

What is a religion and what is a cult?

INTRODUCTION

To some students a question such as 'what is a religion?' may have a very simple answer, such as 'Christianity' or 'a group of people that follow a God'. This session is designed to get students thinking a bit more deeply about what factors actually make a religion. In an age when new religious movements are on the rise and people in the 2001 census listed themselves as 'Jedi', this poses the question what is a religion in today's world?

ACTIVITY

Part One: What is a religion and how does it differ to a cult?

Split the group into two and give them only two minutes.

Ask one side to imagine they are thinking of 'ingredients' that make a religion. What ingredients do you need to call something a religion?

They could start off with an example such as 'followers' or 'God'. The other side need to think of as many names and examples of religions that they know. Go through the answers with the students.

Then show students the definition of a religion in comparison to a cult, which may make it clearer. Explain using the stimulus link below, which outlines the key differences between a religion and a cult. Emphasise to students that the definition of a religion and cult may be subjective and indefinite but there are some common themes.

Stimulus: <http://www.sbnr.org/religion-vs-cult.html>

Ask the students to respond to such questions as:

- Do you have to follow a God(s) to be religious? [Note the fact that on the website there is no mention of this and that Buddhism does not have a God].
- Is there any great difference between following a cult and a religion?
- Can all religions in some way be seen as a cult?

Ask the students to imagine that they have a friend who has just joined a cult. What reasons might they have for joining a cult? Would students accept their friend's decision to join a cult or challenge it?

Introduce Scientology which has often been termed by some as a cult. In December 2013 the UK Supreme Court ruled unanimously in that a London Church of Scientology chapel was a 'place of meeting for religious worship' but the Church itself has not yet been officially recognised as a religious institution.

Show students a definition:

Scientology is a religious system based on the seeking of self-knowledge and spiritual fulfilment through graded courses of study and training. It was founded by American science-fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard in 1955. [Google definition]

Play the students the stimulus clip below. This clip details how in France former members of the Church of Scientology have taken the Church to court over allegedly defrauding them.

Stimulus: Scientology in France:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=eITdioMOXNg

CONCLUSION

After watching the short film, ask the students to sum up their reflections as to whether scientology is a cult or not, or what further information they might need to decide.