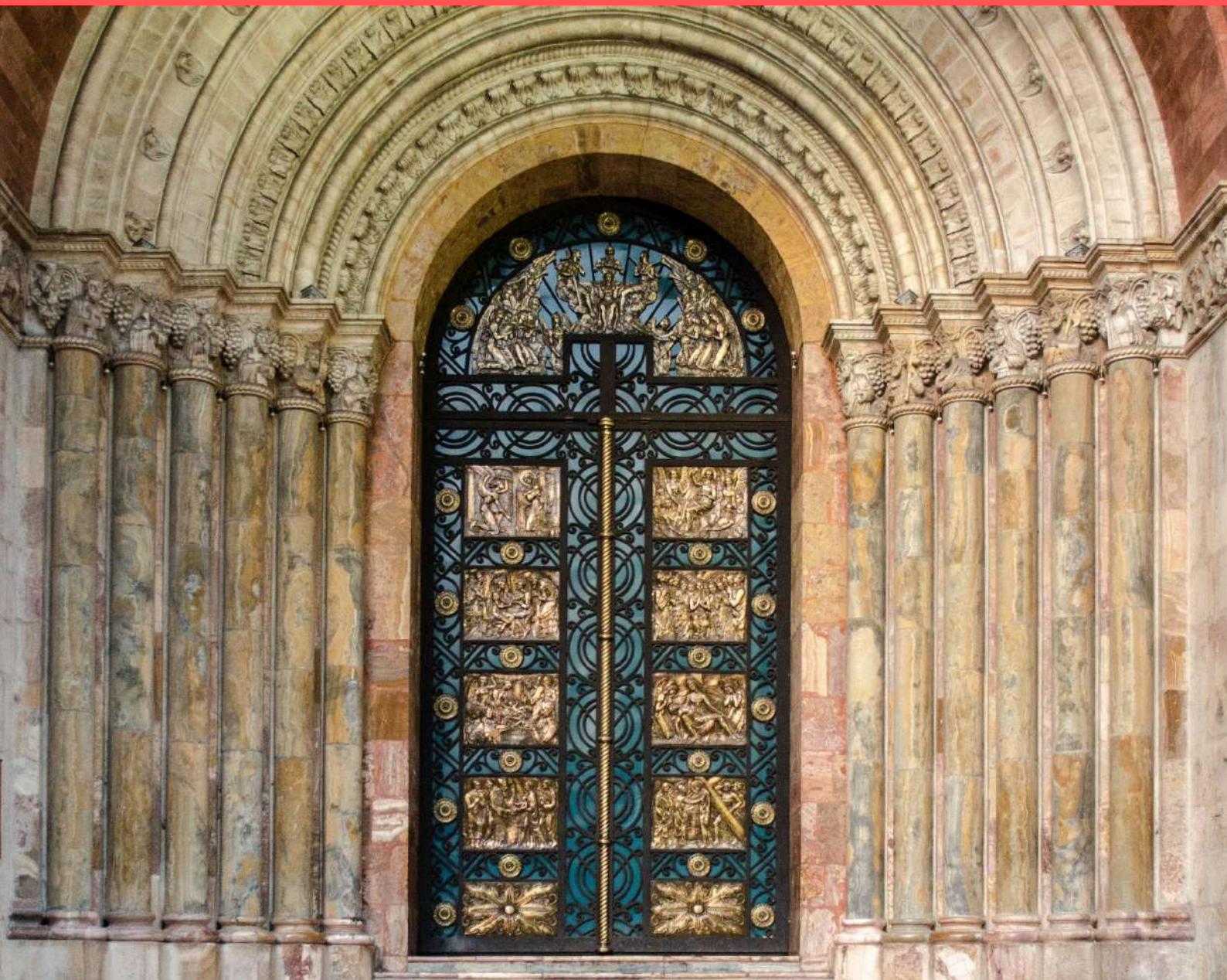


Is Anybody There?

Teacher guide and resources



Introduction

We've drawn together resources and materials to support the delivery of a rich curriculum.

There's plenty of evidence that pupils relish demanding work.

We believe it's important not to dumb things down.

The KS3 Ambitious Years project is underpinned by three strands of research:

i

The 'Just Reading' research from the University of Sussex, which showed a significant increase in reading ages for all pupils, particularly the low prior attainers.

ii

Background knowledge is the main driver of language comprehension, whether written or spoken - E D Hirsch

iii

Pupil voice: when asked about the level of work they are given, pupils say they relish demanding work. This high challenge is possible if the classroom is characterised by low threat.

