

# Humanism for Secondary School Pupils

S1 – 3



## THE ORIGIN OF RELIGION

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What is religion? Where did it come from? Why is it so important to some people? These are a few of the questions we will look at in this course. Whether or not you are a religious person, it is useful to know the answers to these questions. Wherever you go you will meet people who have been influenced by the major religions of the world and in most countries many laws and customs are based on religious ideas and values.

## Ultimate Questions

Since the beginning of the human race people have asked all sorts of questions – some easy to answer, some difficult and many that don't appear to have an answer at all. This last type of question is called an "Ultimate Question" as often it can't be answered. People have always wondered about the world we live in and have wanted to know everything about it. Unfortunately there are huge gaps in our knowledge and even in the 21st century many questions remain unanswered.



## TASK 1

Write down some questions about the world we live in that you would like to know the answers to.

Early people asked questions that were connected to nature such as, "Who made the world? Why does it get dark at night? What causes earthquakes, thunder & lightning and tsunamis? Why do volcanoes erupt?" Some of these are fairly simple questions to answer in the 21st century but early people didn't have all the scientific knowledge we have today. So, what did they do? They tried to find some explanation for these things that made sense to them. They came up with the idea that there must have been a force or power much greater than themselves that could cause all these things to happen. The name they gave this was "god". The system of beliefs that grew up around belief in a particular god became known as **religion**.

## Polytheism

Because there were so many forces of nature primitive people could not understand, they believed there was a power, or a god, for each. This belief in many different gods is called polytheism, which comes from the Greek words 'poly', meaning 'many' and 'theos' meaning 'god'. The ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans all had a belief that there were many gods. They had a god for everything – a god of love, war, peace, agriculture, fertility, a sun god, a moon god and hundreds of other gods too. These early religions were therefore called "polytheistic".

## TASK 2

Write down the names of some Egyptian, Greek or Roman Gods and say why people worshipped them or what they were famous for.

Primitive people had a very hard existence and life, death and basic survival were extremely harsh realities. So they devised gods who had a role to play in their lives. These gods were expected to help them, to protect them from the weather, thunder and lightning and all other natural events that modern people simply take in their stride. People often felt frightened

when natural events threatened them and felt that the gods were in some way or another punishing them. They came to the conclusion that because awful things were happening then it was their fault because they had done something wrong to upset the gods.

Eventually the people created rituals in order to influence their gods. They put their faith in the gods to help them in difficult times by offering gifts and prayers to them. They tried to work out what they had done wrong and would try to discover what the gods wanted them to do. They decided that the gods thought and acted like humans even though they were more powerful. They thought that by offering their time, their gifts and their obedience it would please them. Complicated rituals developed around the world but were similar insofar as they all involved some sort of offering or sacrifice to keep the gods happy. When things were going well they often had thanksgiving ceremonies to acknowledge their gratitude to the gods.

Most early societies developed rules that they thought would keep them in the gods' good books. Codes of behaviour evolved over many centuries that told people what was or wasn't acceptable in the gods' eyes. Certain things were regarded as either right or wrong – and remain so to this day!



### **TASK 3**

Write down five things you believe are wrong or bad.

What actions are regarded as being bad everywhere in the world?

### **Religious Leaders**

Each community of people would have someone special to lead their religious celebrations and teach them the will of the gods. This leader often took the title of 'priest' to signify his place at the head of the community and as a bridge between the people and the gods. He would lead the religious rituals and teach the people what the gods expected people to do. Since the gods were 'transcendent' (beyond the reach of ordinary people) the priest or leader had to be a very special person to communicate with the gods. He would normally be one of the older, more respected and educated males within the community, able to reach beyond the humdrum events of everyday life and speak to the gods at their level. He would interpret what rules or laws were necessary to please the gods and would often act as judge when rules were broken. He would decide what punishment should be given to those who disobeyed rules and put the community in danger because of their actions. There was always a fear that if things were not put right then the gods would take out their anger on the whole community.

### **TASK 4**

1. Write down the names or titles for the leaders of at least five different religions.
2. How do the religious leaders communicate with their gods?
3. What sort of punishments might the gods give to those who disobey them?
4. Do you think it matters what age a religious leader is? Say why.

