



PRAYING

BACKGROUND

This session is a good way for children to look at which things religions have in common and which things set them apart. If we don't know much about another religion it is easy to make the mistake of assuming that its followers do the same as us or that what they do is completely different when actually the differences are superficial.

Take prayer. Prayer of some sort is common to all religious traditions. It is the most fundamental part of most religions and a clear sign of a person's faith.

Jews, Christians and Muslims share similar beliefs about the purpose of prayer and its role in religious life, but different rules about how prayers should be conducted. For Buddhists, the role of meditation is much more central, and meditation is clearly different from praying because the person meditating does not talk to God or try to influence future events. Despite this doctrine, in a Buddhist country like Thailand many ordinary people make offerings at temples with the hope of being favoured in return. Is this prayer? Is this the same thing that people do in churches, mosques and synagogues?

In this story an alien comes down to Earth to study human behaviour. This scenario can be used to explore lots of different concepts because it helps the children to stand outside what they know and consider things at a more abstract level. In this case, the class is asked to define 'prayer' for the alien who doesn't understand, which forces them to think about what prayer is, and what it isn't. The children engage with the problem much more readily than if the question is asked in the abstract. After all, why define a concept like 'praying' when everyone knows what it is? But by creating a character who doesn't know what it is we now have reason to try to define it. The difficulty of defining it may lead us to review some of our assumptions about it.

STIMULUS

An alien explorer came to Earth. Its technology was much more advanced than ours and it was able to travel round the world secretly, in disguise, gathering information to take back to its own planet.

When it was ready to go home it had written a long report on everything it found on our planet. It understood human behaviour almost completely. But there were bits of behaviour that it could never figure out. Although the alien had observed us carefully it didn't understand what we were doing and why. Here is part of the alien's report, translated into English:

1. Some humans put their hands together and close their eyes. They stay silent or sometimes they speak but no human is listening or answering. Sometimes they do this in a big building with other people.
2. Other humans sometimes kneel on the ground and touch their heads on the floor. They often do this in a big building too, but a different kind of one. Some do it 5 times a day.
3. There are also some humans who sit cross-legged on the floor and close their eyes. Sometimes they stay silent and sometimes they talk even if no-one answers or no-one is there.

I have not managed to discover any reason for this kind of behaviour. They do not appear to be working or playing or fighting.

Task Questions

- ✓ What has the alien seen?
- ✓ Are all the people he describes doing the same thing?
- ✓ What is praying?
- ✓ Could you explain to the alien what praying is and why people do it?
- ✓ If you do it wrong, does that mean you are not praying?
- ✓ Can someone pray without believing in God?
- ✓ If there weren't actually any God would praying be a waste of time?

- ✓ Does God answer prayers? What does that mean?

LESSON COMMENTS

During the course of the discussion you will discover the beliefs and knowledge within the class. I had one class that had been on a visit to a Buddhist temple. One boy was very clear about the distinction between meditation and prayer (which had been explained during the tour) even though the rest of the class couldn't remember it.

You may also get a lively discussion among children who have learned that praying should not just be 'asking God for things'. Remember that within each religion there is controversy about what praying should involve.

When you ask children a question like 'What is praying?' someone will sometimes ask if they can look it up in a dictionary. If so, you can get children to predict what the dictionary will say and then comment on what it does say. It doesn't mean an end to the discussion.