

Understanding Sacred Texts

Activities and questions

This document provides a number of thought provoking ideas that can be used in the classroom to guide students through the interactive *Understanding Sacred Texts*. For each of the interactive's five themes we provide observations on particular interviews, as well as activities and questions that will help students to evaluate the ideas that have been presented and to challenge their own views.

The questions and activities are pitched at various levels, ranging from Key Stage 3 – 5. It is important to be aware of this when selecting material for your classes.

Some of the tasks focus on a particular answer given by one of the interviewees. The others require students to draw on answers to more than one question. These activities should ideally be used in conjunction with the video interviews. However, if you are unable to access the Flash videos, excerpts from the interviews are provided.

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Theme 1: Then and now

Activities

1. Watch a selection of answers within this theme and consider how and why the people interviewed engage with sacred texts in their lives? Is it different for different people or does there seem to be an agreement on this?
2. Conduct a debate in which the class divides either into pairs or into two groups. One side should argue that sacred texts help people to conduct their lives with morality and goodness. The other side will argue that people should work out for themselves what it means to be good, rather than relying on a text. Is it possible for the two groups to reach an agreement? Refer to the interviewees' answers to Question 1 and 2, to help you with this task.
3. Investigate a selection of websites (and other computer based materials) dedicated to religious texts? What advantages or disadvantages are there in using these sites? Does the author/host of the site make an influence the material? Is that going to be the case with any written material?

1. How can a text written many years ago help people to deal with their lives today?

Observations on the interviews

Everybody agrees that sacred texts do not need to be updated. A view that quite a few people expressed was that it is the interpretation, rather than the text, that needs to be updated with time.

Ed Kessler (Jewish academic) says, "...each generation has the responsibility to interpret their texts for that generation. And the texts may mean slightly different things for each generation... we reinterpret the text and make sense of it for each particular period of time..."

As the above quote suggests, the interpretation of sacred texts is a great responsibility. How do you think a person decides what a passage from a religious text means? What would they need to consider? What questions would they need to ask and who would they ask?

Morna Hooker (Christian academic) says "The more specific the Commandments ... that we find in the Bible, the less relevant they seem to be to the modern world."

Do you think religious people should ignore passages that do not seem relevant for the modern world? How can they decide what is relevant for the modern world?

Thinking deeper:

- If a passage can be interpreted in a variety of ways, does this mean that sacred texts have less authority?

- If one passage is interpreted in two different ways, is it possible for both interpretations to be right?
- Are all possible interpretations of sacred texts equally valid, or are some 'better' than others?
- "The idea that passages in scripture can be interpreted to have different meanings could lead to chaos within religions." Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have considered more than one point of view.
- Does the idea that a single text can be interpreted in a variety of ways weaken or strengthen its claims to relevance? Give reasons for your answer and show an understanding of two points of view.

2. In what ways do the texts influence lives today?

Observations on the interviews

Ed Kessler (Jewish academic) said, "...at the end of the Psalm we have 'Blessed be he who smashes the children's heads against the rocks' You know, we tend to omit that Psalm, pretend it's not there, but we have to deal with those Psalms, those difficult texts. Otherwise those who want to use the texts for evil will succeed."

Lucy Winkett (Christian Faith leader) also talks about difficult passages (in her answer to question 4), " St Paul wrote in one of his letters, "Slaves obey your masters". Now for me as a Christian living in the 21st century, I think that's not acceptable ... but I don't have any difficulty disagreeing with scripture in that way."

Why do you think that people tend to ignore difficult passages in sacred texts? How do you think they should be dealt with? Is it acceptable for a believer to disagree with scripture in this way? Do you think the other experts would agree with Lucy Winkett?

As seen in the interviews, many religious people decide how they want to live their lives based upon what they read in their sacred text. How do you make decisions about how you want to live your life? Are there particular people or things that you look to?

Thinking deeper:

- Many different factors influence our lives today, such as law, the media, politics and school. Are there any other contemporary writings that can be said to influence people's lives to the extent that religious texts have done?
- Do you think religious texts are important in the lives of non-religious people? How do religious texts influence the secular world today?

