

## Good Learning in RE

Films for teachers from NATRE:  
sponsored by Culham St Gabriel's Trust  
and the Diocese of Saint Albans

### Film 6: The Art of Allah / 12-13 year olds

Becky Williams, RE teacher, provokes her pupils to do some creative learning and critical thinking about how 3 contemporary Muslim artists represent their belief about God / Allah in art, using Islamic rules that forbid any image of God. The visual learning focus of the lesson uses high quality examples of calligraphy and the 99 Names of Allah to explore how Muslims express belief. The 12-13 year old pupils, studying a unit on how faith is expressed through the arts, respond with a wide range of perceptions, ideas and evaluations. The 55 minute lesson is varied, pacy and full of stimulus. Homework done individually will tie down the learning in writing, but the lesson is a dynamic experience of teamwork, judgements and debate.

#### Key RE Concepts:

Islamic belief, teachings and sources / Muslim ways of expressing meaning / Questions of meaning and truth / Questions of commitment.

#### Key vocabulary and ideas:

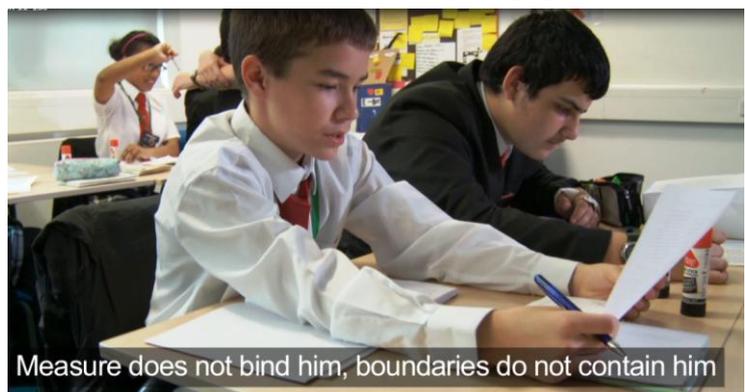
- Vocabulary and concepts: Allah, belief, Muslim, Christian, Atheist, spiritual expression.
- Islamic rules about representation in art are explored and explained by the pupils
- Islamic beliefs about Allah, understood through the 99 Beautiful Names of Allah, are in focus
- Engaging with meaning: whether pupils are themselves theists, agnostics or atheists, they may all learn to understand Islamic ideas and evaluate their own ideas about ultimate questions in the light of their learning.

#### Pedagogy and Learning Method:

This film uses a concept-focused pedagogy. The phenomenon of religious art in Islam is the stimulus to exploring ideas about God in a context where the limits of religious language may also become apparent. The teacher uses lots of stimulating questions to provoke small teams of pupils to think for themselves in the light of their learning. While the art work is the stimulus, the learning method is about being reasonable about religion, and pupils learn to speak accurately about the beliefs of others. One pedagogic intention is to weave together the learning about Islam that develops understanding of the religion with a rigorous reflective approach to pupils' own articulations of ideas about God.

#### Links to key RE strands:

This work is about beliefs and teachings in Islam, concepts of God and the ways they are expressed, and questions of meaning and truth.



### **Lesson outline:**

Pupils begin by reacting to some quotations about belief in Allah from other young people who are Muslims. These quotations have been previously collected from the database of pupils writing at [www.natre.org.uk/db](http://www.natre.org.uk/db) They are then introduced to three works of art in which creative Muslims express their understanding and vision of Allah. The teacher makes a lot of informative knowledge available, but the focus is on the pupils' responses to these expressions. There are few Muslim pupils in the school, and often only one or two in a class, so the work is extending the experience of a big majority of pupils.

### **Learning intentions:**

In this lesson, we wanted pupils across a range of abilities to learn:

- To understand varied examples of Islamic art, and Islamic rules about the representation of Allah (L4);
- To apply their ideas about God and belief to examples from Islam and for themselves (L4);
- To consider and explain to each other what Muslims believe about Allah and their own ideas about God (L5);
- To think more deeply for themselves about Muslim understandings of God and their own ideas and beliefs about questions to do with God, explaining some points of view clearly (L5);
- To interpret three works of Islamic art in relation to each other, using accurate concepts and language and engaging with a range of different perspectives (L6);
- To express their own insights into Muslim understandings of God in relation to a range of others' views and critical ideas (L6);
- To evaluate both critically and personally a range of ideas about God (L7).

