish people who fail to live up to this. For example ...'
- Some of the world's greatest peacemakers have been religious people ...
- Some people say you cannot achieve peace without religion ...
- All religions offer peace to their followers ...
- Examples of religions working together are on the increase; global peace is only going to happen with inter-religious peace ...
- Religions don't just give us charity and hope, but also amazing music, architecture, literature and festivities. These matter because ...
- Atheistic regimes, such as the communistic regimes of Mao and Stalin, have done far more evil than any Christians or Buddhists, which shows ...
- We need more true religion, not less, because ...
- British society gets a lot from religion. For example ...
- The world would be a far worse place without religion because ...

In your conclusion, you might reflect on whether the title is a good question or not.

When you have created your first draft essay, read it aloud and discuss with a person who thinks the opposite to you.

Redraft in the light of these comments.



'Food banks in the UK are overwhelmingly operated by church-affiliated groups, including the 421 outlets run by Christian charity the Trussell Trust. Yet Sufra, meaning 'come to the table' in Arabic, is one of a growing number of Muslim organisations also attempting to tackle food poverty.

'Like many Christians motivated by their faith to help others, giving to the less fortunate is an important tenet of Islam. Voluntary donations and charity work (*sadaqah*) among British Muslims have typically been geared towards poverty relief projects overseas. But Sufra organisers say many Muslims now 'increasingly feel they have a responsibility to the wider community and the problems here in Britain'.

From the website of the Islamic Society of Britain
www.isb.org.uk/foodbank



John Lennon asked people to imagine a world without religion, picturing it as a place of peace.

'Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.'

In this very famous quotation, communist philosopher Karl Marx asserts that religion is false, but that its function is like a drug (opium) which can dull the pain of living a wretched life.

This is not totally negative (religion comforts) but it is not a good way to live because it blinds people to the need for action.

'Those who act kindly in the world will have kindness.' *Qur'an, Surah 39.10*

'Treat people in such a way and live amongst them in such a manner that if you die they will weep for you; alive they will crave your company.' *Nahjul Balagha Saying 9.*

'... spend out of love for Him, for your family, for orphans, for the refugee, for those who have need.' *Qur'an, Surah 2:17.*

Farid Esack, contemporary South African Islamic theologian, said that to overcome the challenges of liberating the oppressed, all people need to work together. He hopes that people will work with each other *because* we have different creeds or worldviews, rather than in spite of our differences. (See <http://bit.ly/1qqRs6G>)

Farid Esack, South African contemporary Islamic theologian.

'The Catholic Church is one of the biggest global health providers. It runs 5,246 hospitals, 17,530 dispensaries, 577 leprosy clinics and 15,208 houses for the elderly ... ill and [disabled]'

Reported by John Green in the *Financial Times*, 2012.



David Cameron, Prime Minister:

'My moments of greatest peace come perhaps every other Thursday morning when I go to sung Eucharist at St Mary Abbots, the church in Kensington, west London, linked to the school my children attend. I find a little bit of peace and hopefully a bit of guidance. I have finally made it this year to the place where our Saviour was both crucified and born. It's a remarkable, extraordinary place, and I think something that will stay with me. The Bible tells us to bear one another's burdens: Jesus invented the Big Society 2,000 years ago. I just want to see more of it, and encourage as much of it as possible. What we both (churches and government) need more of is more evangelism. More belief that we can get out there and actually change people's lives and make a difference and improve the spiritual, physical and moral state of our country.'

Reported in the *Daily Telegraph*, April 2014



'It is not religions that cause wars but people. Some people use religion to support their hatred or fear, and make war in the name of Jesus, the Buddha or the Prophet. But most Muslims, Christians or Buddhists use their religion to try and live a good life for the well-being of all. So don't blame religion for human selfishness.'



Stephen Fry was asked:

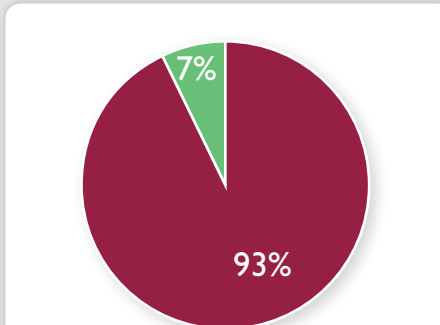
'If you die, and come face to face with God, what will you say?' His reply:

'How dare you create a world in which there is such misery that is not our fault? It's not right, it's utterly, utterly evil.'

'Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God who creates a world that is so full of injustice and pain?'

From the *Guardian* website, 1 February 2015

The word 'Islam' means 'peace' and the earliest Islamic communities 15 centuries ago ended tribal fighting and sectarianism. They established the 'Ummah' (global Muslim community) and used Shariah law to seek a civil society of fairness and of diminished prejudice, intolerance and poverty. In the modern world, Muslim aid agencies (Islamic Relief, Muslim Hands, Muslim



The Encyclopaedia of War, 5 volumes, 2012, edited by Gordon Martell, published by Wiley-Blackwell, analysed 1,763 wars from the last 10,000 years of human history. What percentage were started by or caused by religions? And what percentage by governments?

Answers:

7% Religions.

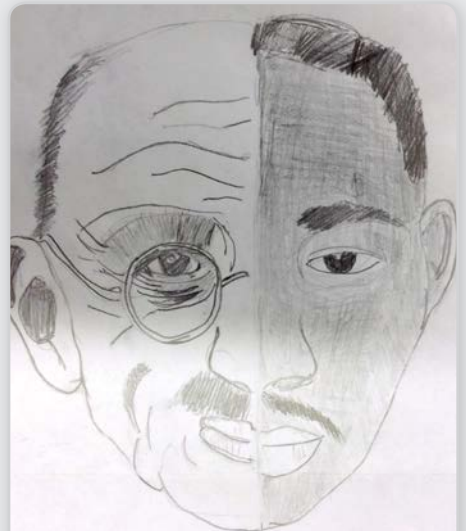
93% Governments.

In his book, *The Devil's Chaplain*, Richard Dawkins describes what he views as the human mind's two 'sicknesses': vengeance passed from one generation to the next and the need to label people as belonging to a group, rather than seeing them as individuals. He sees Abrahamic religion (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) as fostering these 'sicknesses', and so finds religion at fault for much of the conflict that has happened and is happening across the world. He calls on those opposed to religion to speak out against this.

Aid and many others) seek to make peace through development. Muslim co-operation and contributions to interfaith work are many and various. In recent times, the stereotyping of Islam as associated in some inevitable way with terror or fanaticism has done much harm, as have the un-Islamic actions of some self-styled 'Islamists'.
RE teacher



'Handcuffs or keys? Religion comes in many forms. Any form that ties you down, stops you being the best you can be, that can lead to the dark side. But other forms liberate people, set them free and enable them to grow. That's typical of religion too. The question is: what makes the difference between the religion that ties you down and the religion that sets you free?' RS Lecturer



Seymour, age 13, made this picture. He says:

'Gandhi and King are two of the world's most famous peacemakers, one a Hindu and one a Christian. They were both very religious. People who say that 'religion causes wars' forget that peace is also often made from religious motives, in religious communities, by religious leadership. If you look at all the Nobel Peace Prize winners, then huge numbers are Christian, Muslim, Jewish, people of faith.'