3. Would you ever use computer technology instead of a book or scroll?

Observations on the interviews

Muhammad Yusuf (Muslim faith leader) said, "If a Qur'an is written up on the internet on a computer ... there needs to be thought given to the kind of material that might be on the same machine."

Why would it matter what else is on the machine?

A few of the interviewees mentioned the importance of touching and feeling the text, at the same time as reading it.

Hamza (young Muslim) said, "...when you're holding something close to you it holds a deeper meaning... When you touch and feel something and it's messing with your senses, it plays on your emotions, I guess, and it has that effect of sacredness."

Why might things have a greater effect on us when we experience them with more than one of our senses?

Muhammad Yusuf (Muslim faith leader) explains how over time, the Qur'an has appeared in many forms:

"The very first expression of the Qur'an was verbally in the mouth of the Prophet, peace be upon him, himself. It was later written down by the scribes of the Prophet on ostraka, on bits of pottery, on the shoulder blades of animals and later on, on parchment and on papyrus, and through the present day, in books and in bound folios. Through to the present day, we see not only paper bound copies of the Qur'an, but also online versions, computerised versions."

Many people talk about the way different versions of the sacred texts are used for different purposes.

Gila Sacks (Jewish educator) says, "...in Judaism, you can use whatever version works for you... But the exception to that is where reading the text is the act in and of itself, reading the text is the act you're commanded to do. And that happens when we read the Torah during a prayer service... we're commanded to read off specially written scrolls, manuscripts that were written with the intention that they would be used for holy reading."

Thinking deeper:

- Is reading scripture from a computer less of a religious act, than reading it from a book or a scroll? Does it change a person's connection with the words?
- "It does not matter *how* you read scripture, what is important is *why* you read it." Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have considered more than one point of view.

Theme 2: Whose text?

1. What if your conscience disagrees with a 'rule' from scripture?

Observations on the interviews

Julian Baggini (atheist philosopher), "as a non-believer I have no problem if my conscience disagrees with a religious text, because I think I can learn from religious texts, but I don't take them to be final authorities..."

What does Julian think non-believers can learn from religious texts? What does he mean by final authority? Can a text have authority over people? How do these religious texts influence secular society?

Gila Sacks (Jewish educator) said, "I've got the right to argue with the text and that's ok, that's allowed."

What do you think they meant by 'arguing with the text'? Do you agree that religious people have this right? Do you think that the other interviewees would agree with her?

Muhammad Yazdani (Muslim educator) says that if a person doesn't agree with the scripture, it's because he or she does not fully understand the words.

"If a passage from scripture does not seem to make sense, this is because the reader does not understand rather than because the passage cannot be understood."

Do you agree? How does this compare to Morna Hooker's (academic) Christian view. In talking about the influence of texts on people's lives (Then and now, qu 2), she says:

"We can use the Bible as a guide to how we live, provided we don't expect it to answer everyday problems that confront us."

Do you think Muslims or Jews would expect their texts to answer everyday problems?

Julian Baggini points out that many people disagree with elements of scripture, and therefore re-interpret the words to fit their own arguments. He says that ultimately,

"you can't escape your own responsibility to look at what's in the text and respond according to your own conscience. The minute you just say well it's in the text, I must do it, in a way you're abdicating your own responsibility to try and interpret what's going on there and take responsibility for how you read it."

Thinking deeper:

- There are different attitudes towards texts among religious people. What are these different attitudes? Can you think of any reasons for the differences? Is it ok that there are differences, and if so, how does this impact on the idea of the scripture as the word of God?

2. Are there parts of the text that are particularly special for you?

Ed Kessler says,

"Another favourite saying of mine is ... "you're not free to complete the task but neither are you free to desist from it'. In other words, you have to make an effort, you have to contribute to this world but don't think you're going to do it all, but just make your own contribution."

What does it mean to 'contribute to the world'? In what ways can we contribute to the world? Are there any particular ways in which you contribute to the world? How do you feel this contribution relates to religion, if at all?

Why do you think that some people have linked their sacred text to an important life event, such as the birth of a child or a wedding (see John Williams, Christian educator)? What does this tell you about their relationship to the text? Does it tell you anything about their relationship to God?

Both Harry (young Jew) and Hamza (young Muslim) talked about passages they had learned when they were young:

Harry - "I personally believe that the *shema*, the prayer for the morning and the evening, is very important ... it makes me feel part of the greater Jewish community saying it at a service because everyone, every Jew, is taught it when they are very young."