## Early Worship

Since primitive people could not read or write there are no exact accounts of what they believed. However there is a lot of evidence that we can use if we look at the many historical remains around the world. With the help of archaeologists and historians we can learn a lot from ancient monuments about the customs and beliefs of the people. What we do know is that some places were very special to the people since they went to incredible lengths to build structures that still exist to this day. It appears that many ancient monuments were used as places of worship, places where the people could communicate with their gods, pray and offer sacrifices.

Everywhere in the world you can find remains that go back before any history books were written. The strange thing is that people around the world seemed to be doing very much the same things and appear to have had very similar beliefs. Some very primitive groups of people still exist in different parts of the world today and we can learn from them how their ancestors thought and acted. They have retained many of the simple beliefs and traditions that were handed down to them centuries ago and which still give meaning to their lives today.



## TASK 5

1. Why do you think people in different countries had similar beliefs when they couldn't travel around the world and communicate with each other?
2. Name five types of building used as places of worship.

## Ancient Religious Monuments

There are many sites around the world which were used for religious ceremonies or purposes centuries ago and have now become major tourist attractions. These include places like the Pyramids of Egypt and the Americas, Stonehenge in England, the Stone Circles found all over Western Europe and many other excavations around the world. These ancient sites seem to have had many uses. Some were places where people met together, some were temples for worship, rites of passage and sacrifices and some were possibly used as astronomical calendars.

**Stonehenge**, near Salisbury in the south of England, is probably one of the most important and impressive monuments in the world. Work on it started in the Neolithic period around 3100 BCE and finished around 1100 BCE. A "henge" is a circular or oval area enclosed by large stones and an embankment. Henges were used as places of worship and could be fairly large depending on the size and importance of the community. Stonehenge is the largest example of an early place of worship we have and it is even older than many of the pyramids in Egypt.



The size and nature of the remains indicate that it was an extremely important and special place. The stones are enormous and some weigh more than four tons each. Different types of stones were used: sarson, bluestone and Welsh sandstone. Some of them were from local quarries but some were brought about 240 miles from the Preseli Mountains in Wales. Archaeologists believe they were put on rafts and taken along rivers to the sea, floated over to the English coast then dragged overland to their current position. Why on earth did these people go to such great lengths to build this monument? Possibly we will never find out but we can draw some conclusions. There are many early places of worship in this part of England so the people who lived here must have felt it was a very special place for them.

What was Stonehenge actually used for? The layout of the various circles, (some covered with lintels), may indicate it was used for religious ceremonies and rites. Some people think it may also have been used for sacrifices because of the flat, altar-like stones. Astronomers have also discovered that the monument is lined up with the rising sun on midsummer's day and with the moon on mid-winter's day. This probably indicates that Stonehenge was used as some form of astronomical calendar to help people work out when the change of seasons took place. They would then be able to calculate the best times to sow seeds and plant crops as the days started to get brighter and warm up after winter was over.

Nowadays many New Age people gather every year in the third week of June to celebrate the summer solstice. Many of them feel it's important to get back in touch with our roots and they have revived some of the ancient rites that were used centuries ago to celebrate the start of summer. Reflecting on the change of seasons makes them feel a oneness with the earth and with each other, something people living in the modern world seem to have lost.

### **Stone Circles**

Another important archaeological find has been the many Stone Circles or Standing Stones found around Britain and other parts of Europe. There are hundreds of these in Britain alone and we can learn a lot about the people who built them and what they believed. In England the most famous circle is at **Avebury**, a few miles from Stonehenge.

**Callanish**, on the Isle of Lewis, is probably the best known and most important site in Scotland. It was built by the Neolithic tribes around 1800 BCE. The stone circle consists of thirteen slender stones forming a circle with four rows of smaller stones fanning out to form what looks like a Celtic cross. Since the monument was built before the Christian religion began it can't have the same significance, even though some people have made up stories that it first appeared in Christian times. Some people say the stones were originally early

Scots who refused to convert to Christianity and were turned into stone by St Kieran as a punishment when they refused. The largest stone in the centre is about 16 feet high. It marks a burial chamber which indicates that this site was probably used for funeral ceremonies. Many other stone circles have burial mounds or chambers either in them or very near to them. Callanish, like Stonehenge, could have been used as a temple for other religious rites too (such as sun worship) and as an astronomical calendar.



### **TASK 6**

1. List five famous religious sites in the world today.
2. Choose three of them and say what they are used for.
3. What types of celebrations are held in places of worship today?

