

# Unit 3A What do signs and symbols mean in religion?

## ABOUT THE UNIT

In this unit children learn about some of the possible or intended meanings of a wide range of signs and symbols. The unit considers a variety of religious symbols and their meanings for those who use them. Children are encouraged to investigate examples of symbolic language and to deepen their understanding of some common religious concepts.

## WHERE THE UNIT FITS IN

This unit builds on previous work on different world religions, especially work on places of worship, special books or religious stories. Children extend their understanding of the use of religious symbolism in these contexts. Links can be made with the year 1 unit 1A 'What does it mean to belong?' and unit 2B 'Why did Jesus tell stories?' in year 2. Teachers can continue to explore examples of symbolism in units that follow, building on children's knowledge and understanding.

## VOCABULARY

In this unit children will have an opportunity to use words and phrases related to:

- 'signs' and 'symbols'
- meanings beyond the literal, *eg stands for ..., represents ..., is a bit like ...*
- metaphors and similes

## RESOURCES

- a range of books including a Bible, a retelling of the story of Noah's Ark, and stories about how memories can be provoked by certain objects
- a 'feely' bag
- a Passover (seder) plate
- visits to a local church
- visitors: a member of a local church to demonstrate the use of clothes/cloths worn or used by priests/ministers in services, and/or talk about an example of a Christian metaphor used in worship
- pictures/posters/videos: large photos/pictures of people using non-verbal forms of communication; Christmas card pictures showing nativity scenes; drawings of signs/symbols which can be found around the school or in the local community, and pictures of a rainbow, dove and olive branch; greeting cards or advertisements showing examples of non-literal language
- pictures/images of Hindu deities, pictures/videos of Muslims at prayer; several Christian symbols (*eg cross, dove, fish, halo, chi-rho*) and examples of these in pictures/videos of churches; pictures/videos of Christians at worship

## EXPECTATIONS

### At the end of this unit

*most children will:*

identify some key religious symbols and some symbolic actions in a religious context; talk about some of the beliefs or ideas which underlie them; discuss the possible meanings of some examples of symbolic language, *eg words or phrases used by believers to describe God*

*some children will not have made so much progress and will:*

describe and suggest meanings for some religious symbols, gestures and words; understand that not all language should be taken literally

*some children will have progressed further and will:*

identify similar beliefs and ideas expressed symbolically in other religious or secular contexts, ie through symbols, actions, or words

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

## POSSIBLE TEACHING ACTIVITIES

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

## POINTS TO NOTE

CHILDREN SHOULD LEARN

CHILDREN

### WHAT DO THESE EVERYDAY SIGNS AND SYMBOLS MEAN?

- about the meaning of everyday signs and symbols
  - how to explore meanings within stories
  - how memories are linked to particular objects
- Show children rough drawings of some signs they might see around them in school or in the local community. Discuss what the signs mean. Ask volunteers to draw signs that they know, and ask the rest of the class to identify them.
  - Explain the difference between a sign and a symbol.
  - Look at symbols used in washing labels on clothes, on food packages or in sport to introduce the idea that sometimes one needs to be 'in the know' to understand certain symbols.
  - Look at pictures of a rainbow, a dove and an olive branch. Explore the meanings and uses of these symbols today. Find their origins in the story of Noah's Ark, which is important in three major world faiths – but in very different ways.
  - Ask the children to think about objects that they own which hold special memories or meanings for them. Model ways of talking about these, *eg I've got something special – it's a ....and it reminds me of ...*
  - Read a story which prompts talk about how memories can be provoked by certain objects.

- talk about meanings contained in stories, objects and signs
- relate the idea of a symbol as a reminder of something special to their own experience

- It is useful in this context to explore the difference between signs (which usually have one clear meaning) and symbols (which can have many meanings, and are therefore open to interpretation).

### HOW DO SYMBOLS HELP US REMEMBER THE PAST?

- the significance of Passover and its practice for Judaism
  - about how symbolic food can be used to remember important events
  - to reflect on important events in their own lives and link them with the importance of Passover for Jewish people.
- Show the children a Passover (seder) plate. Talk about what it might be. Show a video extract of a Jewish family sharing a Seder meal; *What meanings or memories does the seder plate hold for Jews?* Explore the reasons why it is important for Jewish people to remember this event in their history.
  - Ask children to imagine that they are living away from home and are preparing a meal which would bring back memories. *What would you choose and why?*

- talk about and explain the significance of a Passover meal for Jewish people
- explain how food can remind them of special events
- make connections between their personal experience and the experience of people in a religious context

### WHAT DO THESE EXAMPLES OF NON-LITERAL LANGUAGE MEAN?

- that words can have literal and non-literal meanings
  - how metaphors can convey religious meanings
  - how to interpret religious metaphors
- Introduce children to three or four examples of non-literal sayings, *eg you're driving me up the wall; it's raining cats and dogs; sorry, I must fly*. Discuss the literal and non-literal meanings.
  - Collect examples of non-literal language on greeting cards, *eg sorry you're under the weather*, and in advertisements to share with children. Discuss their literal and non-literal meanings.
  - Choose a feeling, *eg jealousy, anger, loneliness, fear*, to explore in terms of simile and metaphor, *eg When I'm angry, I feel like a balloon about to burst*. Encourage the children to write and illustrate their own ideas.
  - Introduce one of the following religious metaphors from the Bible: God is my rock (Psalm 18<sup>2</sup>), Jesus is the light of the world (John 8<sup>12</sup>), The Lord is my shepherd (Psalm 23). Brainstorm with the children any words they connect with the relevant image (*ie rock, light, shepherd*); from their suggestions, choose those which may explain why a religious believer might use such metaphors. Show children how believers might actually use these metaphors, *eg in religious books, songs, artefacts*. Choose a metaphor and ask the children to illustrate it using words and pictures for a class display.