Hamza - "... there's one certain aspect of the text that's really special to me...and this was the *Surat Alaq*, in which ... [the Prophet Muhammad] said the first few words of the Qur'an. ... This is the first, story that I learned when I was younger, so I guess this is something that will always stick in my mind."

Thinking deeper:

- In what ways can sacred texts lead to positive attitudes towards people with different beliefs? Refer to the interviews in your answer, for example, you may want to refer to Hamza's (young Muslim) answer to Question 11 or Amineh Hoti's (Muslim academic) answer to Question 5.
- How about you? Is there a text, or part of a text, that is particularly special for you? If so, can you explain what it is and why it is special? If not, do you think there is anything or anything else in your life that performs the role that a text might play for others?

3. Imagine that you have been asked for a cut-down version of this text. What would it contain?

Many of the interviewees found this question very difficult to answer and were uncomfortable with the idea of suggesting that some parts were less important than

others. Why do you think they did not think it was appropriate to suggest cutting down the text?

Muhammad Yusuf (Muslim faith leader) compares his relationship with the Qur'an with his relationship with his mother (Who's text, qu 2),

"The Qur'an constitutes a way in which God ... communicates with us... "

Gila Sacks (Jewish educator) agrees with him,

"I think one of the things that's most important in the way I understand Torah is the whole,... its easy to focus on the juicy bits...But to say that [the 'tricky'] bits somehow matter less or can be cut out is to miss the point...I might not understand why they were put there ... but they're there to tell me something."

Faith leaders Lucy Winkett (Christian) and Jeremy Gordon (Jewish) both gave versions of The Golden Rule - treat others as you yourself would like to be treated. Do you agree with the Golden Rule? Can you think of a situation in which the rule should not be followed? If almost all religions have a version of this rule, what does this tell us about religion in general? Could this rule exist without religion? What function does religion serve in this context?

Jeremy Gordon (Jewish faith leader) talks about a story in which one of the most respected Jewish teachers, Rabbi Hillel, says that The Golden Rule is the basis for all Jewish teaching. Then Rabbi Hillel tells the person questioning him to "now, go and learn." How or what do you think the rabbi in the story wants the convert to go and learn? Why is learning so important in religion? Jeremy Gordon says that many people forget the "go and learn" part of the story. Do you think it changes the meaning?

Thinking deeper:

- "A religious person only needs to know the important passages of a sacred text." Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have considered more than one point of view. It may be particularly helpful to look at Gila Sacks's (Jewish educator) answer to Question 6.

Theme 3: Authority and Belief

Activities

Jeremy Gordon (Jewish faith leader) describes how the Torah is treated in Judaism (qu 2), and Amineh Hoti (Muslim academic) describes how Muslims show respect for the Qur'an (qu 3). Find out about how sacred texts are treated in other religions. What do people do to show their respect to them?

1. Do believers need help to understand the text?

Observations on the interviews

Harry (young Jew) says "In religious texts you have to read between the lines."

Does this mean that the message in sacred texts is not obvious? Would this make a difference to people's belief in that text? Do you think the fact that people have to work so hard to understand a sacred text, makes a difference to the authority of that text?

Amineh Hoti (Muslim academic) says although people need help translating the Qur'an, the words themselves are accessible to anyone,

"There's no Imam, or there's no priest in between God or the Qur'an ... [and people themselves]" .

Gila Sacks (Jewish educator) agrees saying,

"I think anyone can read it and I think anyone can find meaning in it if that's something they look for, if that's something they choose to do."

Julian Baggini (atheist philosopher) talks about the importance of understanding the texts as historical documents,

"... as modern people we read these texts and we need to understand about their history, and where they come from, the social background – all these things are important."

Morna Hooker (Christian academic) agrees with him, saying

"... the more we understand the context in which those texts were written, and the more we understand the kind of problems which the people who wrote them were facing, the easier it is to understand the real significance of those texts."

Do you think religious texts are historical documents? Would that change your understanding of them? How much information do you need to know about these texts before you can really understand them?