Resources

Video links

These 5 min recordings set the scene and provide pupils with background knowledge

Text links

Extracts from a text (the page numbers reference the Kindle version)

Visuals

Each session has an image to add a further dimension for discussion

Pupil booklet & knowledge organiser

This can either be photocopied or used as the basis for pupils' insights and written outcomes in their exercise books

You will need an electronic copy of the text and it's also worth having a few hard copies for pupils who want to read on.

Links to 'A Little History of Religion' by Richard Holloway:

Ebook [here](#)

Hard copy [here](#)



Context

Religious Education (RE) is a statutory subject in UK schools, meaning it's required to be taught. However, it's not part of the National Curriculum, so there's no single, centrally prescribed curriculum. Instead, RE content is determined locally by Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs).

This means that pupils starting Key Stage 3 will have had different experiences of religious education. This being the case, it's helpful to draw on the RE Council's Teacher-Led Framework two working principles:

- Worldviews start with people
- Pupils' ability to make sense of what they learn is a necessary part of the curriculum

Using Richard Holloway's 'Little History of Religion' as the basis for this unit will introduce pupils to the big ideas at the heart of human experience and religions.

Context

Each session has three elements to help pupils understand the content:

- A short video to provide context
- Links to a chapter from Richard Holloway's 'Little History of Religion'
- An image which relates to the content, and which can be used as the basis for discussion

Richard Holloway is the former Bishop of Edinburgh and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church. In drawing on his work, we are showing pupils how theologians think about religion.

By the end of the unit, pupils will write a short essay on:

Where does religious belief comes from?

Knowledge organiser

Word / Phrase	Explanation
Agnosticism	The belief that it's not possible to know if Gods exist or not
Atheist	Someone who does not believe in the existence of God or gods
Atheist	Someone who does not believe in the existence of God or gods
BCE	Before the Common Era – the time before year 1 in our calendar
Brahma	The Hindu god of creation, part of the Trimurti (three gods)
Brahmin	A Hindu priest or scholar, someone who studies Hindu teachings
CE	Common Era – the time after year 1 in our calendar
Karma	The idea that good or bad actions bring rewards or consequences
Moksha	The release from the cycle of rebirth and becoming truly free
Monotheistic	Believing in only one God
Nirvana	A state of peace and happiness often reached when a person is enlightened

Knowledge organiser

Word / Phrase	Explanation
Polytheistic	Believing in many gods
Reincarnation	When a person's soul is born again in a new body after death
Sage	A wise person who teaches and gives advice about life and religion
Samsara	The cycle of birth, death, and rebirth in some religions
Symbol	A picture or sign that represents an idea or thing
Theist	Someone who believes in one or more gods
Theist	Someone who believes in one or more gods
Theology	The study of the nature of God and religious belief.
Upanishads	Hindu texts that explain the deeper meaning of the Vedas
Vedas	Ancient Hindu texts that contain prayers, songs, and stories

Table of Contents

Step 1: Is Anybody There?	9
Step 2: The Doors	15
Step 3: The Wheel	20
Step 4: One Into Many	25
Step 5: Prince to Buddha	30
Step 6: Conclusion	35

01

Is Anybody There?



1.1 Video

Show pupils the two recordings with Francesca Stavrakopoulou, a biblical scholar at the University of Exeter. These will provide background for pupils for the big questions about the meaning of life.

Video 1

Some of our ancestors believed that the dead and other spirits could see what was going on in this world. They knew what was happening in the lives of the living and to a certain extent they could influence events in that world. That's a powerful notion. The idea that the dead or even the gods are with us and they can intervene in our lives is comforting, but it can also make us very careful about what we do.

Link to BBC Bitesize: [Are we wired to believe in a higher power?](#) (1min 39 secs)

Showing this first video is a good starting point for the unit. You might pause at the end and ask pupils to share any questions they have.

Then show the short video below.

Video 2

Religion is one of a number of sources of comfort to us in the face of our own mortality, but it also has a psychological function. Religious beliefs help humans to order and bring meaning to their lives. And rituals in particular can punctuate our lives, marking the most crucial events.