- explain literal and non-literal meanings
- use similes to describe emotions
- talk about how metaphors can describe beliefs

- Non-literal language can make us laugh but can also provide a powerful tool to help us explore or express ideas which are difficult to put into words.
- Psalm 18 and Psalm 23 can also be found in Jewish writings.

### HOW DO SYMBOLS HELP BELIEVERS TO EXPRESS OR EXPLORE RELIGIOUS CONCEPTS, SUCH AS THE CONCEPT OF GOD?

- that symbolic language is used to describe God
  - that religious beliefs and ideas about God can be experienced in a variety of forms, including symbolism
- Ask the children to work in groups to discuss how symbolic language is used in different religions. Talk about the characteristics of fatherhood and motherhood, and how these might apply to God.
  - Consider God as multifaceted (as expressed in symbolic objects): talk about how people have different sides to their characters and enjoy doing different things. Look at images (or pictures of images) of Hindu deities. *What might these be saying about Hindu beliefs about God?*
  - Consider God as beyond image, incomparable (as expressed in symbolic actions): use examples from Islam. Look at pictures or videos of Muslims at prayer. Identify some symbolic actions and then discuss their possible meanings.
  - Consider God as holy and worthy of respect (as expressed in symbolic words): explore how Jews avoid writing God's name by finding other words to describe God, and explain why they do this. Ask the children if they have any more ideas.
  - Let the children present their findings to the rest of the class. Children can record their findings in words and pictures, drawing out similarities and differences.

- talk about some characteristics which are ascribed to God in different religions
- identify symbolic actions and suggest meanings
- compare and contrast the ways in which ideas about God are expressed symbolically in different religions

- The examples are based on the religious concept of God in some particular faith contexts (Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism). They are suggestions which should be adapted to suit children's previous experience of different world faiths and also the requirements of the locally agreed syllabus.
- There are opportunities for links with art and design.
- The idea of the motherhood of God in Christian thinking has been explored by a number of writers, including Julian of Norwich.
- This lesson could be developed to cover several lessons, thus extending the unit to last for a term. This would provide a firm basis for future work in RE, much of which requires understanding of how symbolism works in language, thought and practice.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

## POSSIBLE TEACHING ACTIVITIES

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

## POINTS TO NOTE

### CHILDREN SHOULD LEARN

### CHILDREN

#### HOW ARE RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS USED IN PLACES OF WORSHIP, SUCH AS A CHURCH?

- about some common symbols within a place of worship
- *Which signs and symbols might we find in a place of worship?* Show pictures of several Christian symbols, eg a cross, dove, fish, halo, alpha and omega, chi-rho. Ask the children to match the symbols to the meanings. Look for such symbols in pictures or videos of churches, or visit a church after looking at pictures of symbols which can be found in that church. Set the children off on a 'symbol safari', where they hunt for the symbols, note where they found them, and suggest possible meanings for those they have discovered.
- Make a class 'symbol safari' book.

- identify and understand the significance of symbols found in a place of worship

- The concept of the Trinity may come up within discussions during this part of the unit. This might be a very useful time to give children some simple but useful pictures which Christians have used to express this concept, such as a clover leaf.
- Videos of people at worship need to be selected carefully and children need to know what in particular to look for.
- Further related activities could include looking at pictures or videos of Christians worshipping. *What might worshippers be 'saying' by their various actions? Is it friendship, respect, joy, or something else?*

#### WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT ABOUT SIGNS AND SYMBOLS?

- how symbols are used by believers in practice
- Discuss the symbols children have used. Recap on what they have learnt about signs and symbols.
- Leave the children with some questions to ponder. *When might actions/pictures/objects speak louder than words? Why do people, especially poets and religious writers, often speak in pictures?*

- talk about how signs and symbols are used in religious belief

- Links could be made with work on literacy, building on children's experience of different types of text, genre and use of language.

## **PRIOR LEARNING**

It is helpful if children have:

- explored examples of actions, colours and clothes in everyday life which express feelings or ideas
- identified possible meanings of some everyday signs and symbols
- heard and discussed stories which convey meanings beyond the literal, *eg fables or parables*
- explored some examples of figurative language and discovered that they are nonsense if taken literally

## **FUTURE LEARNING**

Children could go on to:

- explore symbolism in increasing depth for all the religions they study
- compare and contrast the use of symbolism in religions

## **OUT-OF-SCHOOL LEARNING**

Children could:

- look out for signs and symbols in their everyday experiences