Thinking deeper:

- Who do you think are the best people to help others understand sacred texts? If you wanted help to understand a piece of writing (religious or other), who would you ask and why?
- "Holy books are the final word of God and need no further interpretation." Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have considered more than one point of view.
- Which of the two following statements do you agree with? (If you need some help with your thinking, watch Hamza and Gila Sacks's answers to this question)

“People should make up their own mind on how to interpret scripture, listening to others’ points of view is just confusing.”

“It is not possible to understand a sacred text without considering the ideas of other people.”

2. What is sacred?

Observations on the interviews

Morna Hooker (Christian educator) said that she finds the term sacred difficult:

“... the problem with this word is that it seems to set the Bible and other sacred writings apart from us, as something to be venerated, treated with awe and respect. And I understand the Bible to be a book that is relevant to our everyday lives.”

Do you think it could be possible to see something as sacred at the same time as seeing it as part of everyday life?

John Williams (Christian educator) says:

“Sacred translated means holy, and holy means to me different. It’s something which is not mundane. .. We talk about life being sacred it’s because it’s different – human life is different to other forms of life because we have a soul. That’s what I mean by holy.”

Gila Sacks (Jewish educator) also talks about sacred being something different,

“In Hebrew, the word for sacred is *kodesh*, it’s a word that’s often translated to mean holy, but actually it means separate or distinct or other.”

How would you describe the word “sacred?” What is it that makes the holy or sacred stand out from the ‘profane’?

Muhammad Yazdani (Muslim educator) says that

“Sacred is to surrender to a deity or to a text from the deity.”

He explains that the text from a deity, God, must not have anything added to it by humans and that sacred means absolute belief in God and the text.

Julian Baggini says

‘I think when people usually use the word sacred, they’re trying to give over a sense of untouchability or utter reverence we have to have towards something. That we take it to be true, eternal and we can’t question it, we can’t criticise it, we have to take it as the final authority.’

Do you agree? Do you think there is an element of surrender about believing in something? Does that mean giving something up? Can things created by humans be considered sacred, or should the term be saved for things religious or spiritual? Does the word 'sacred' suggest something that is more important than normal human beings?

Gila Sacks (Jewish educator) said,

"... we can turn something that isn't holy into something holy by using it for holy purposes."

Can you think of any examples of how everyday things have been made holy in this way? Explain what it is that made them holy.

Thinking deeper:

- Is there anything that is sacred to you? If so, how do you show your respect for it? Do you have any rules about how others should treat it?

3. Many religious people refer to scripture as the 'Word of God'. What does this mean? Does it matter?

Observations on the interviews

Harry (young Jew) explains an absolute (or literal) view of scripture as "a direct dictation from God". Lucy Winkett (faith leader) says that this isn't the way Christians understand their scriptures:

"It's not so much that we believe that it was dictated on to a page by God, but the four gospels all tell slightly different stories about Jesus."

This is very different from Muhammad Yusuf's (faith leader) answer,

"for Muslims, the Qur'an is God's very dictated word, sent through the transmissive agent of the holy Prophet... the holy Qur'an is God's word ... with different layers of meaning".

Traditionally Jews and Muslims believe that their scriptures were revealed by God. This is different from Christians' understanding of their scripture, that it is the life of Jesus, told by his disciples. Do you think these different understandings change the way that Jews, Christians or Muslims relate to their text?

John Williams (Christian Educator) says

"God is talking to us all the time, through scriptures, through other people, through the Church that I belong to".

Gila Sacks (Jewish educator) also talks about God communicating with people,

“... the idea of God speaking, of God communicating these precise words, of us having an exact record of something that is so beyond our capacity to imagine is something very difficult to comprehend...”

What does it mean to say that God speaks through other people? How might God do this? How could a person tell whether or not God was communicating with them? Might a person mistakenly believe that they are hearing the word of God?

Julian Baggini (atheist philosopher) would prefer that people didn't think about sacred texts as the word of God as

“in a way it stops you from being able to argue with it, and I think the ability to argue with the text, to disagree with it, is very important. Because once you set up a text as an authority which can't be questioned, I then think it can be misused by people who want you to interpret it in a certain way for their own ends.”

What does it mean to “argue with a text”? Do people argue with modern texts? Are all ideas continually open to new interpretations? How have different people and communities throughout history argued with the scriptures? You might research the Christian Reformation or the establishment of Jewish progressive movements to help you answer this.