Link to BBC Bitesize: [Are we wired to believe in a higher power?](#) (2 mins)



1.2 Text extract

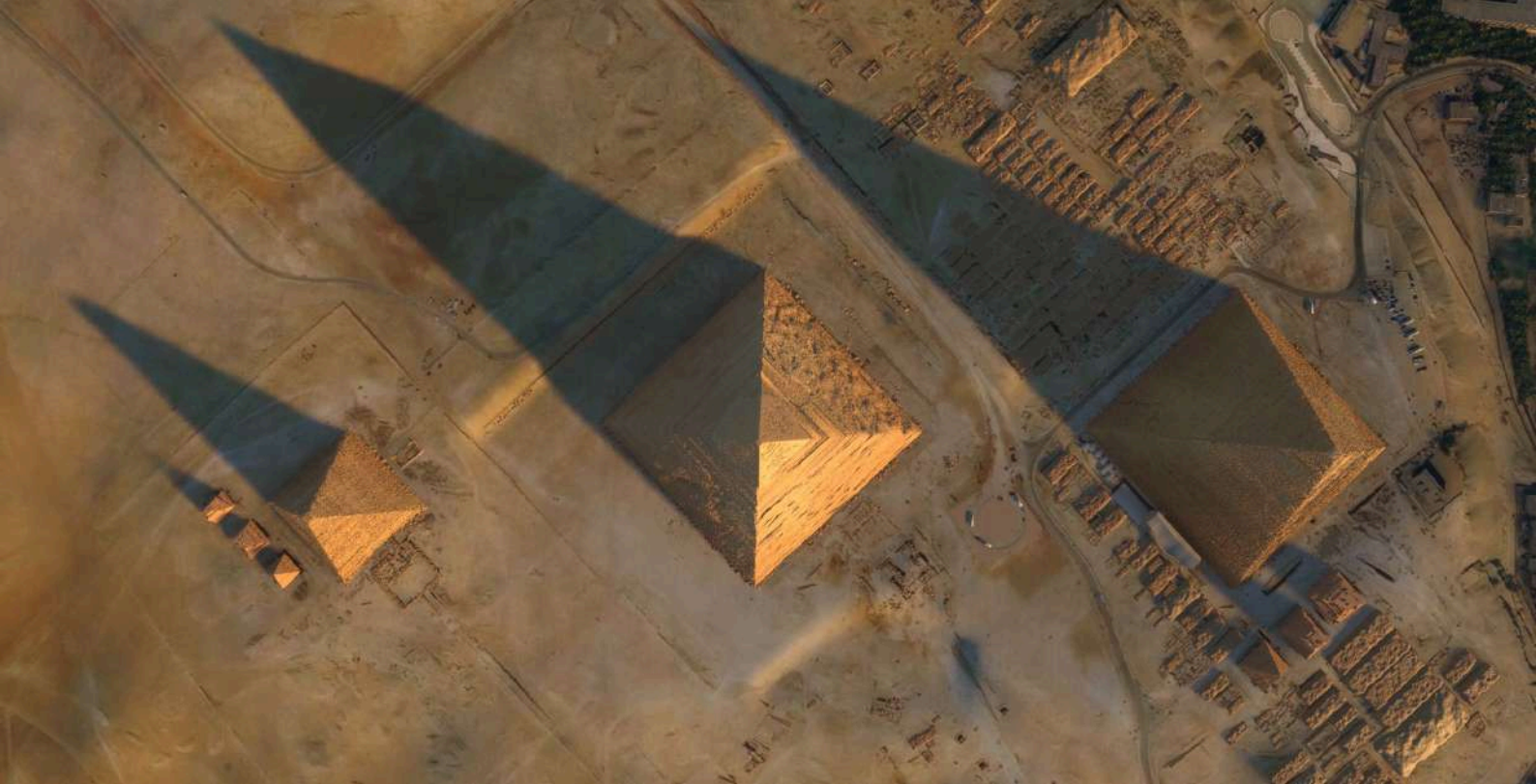
Chapter 1: Is Anybody There?

There will be vocabulary that pupils won't have necessarily encountered before, so it's important to let them know this is ok, as we'll be reading the passage twice and the second time, we'll be unpacking some of the new words and checking them on the knowledge organiser.

Read from the beginning of the chapter to the end.

What is religion? And where does it come from? Religion comes from the mind of the human animal, so it comes from us. The other animals on earth don't seem to need a religion. And as far as we can tell they haven't developed any...

...One of those prophets was called Moses.



The pyramids of Giza

1.3 Image

One interpretation is the pyramids were built as tombs for the pharaohs over 4,000 years ago. As Richard Holloway says:

‘The most dramatic of humanity’s monuments to the dead are the pyramids at Giza in Egypt. As well as being tombs, the pyramids might be thought of as launch pads from which the souls of their royal occupants had been blasted into immortality.’

