

# 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 31,611 people in the 2021 census listed themselves as 'spiritual', 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:** [www.yourdictionary.com/articles/cult-religion-differences](http://www.yourdictionary.com/articles/cult-religion-differences)

Ask the students to respond to such questions as:

- Do you have to follow a God(s) to be religious? [Note that Buddhism and Jainism do not have necessary beliefs in God and ask students who have engaged with Session 7 of this programme to recall their definitions of 'religion'].
- 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 set of beliefs and practices invented by the American author L. Ron Hubbard, and an associated movement. It is variously defined as a cult, a business, or a new religious movement. Hubbard initially developed a set of ideas that he called Dianetics, which he represented as a form of therapy. [Wikipedia]

Play the students the stimulus clip below. This clip briefly explores the question of whether Scientology is a religion or a cult.

**Stimulus:** Is Scientology a Religion or a Cult?  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uraz0CEXF2E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uraz0CEXF2E)

## 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.