Thinking deeper:

- “Sacred texts are meaningless if they are not the word of God.” Do you agree? Give reasons for your opinion, showing that you have considered more than one point of view.
- Some of the interviewees state that their sacred text is the word of God. Is this belief in anyway compatible with the belief that not everything in the text is literally true?
- It is clear from the interviews that the ‘word of God’ means different things to different people. How might these different views influence the way people think of the miracle stories in sacred texts?
- “It does not make sense to believe that a sacred text is the word of God, just because that text says it is.” Do you agree? Give reasons for your opinion, showing that you have considered more than one point of view.

Theme 4: Meaning and Interpretation

Activities

1. Divide the class into two and stage a debate. One half of the class should argue that sacred texts should only be read in their original language and the other half should argue that they need to be translated.
2. Create a definition for different kinds of truth, list examples of each one and explain where you would go to 'find' each sort of truth on your list. Provide definitions and examples for each kind of truth. Look at the answers given by Morna Hooker (Christian academic) and Harry (young Jew) if you need some help.
3. Write a speech, defending the translation of the Bible into English in the 1500s. In reply to the above, write a speech by one of the Christian leaders who had the translations burnt.

1. What are the advantages or disadvantages of translating scripture?

Observations on the interviews

Lucy Winkett (Christian Faith Leader) explains the problems of translating words from different languages, and how this can completely change the understanding of the text. In the example she gives, a feminine Hebrew word for the spirit of God, *Ruach*, is translated into Greek, then Latin, which results in people talking about the Holy Spirit as *he* when talking in English. Do these changes make a difference to people's connection with the text or the religion?

Jeremy Gordon (Jewish faith leader) says that every time you translate a text you produce a new interpretation of it, creating new meanings:

"sometimes you can get an interpretation that actually takes you further away from the text than you would find if you could really engage with the text in the original language".

Gila Sacks (Jewish educator) agrees saying,

"There's an extent to which any translation layers on to a text ... a meaning that's relevant for its time and the time of that language".

Is understanding something in the language it was originally written in make it more pure? Do you think modern translations of religious texts give it meanings that are linked with contemporary society? Does it matter if they do? Does it matter if different translations give different messages?

Lucy Winkett (Christian faith leader) points out that the Bible was first translated into English in the 1500s. She goes on to say that at this time,

"there were English New Testaments burned in the middle of London because Bishops and Christian leaders thought that it was terrible to translate the Bible into a language that everyone could understand. They wanted to keep the power for the people who could read Latin."

Why do you think the Bishops and Christian leaders believed that an English translation of the bible was wrong? Do you think people can be more powerful if they can understand more?

Thinking deeper:

- "A text can only be fully understood if it is translated into the language of the reader." Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have considered more than one point of view.
- "As soon as a sacred text is translated, it is no longer the word of God." Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have considered more than one point of view.
- "If God has chosen to reveal the truth in a particular language, we should not alter that." Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer, showing that you have considered more than one point of view.

2. Is there truth in the text?

Observations on the interviews

Julian Baggini answers this question by saying:

'Not all, but a lot of religious believers think that the truth in the text is an eternal truth, it's basically the word of God and it's true to all people at all times. Now I think that's something that secular people are very unlikely to believe because every text is a product of its time, every writer is a product of their own society.'

Do you think that truth is something that is specifically relevant to particular people and times or are some truths eternal?

Ed Kessler (Jewish Academic) says,

"...the question of what is truth is a question that philosophers for hundreds, if not thousands, of years have tried to answer... And the important thing is not 'what is truth?' but ... "Do I live a good life".

Why do you think philosophers throughout history have been so concerned with this question? What kinds of truths have people been searching for? Is living a good life more important than believing in a religion or religious text?

Scarlett (young Christian) talked about being expected to “tell the truth”. Do religious texts always tell the truth? Is telling the truth always the right thing to do? Can you think of any examples where lying might be the right thing to do?

Thinking deeper:

- Can a text that is not factually true contain truth? What is the difference between truth and a fact? Does the distinction matter? If something contains 'truth' does it mean that it is always important? Can you think of any other places you would go to look for truth?
- What are the most important truths in your life? What kind of truths are they and why are they important?