It’s helpful for pupils to make a summary of what they have learnt so far using the points below:

- What kinds of questions do we human ask about life and death?
- How do we know that people have wondered about life after death?
- Why were some bodies painted with red after death?
- Why are symbols important?

1.4 Questions and reflections

It's helpful for pupils to make a summary of what they have learnt so far using the points below:

- What kinds of questions do we human ask about life and death?
- How do we know that people have wondered about life after death?
- Why were some bodies painted with red after death?
- Why are symbols important?

02

The Doors



2.1 Video

Show from start to 1min 43 secs

In this short video with Richard Holloway, he talks about how we can't help wondering about where we come from and why we are here. Did some all-powerful being make the universe? When we die, is there anything else to come? And what will it be like? Questions like these have occupied human minds across the ages. In our search for answers, we have come up with different stories.

Link to [A Little History of Religion - A short film with Richard Holloway](#).



2.2 Text extract

Chapter 2: The Doors

Read from the beginning of Chapter 2 to the end.

Say you found yourself in the Sinai desert in Egypt one morning in 1300 BCE. You might come across a bearded barefoot man kneeling before a thorn bush. You watch him as he listens intently to the bush...

....So we will begin with India.

2.3 Image



Moses and the Burning Bush,
by William Blake at the V&A

In William Blake's art, the Burning Bush often symbolizes the divine presence and revelation experienced by Moses, as well as the transformative power of faith and revelation. Blake uses the image to explore themes of spiritual awakening, divine communication, and the potential for seeing beyond the limitations of the material world.

2.4 Questions and reflections

It's helpful for pupils to make a summary of what they have learnt so far using the points below:

- What does Richard Holloway have to say about prophets?
- What do you think about the 'doors' way of thinking about religious experience?
- Different things were going on at different times and in different places, so learning about religion means looking at different people and stories. As we do so, we find our own ideas can change. What has made you think from this session?

03

The Wheel



3.1 Video

Simran and Vraj explain the complexities of Hindu belief in reincarnation. They believe life is a cycle of birth, death and rebirth, with our actions in this life, our “karma”, affecting our future incarnations. Kindness leads to good karma, whilst selfishness leads to bad karma. The soul may be reincarnated thousands of times.

Believing in reincarnation affects how Hindus think about death. Bodies are burnt after death, to symbolise the quick release of the soul to begin its next life. Simran meets Hemang, a Hindu priest, on a boat in the River Soar in Leicester. He tells her that as our bodies are mostly water, Hindus scatter the ashes in a river after death. He helps the families of those who die to understand that death is a new beginning for the soul of their loved one. In India Hindus traditionally scattered ashes in the River Ganges. Hemang says that all rivers are created equal in the eyes of god, and they all merge eventually into the oceans. River Soar, or River Ganges, the symbol is for the way life flows on.

Video link to [The Hindu cycle of birth, death and re-birth](#) (4mins 36 secs)



3.2 Text extract

Chapter 3: The Wheel

Read from the beginning of Chapter 3 to the end of the chapter

A popular theme in science fiction is the hero who goes back in time to alter events in the past that had a catastrophic effect on human history. At the beginning of one story a train is hurtling along the tracks with a mad bomber on board. He blows the train up as it passes a huge dam, causing a flood of water to drown a whole city...

.....When I was a young man studying to be a priest I was fascinated by guides to the rites and ceremonies of the different Christian traditions.



Square mandala on the ceiling of a Tibetan monastery

3.3 Image

As a symbol of unity, eternity, wholeness and perfection, Hindus and Buddhists use the Mandala to denote everlasting life, a kind of cosmic diagram revealing the structure of life, emphasising the importance of the inner world we all experience quietly inside, and the outer world.

3.4 Questions and reflections

It's helpful for pupils to make a summary of what they have learnt so far using the points below:

- What does Hinduism have to say about karma?
- Why are rivers important to Hindus?
- What do you think about the cycle of life?

04

One Into Many



4.1 Video

Vraj shows us around a Hindu temple, called a mandir, and tells us about the religious statues called murtis that Hindus keep in their temples and homes. Hinduism is over 4,000 years old and made up of lots of different Indian religious traditions. Hindus believe in one God, Brahman, but the millions of qualities that Brahman has are represented by millions of different gods and goddesses. Vraj compares this idea to a bunch of flowers; although every petal or flower is different, they are still one bunch. Going to worship at a shrine is like visiting the gods and goddesses. Mandirs are centres for the community and worship, with many murtis to pray to. Vraj rings a bell to awaken god when he enters, then bows and prays to the statues ask for help or to thank them. His family mainly worships Shiv or Shiva, the creator, but he can ask other gods if he needs particular help. For example he might ask the monkey god Hanuman for strength, or Ganesh the elephant god for intelligence. We see Vraj at the service of worship called Aarti, performed at least twice a day.