### **Human Sacrifices**

One custom found in many ancient religions is that of offering up human beings as sacrifices to the gods. We have no proof that Stonehenge or Callanish were connected with human sacrifices but there are other places in Britain, Europe and South America where bodies have been found that appear to have been killed in a ritualistic manner, suggesting they were part of some religious ceremony.

Early people seem to have believed that humans are the most precious thing we have on earth. They thought that the gods would be pleased if humans were offered to them in sacrifice. If the people had offended the gods or if they wanted a favour – maybe a good harvest or many children – then this would make the gods look more favourably on them and answer their prayers and requests. A human being would then be chosen from the community, killed in some form of religious ritual and offered to the sun god, the fertility god or whoever.

Throughout Europe, Britain and Ireland archaeologists have discovered many bodies. Most have been very well preserved because they were buried in peat bogs. The chemicals in the peat help to preserve the bodies in almost exactly the same condition they were in when they were first buried. It's similar to what happens to food put into tins and jars. Chemicals, called preservatives, are added so that the food will last a very long time without going bad.

The archaeologists have discovered many bodies that appear to have been placed in the ground following a ritual killing. The way the bodies are dressed and the artefacts found beside them indicate that some sort of religious significance can be attached to these sites. Many of the bodies in European sites were those of adults or children who appear to have been killed in a violent way. Some bodies had their skulls crushed or had been beheaded. Others were tied up, indicating they had been forcibly killed against their will.

In South America, especially in the Andes Mountains of Peru, many of the bodies appear to be those of young children. They weren't killed in such a violent way and may even have been drugged and left to die from exposure on the high mountain peaks. Children were sometimes used in sacrifices because the people felt their youth and beauty would be more pleasing to the gods. It is unlikely that any of these people wanted to die and so by drugging them first with coca it was easier to get them to the place of sacrifice on top of the mountain.

Some of the sites where bodies have been found were recently excavated. Around Cuzco and Machu Picchu, where the Incas held many of their religious ceremonies, up to 20 bodies of young children have been discovered. They were known to worship the sun god and the very mountains they lived in too.



### **TASK 7**

1. Why do you think humans were sacrificed to the gods?
2. What does the word "sacrifice" mean?
3. How do we know the bodies had been sacrificed?
4. Why do you think children were chosen to be killed?
5. How would you have felt if you had been chosen as a sacrifice? Say why.

### **The Pyramids**



Ancient Egypt is another place where archaeologists have made interesting discoveries about peoples' religious beliefs. Many of the Pharaohs chose to be buried in large buildings

called pyramids. It took many years, lots of skill and thousands of people to build the pyramids. They have been excavated since the start of the 20th century and can tell us some of the beliefs their builders had. The way the bodies are laid out inside the pyramids suggests that there was belief in an afterlife. The bodies were mummified, that is they were embalmed and wrapped in special material. The internal organs – liver, lungs, intestines and stomach – were carefully wrapped in linen and placed in canopic jars beside the coffin or sarcophagus so that they could be used again in the afterlife. Food, drink and many of the material things that are important to people have also been found inside the chambers beside the Pharaohs. This probably indicates the Pharaohs thought they would live on in some way or another and would need these things to accompany them on the journey towards eternity. There is also evidence that religious rites were performed in the pyramids, connected with the Egyptians' belief in an afterlife.



### **TASK 8**

1. Describe in detail the preparations made to accompany a dead Egyptian on their journey to the afterlife.
2. What do you believe will happen to you when you die?
3. List any types of belief you have heard of regarding life after death.

As well as the Egyptian pyramids, there are many others to be found in Central and South America. Places like Mexico and Peru have structures very similar to the Egyptian pyramids, though not on quite so large a scale. These were used by the ancient tribes for religious ceremonies and possibly also for human sacrifices to the gods. Unfortunately, because the people left no written records, we can only guess what they were doing all those centuries ago and we cannot be completely certain.



### **Conclusion**

For many centuries human beings have tried to answer very difficult questions about the world we live in. Many people have come up with the idea that a god, or gods, can answer these questions. As a result people have spent a lot of time and energy trying to communicate with their gods, trying to please them and do what they want so that their lives will be a lot happier. At the end of this life they may even go on to another place where they will be rewarded with eternal happiness for the good lives they had on earth.

### **TASK 9**

1. Do you think it is useful to believe in god? Say why.
2. Different religions try to answer many everyday questions about the world. Give some examples of things various religions teach.
3. Is it possible to answer any of life's mysteries without believing in god or religion? Give some examples.