3. Are there any contradictions in the text?

Observations on the interviews

Gila Sacks (Jewish educator) believes that the contradictions found in Jewish texts were put there intentionally,

“I start from a starting point that this is a text given from God, this is the word of God ... And therefore it’s a contradiction that’s there to teach me something, to make me look for something, to ask me something.”

Lucy Winkett (Christian faith leader) makes a similar point,

“I think that’s wonderful because it shows the variety of human experience, and it also shows that different people see things in different ways and that that’s not necessarily wrong...sometimes two contradictory things can be held at the same time.”

Do you agree that any contradictions in the texts were put there intentionally? Do you think that contradictions are good or bad?

Amineh Hoti's (Muslim educator) answer is very clear, she says simply,

“For a Muslim, there are no contradictions in the Qur'an.”

Muhammad Yazdani agrees, explaining that if there seems to be a contradiction, it is because,

“ ... there are scholars who have misunderstood the texts ... the Qur'an was revealed over twenty two to twenty three year period ... we say that it is an evolution of revelation.”

Julian Baggini (atheist philosopher) says that the contradictions in the texts are evidence that they are not historically accurate

"[If] you do believe that texts are literally true ... you can always come up with very, very complicated interpretations. ...but I sometimes think that if you want to explain what's going on, a very highly complicated, convoluted way of resolving a problem is probably not the best one to do."

He also says, 'when you look at these texts you see there are differences, there are contradictions, because they were all written by human beings who are not infallible.'

Do you agree with Julian? How would a believer disagree with Julian? Do you think religions create complicated answers as deliberately interesting ways to solve problems?

Thinking deeper:

- Are contradictions evidence of mistakes in the text?
- Some religious people believe in their scripture literally, that it is the true word of God. Others believe in a more liberal view, for example that the text was inspired by God but can be interpreted in different ways. What do you think these two groups of people would say about contradictions in the text?
- "A sacred text containing contradictions cannot be considered to be the word of God." Do you agree? Give reasons for your opinion, showing that you have considered more than one point of view.
- Some believers value contradictions in the text because it means that they have to work harder to understand it. Why do you think that some people prefer to work hard to achieve understanding? Is there anything that you are willing to put lots of effort into to achieve?

Theme 5: Connections

Activities

1. Hold a debate in which one side argues that religion is responsible for dividing people rather than binding people together, and the other side holds the opposing viewpoint. You could use examples from ancient or modern history as well as contemporary events.
2. Create a poster to show the connections between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. You could consider the stories, rituals, festivals, food, beliefs. Make sure you also show the differences as well as the similarities (e.g. Rules for observing the Sabbath/day of prayer).
3. Collect a range of newspaper over the period of a week. How many positive stories are there about religion, how many negative ones? Is religion often shown as linked to conflict or are there positive examples of inter-faith activity? Does this media representation give a fair portrayal of religion in general?

1. Could a religion exist without scripture?

Observations on the interviews

Lucy Winkett (Christian faith leader) argues that the scripture

"enables the stories and the wisdom of that religion to be spread to a much wider audience, much wider group of people." Gila Sacks (Jewish educator) makes a similar point, that "...it's quite difficult for me to understand ... how you would transmit ideas and beliefs and values and practices."

Do you think words are the best ways to transmit ideas? Will this change as technology becomes more important in our lives?

John Williams (Christian Educator) describes scripture as, "central to the believers' faith." Jeremy Gordon (Jewish Faith Leader) takes this idea further suggesting that the relationship that Jews have with scripture is so important, "that's how we know who we are and that's how we tell our story."

What is it that makes you who you are? Is this similar to the way some believers feel about their faith? Are there any texts or writings that are central or crucial in your life?

Scarlett (young Christian) says,

"... a faith or a religion wouldn't exist without your God, or most importantly without your belief. Having a text isn't going to help you believe if you don't have faith."

Do you agree with her? What is it that helps people believe? If you do not believe in God, what would change your mind?