Link to [Visiting a Mandir \(Hindu Temple\)](#) (4mins 15 secs)



4.2 Text extract

Chapter 4: One Into Many

Read from the beginning of the chapter to the end of the chapter.

One day you hear that your favourite author is coming to town to talk about her work. You go along to the bookshop where she is appearing and hear her reading from the new book, which is filled with the latest adventures of characters long familiar to you. You ask her where they all come from. Are they real? Do they exist somewhere? She laughs. 'Only in my imagination', she says. She made them all up. They come from her head. So she can do anything she likes with them....

...His name was Siddhartha Gautamam and he was a prince. But he is better known as the Buddha.



Figure of golden indian symbol aum

4.3 Image

Brahman represents the ultimate reality, the supreme force or principle that underlies all existence, and Aum (Om) is the sacred symbol and sound that embodies Brahman. Brahman is often described as the foundation of the universe, the source of all creation and the ultimate reality.

While Hinduism has many gods and goddesses, many believe these are different manifestations or aspects of the one Supreme Spirit, Brahman. Brahman is often seen as formless, yet it is also understood to be present within all things, including the individual self.

4.4 Questions and reflections

It's helpful for pupils to make a summary of what they have learnt so far using the points below:

- What is the difference between Brahman and Brahma?
- While there are thousands of gods, we have looked at two in particular.
- What have you learnt about Shiva?
- What have you learnt about Ganesh?

05

Prince to Buddha



5.1 Video

Why do we get old, get ill and die? How can we escape from suffering? The story of how Prince Siddhartha Gautama left a life of luxury to embark on a search for the answers, and how he eventually became the Buddha -- the Enlightened One.

Link to [The Enlightenment Of The Buddha](#) (5 mins 53 secs)



5.2 Text extract

Chapter 5: Prince to Buddha

Read from the beginning of the chapter to the end.

Fifteen hundred years after those Aryan horsemen thundered into India and began the evolution of the complex and colourful religion we now call Hinduism, a man looked in dismay at its doctrine of endless reincarnations. He asked himself what it was that shackled souls onto the wheel of samsāra. And from his answer a new spiritual movement emerged. He was born around 580 BCE at the foot of the Himalayan Mountains in north-east India. His name was Siddhartha Gautama and this is his story....

.....The religion Siddhartha Gautama founded spread throughout Asia and in time became a world religion, but it is hardly found today in the land of its birth. Unlike Jainism, which is found hardly anywhere else, and to which we next return.



The Seated Buddha at Gal Vihara

5.3 Image

The Seated Buddha at Gal Vihara, a part of the ancient city of Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka, is a magnificent rock-cut sculpture carved during the 12th century CE under the command of King Parakramabahu I. The complex features four statues of the Buddha carved on a single granite rock face, considered among the best examples of ancient Sinhalese sculpting. The Seated Buddha, specifically, is depicted in the dhyana mudra, a meditative posture.

5.4 Questions and reflections

It's helpful for pupils to make a summary of what they have learnt so far using the points below:

- Siddhartha was born a prince, what questions did he ask?
- What did the Buddha believe was the best way to break the cycle of samsara?

06

**Where does religious
belief come from?**

Conclusion

This session draws together the threads of what we've learnt so that we can answer this question:

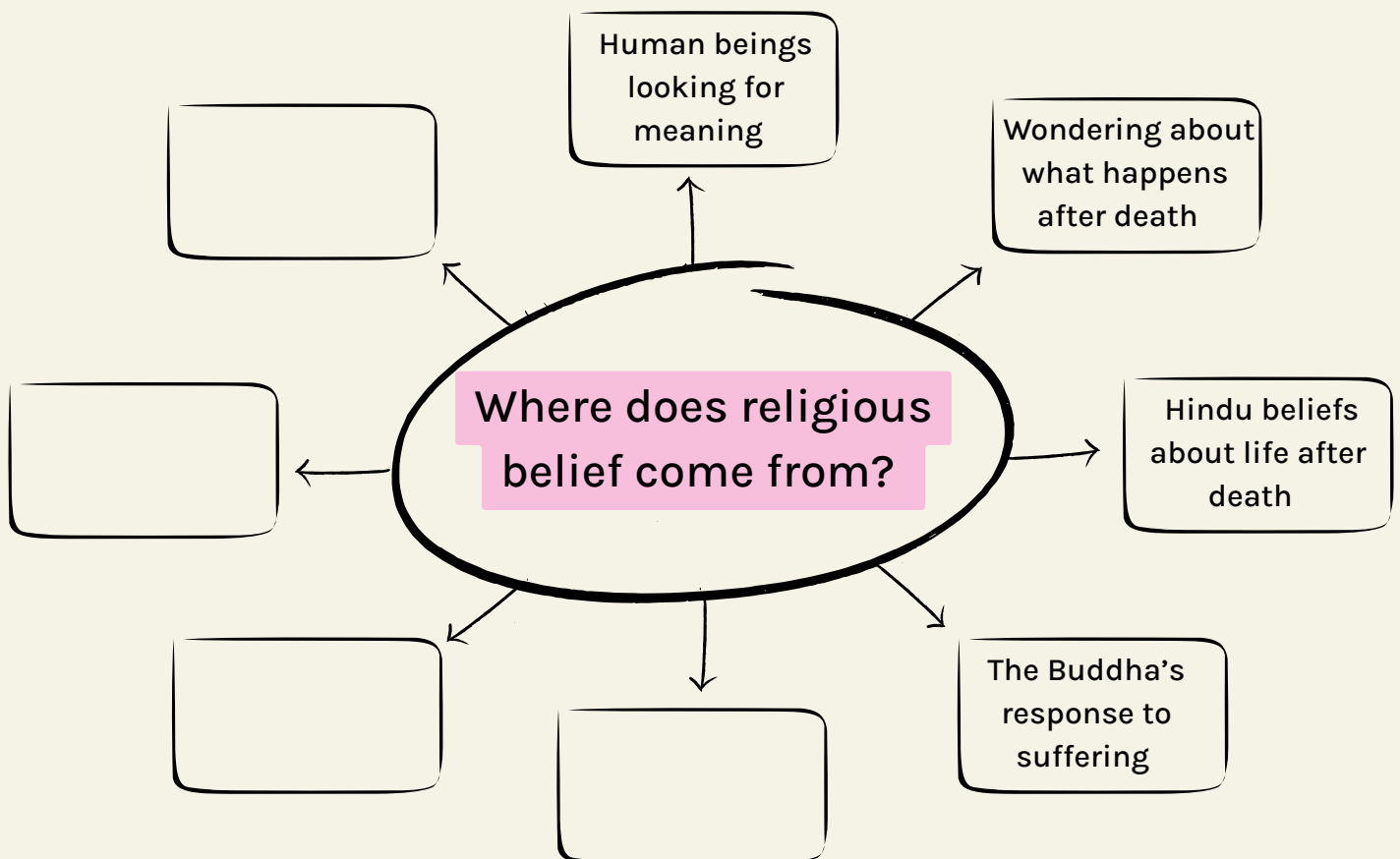
Where does religious belief come from?

The headlines of what pupils have learnt in this unit:

- Humans ask questions about why we are here and what might happen when we die.
- Religions try to answer these questions, but they are not neat and tidy.
- We have found out that prophets believe they have direct communication with God or with a universal being.
- Some religions believe that there is a cycle of life and death.
- In Hinduism there are thousands of gods which Hindus believe represent the one life force.
- Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha had profound experiences which shaped the way he thought about suffering and the purpose of life.

Using the notes of key points from each session, get pupils in their own words to answer the question 'Where does religion come from?' in their own words. The mind map will help them in preparing for their written response.

Mind Map





Mary Myatt

Mary Myatt is an education adviser, writer and speaker. She engages with pupils, teachers and leaders about learning, leadership and the curriculum.

Mary has written extensively about the curriculum, leadership and school improvement. Her most recent is the Huh Curriculum series for primary, secondary, SEND and Alternative Provision.

She has established Myatt & Co an online platform with films for ongoing professional development including the popular Primary Subject Networks, Secondary Subject Networks and most recently Key Stage 3 The Ambitious Years.

She maintains that there are no quick fixes and that great outcomes for pupils are not achieved through tick boxes.



[@MaryMyatt](https://twitter.com/MaryMyatt)



www.marymyatt.com



For more information you can email
hello@ambitiousyears.com



Key Stage 3:
The Ambitious Years

Resource produced by



v5 July 2026