

Are you 'religious'?

INTRODUCTION

One of the most beautiful things about philosophical enquiry is that it forces people to stop and consider whether they actually comprehend the true significance of the words they are using. All too often, it seems, we do not have a clear and shared understanding of what is meant by some of the most fundamental terms that are commonly used in philosophical discussions and even in everyday life.

To take two classic examples:

- *What do we mean by 'God'? and*
- *How should we define the term 'religion'?*

Children and young people seem to adore the challenge of coming up with working definitions for these terms. There is plenty of scope for deep and meaningful philosophical enquiry through a discussion of the definitions people come up with in a safe and non-judgmental way.

This investigation takes you and your group on a journey to discover the hidden depths to the seemingly straightforward question:

- *Are you 'religious'?*

Begin with definitions:

ACTIVITY

Ask the students to talk in small groups about what we might mean by 'religion'. Encourage them to answer such questions as:

- *What is a 'religion'?*
- *Are religions easily distinguished from each other?*

When discussing the definition of a word it is always worth asking each of the people you are working with to write down their definition before you start discussing the term. This will give them a reference point to look back at the end of the session in a reflective exercise designed to see if their definition has changed during the course of the session.

Once everyone has written down a definition it is important to have

a dictionary definition ready to kick start the debate. Ensure you stress to the group that whilst the dictionary definition is a good starting point it does not necessarily tell the whole story of how the word is used.

Explain that the whole point of this exercise is to question everything including the dictionary definition. At this point, reveal ONLY the first of the Online *Oxford Dictionaries* definitions of the term religion. Do NOT reveal the fact that there are more definitions to come at this stage as unpacking the term piece by piece is critical to the learning process.

Definition 1:

Religion: the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods.

This definition and the two subsequent ones can both be [found here >>](#)

ACTIVITY

After looking at the first definition, encourage the students to answer such questions as:

- *Did you come up with a similar definition?*
- *How 'religious' are you, in relation to this definition?*

Unless they have undertaken a discussion such as this previously most people in our society associate being 'religious' with believing in God and this will almost certainly be reflected in the group you are working with. A religion will thus usually be defined as 'a group of people who believe similar things about God.' If this is the situation you find yourself in with your group I would ask the group to list as many of the major world religions as they can. Hopefully at some point 'Buddhism' will come up. Ignore it at first and just list it alongside all the other religions that the group come up with.

ACTIVITY

Now challenge the students to answer a further question:

- *In a list of 'religions' why might Buddhism be different?*

Listen to the ideas they come up with at this point and respond as appropriate but also ensure that they realise that most Buddhists do not believe in a 'superhuman controlling power', and therefore

according to the definition of religion we are currently working with Buddhism can't really be classed as a religion. Point out that Buddhism is always included in any text book on major world religions and that it is one of the 'Six major world religions' children are expected to learn about in RE lessons in this country. Open up a genuine debate about this.

ACTIVITY

Now challenge the students to answer a further question:

- *Can Buddhism be a religion if it doesn't have a God?*

It is important to note at this point that the group may come up with 'football', 'shopping' or 'worshipping celebrities' when they are asked to list as many religions as they can. This is fantastic as it shows that they are really beginning to question the whole concept of religion but try to hold off discussing these issues at this point but tell anyone who mentions them that we will return to these issues in due course. Instead, at this stage it is really important to ensure that Buddhism is specifically discussed. This is vital because it is seen by most people as an established religion even though most Buddhists don't believe in a creator God. At this point it is worth bringing in the second definition of religion:

Definition 2:

Religion: a particular system of faith and worship.

ACTIVITY

After looking at this definition, encourage students to exchange views:

- *How do the established religions fit with this term?*
- *How 'religious' are you, in relation to this definition?*

Again it is worth specifically discussing whether Buddhism qualifies under this definition. Many Buddhists would surely argue that it doesn't as they might say their beliefs are not based so much on faith as on empirical evidence. Many Buddhists would say that they do not *worship* the Buddha so much as *remember* him as an enlightened teacher. So, again, it is time to question why Buddhism is generally classed as a religion. Now is the time to throw in the third and final definition of religion:

Definition 3:

Religion: a pursuit or interest followed with great devotion.

ACTIVITY

You could choose one area of modern devotion that you are very interested in to discuss with the group. Use your own 'enthusiasms' as an example if you feel it is appropriate. Look at the behavioural and emotional parallels between the established religions and the modern devotion you are discussing. Having looked at the third definition, encourage the students to answer such questions as:

- *Is this a good definition of a religion? Why / Why not?*
- *Does it cover all the major world religions including Buddhism?*
- *What else does it cover? Could / should contemporary 'hobbies' and obsessions be included?*
- *How 'religious' are you, in relation to this definition?*
- *Do you want to change your own definition of 'religion' written down at the start of this session?*

CONCLUSION:

Show a short video featuring a modern religion / passion / obsession, e.g., shopping or, as here, a Sky advert for 'football as religion' at www.youtube.com/watch?v=jXac8J4EoIE. Ask the students:

- *Is a person's 'religion' simply that which they feel most passionate about?*
- *Does the idea of shopping or football as religion trivialise the seriousness involved in 'real religion'?*
- *What REALLY matters in religion and life?*