Thinking deeper:

- What are the various roles that scriptures perform in religion? Could these roles be performed by anything or anyone else? Can you imagine what a religion without scripture might be like? What would be missing? Would anything be added? Can you describe it?
- Does religion create scripture or does scripture create religion?
- "A personal relationship with God is possible through prayer; reading a sacred text is an optional extra." Do you agree? Give reasons for your opinion, showing that you have considered more than one point of view.
- "Religion can exist without scripture but it can't exist without tradition." Do you agree?
- Why is tradition so important for religion/s? Do you think people can connect with each other just through following the same traditions? How can traditions be preserved other than through scripture? What traditions do you have in your life?

2. The word 'religion' originates from a word that means 'to bind'. To what does religion bind people?

Observations on the interviews

Ed Kessler (Jewish academic) says that the idea of binding is a reminder of the story of Abraham and Isaac,

“when God asks Abraham to sacrifice his long awaited son, Isaac. And Abraham binds his son Isaac... and although Abraham doesn't sacrifice Isaac, thank God, we Jews look at the binding as a significant story in our tradition.”

What does the fact that this story is so important tell you about Jewish people and how they see their relationship with God? You may want to look at this story, which appears on the Sacred Stories interactive, before you answer this question.

Julian Baggini says,

“religion can be a very powerful force for bringing people together and a text can help to do that... However, there is a downside to the binding I think, which is that as we bind ourselves together with people whose views we share, it's very hard to avoid separating ourselves off from other groups of people who disagree with us.”

Do you consider yourself part of a group that share the same views? Do you feel that this has separated you from other groups? What problems could arise if we become separated from other people in this way? What could we do to prevent or overcome these problems?

Several people talked about the texts binding or connecting people with God. Muhammad Yazdani (Muslim educator) says,

“...everything in the divinely revealed scriptures and texts is something that binds us, binds us to the Lord Almighty.”

Muhammad Yusuf explains (Connections, qu 2) that this is one thing that connects Jews, Christians and Muslims, describing them as,

“a family which ... all have a shared heritage of revelation and of communication with the one same, personal God of us all.”

What do you think it means to be bound to God through scripture? Could this mean different things for different people?

Thinking deeper:

- Can you think of any other things that bind people together? Are there both positive and negative things that can bind us together? What are the things that bind you to others?
- “The only things that sacred texts bind people to are outdated ideas and beliefs.” Do you agree? Give reasons for your opinion, showing that you have considered more than one point of view.
- Some people talk about being bound to God, to other people and to creation. What kind of thoughts and behaviour would result from being bound to these things? How might this be different for different people?

3. How does your text relate to the other Abrahamic texts?

Observations on the interviews

Scarlett (young Christian) talks about religion giving people a sense of belonging,

“There's obviously that bigger something that people want to belong to, that something that makes them in common in a way, ... So in a way they're connected through that sort of overall belief in that way of life.”

Why do you think so many people are drawn to religion? Are there different reasons for different people? Does the persistence of religious belief prove that God exists?

Lucy Winkett (Christian faith leader) talks about the connections between the texts of the Abrahamic faiths,

“The bible that Christians accept is split into two parts – the Hebrew bible, or what Christians call the Old Testament and the New Testament. And for Muslims there is also a last Testament, the Qur'an.”

Amineh Hoti agrees saying,

“The Qur'an is part and a sequence to the Torah, to the *Injeel*, which is the bible. It comes in line after the books but it is revealed by God as God's final word, according to Muslims.”

What are the advantages and disadvantages of referring to the texts in this way? Try to think about this from the perspective of a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim.

John Williams (Christian educator) talks about the connections through values, “of love and justice and peace and forgiveness.” Ed Kessler (Jewish academic) makes the link through stories,

“For instance, the story of Noah and the flood, the story of Joseph, the story of the sacrifice of Abraham's son ... these are all stories that we share in common.”

When thinking about inter-faith connections, is it more important to look for similarities or to understand the differences?

Thinking deeper:

- The Abrahamic texts are closely related. What difference do you think this might make to the way a person thinks of and acts towards people from other Abrahamic faiths?
- If there are so many similarities between these three religions, how can we explain some of the bad feeling and prejudices that sometimes exists? Is there anything that can be done to prevent or improve bad feeling and prejudice?
- One method of reducing conflict is through discussion and dialogue, and many inter-faith groups have been set up to do this. Do you think discussion is the best way to get to know others and make society a better place?