### **What makes for good learning in this example?**

There are many features of good RE learning in this short film.

The teacher sets high expectations of both behaviour and thoughtfulness for all pupils. Starting activities use discussion and stimulus quotes to draw all pupils into the enquiry. The focus is much more on pursuing lines of thinking than merely remembering facts (although the stimulus does enable learners to build a detailed and increasingly accurate factual picture of Muslim belief), and pupils are expected to explain their ideas with reasons to back them up.

Resources have been chosen to provoke questions and tasks are sharply focused on understanding and explanation. Pupils move their understanding and explanations along by teamwork and discussion, generating ideas between themselves.

A thinking skills 'Venn Diagram' of thoughts asks for learners to co-operatively identify similarities and differences between artworks, relating these to their growing knowledge base about Muslim belief. The pupils are asked for their (provisional) judgements about the art works – and bang on the desks to vote. It's one of a number of fun moments in the learning, keeping all learners in this mixed ability group actively engaged and on task.

Higher achievers are challenged to think about the relationship between truth claims in different religions and belief systems. Towards the end of the lesson, three challenging questions provoke those able to achieve at levels 6 and 7: What would atheists say about these art works? When Christians and Muslims speak of God, are they talking about the same God? Open ended and potentially profound, these kinds of critical questions engage the pupils at the front edge of their understanding, and show them there is more work to do.

**Running a lesson like this: what do you need to do?**

<p><b>“I believe in one God, ALLAH. I don't know what my God looks like because in the Muslim religion we are not allowed to see any pictures of 'him'. As a Muslim I think Allah is the most powerful 'thing' as I don't know what 'he' is like. I respect my God very much.” <i>Girl, 14</i></b></p>	<p><b>“I think God is... well... God, I guess. God is God, our creator, and He is very powerful. That all I can say. He is not something you can measure.”</b>  <b><i>Girl, 15</i></b></p>
<p><b>“I am a Muslim so my beliefs about God are fairly orthodox. I believe God is an entity which is beyond the scope of human perception (which is pretty limited to say the least...), God is within all of us, He is the voice which guides us down the path of goodness, The Hand of God is on all of us - it's our choice whether to take it or not.” <i>Boy, 15</i></b></p>	<p><b>“I feel that Allah (God) is with me and looking at me wherever I am. I think Allah is the real God. No one can see him but he can see us. He is one, he has no partner and he wasn't born. When you pray you feel closer to God You are thanking him for what you have got. I think religion completes your life. Without it you can get lost and confused.” <i>Boy, 11</i></b></p>

Use quotes like these for initial stimulus. Pupils can collect hundreds more from [www.natre.org.uk/db](http://www.natre.org.uk/db). Encourage your Muslim pupils to contribute some of their own – perhaps anonymously. Get all pupils to review a number of these, and select the most interesting.

Then use art works as Becky did: on the next page is a slide from her presentation. You might find other works of art that are suitable for this task, but the three used in the film are good examples, being authentic, contemporary expressions of belief by Muslims from Britain and the wider world.

**Creative Curriculum Connections**

The work here links RE to the art curriculum, and to aspects of pupils’ social, emotional and citizenship learning. Using the database of pupils’ writing about spiritual questions is a good ICT link. There is lots to think about in historical learning as well.

**Resources**

The NATRE database is free to use on the NATRE website.

Assessed RE (downloadable from the RE Today website) has lots of work about the painting by Ahmed Mustapha.

See Questions: Muslims (for sale from RE Today) for more on Yasmin Kathrada’s art.

The British Museum website is a must: [www.britishmuseum.org/hajj](http://www.britishmuseum.org/hajj)

**3 Paintings ~ Similar + different**  
Write all your ideas about each one into the shapes. Give details!

This is unique because...

These 2 share...

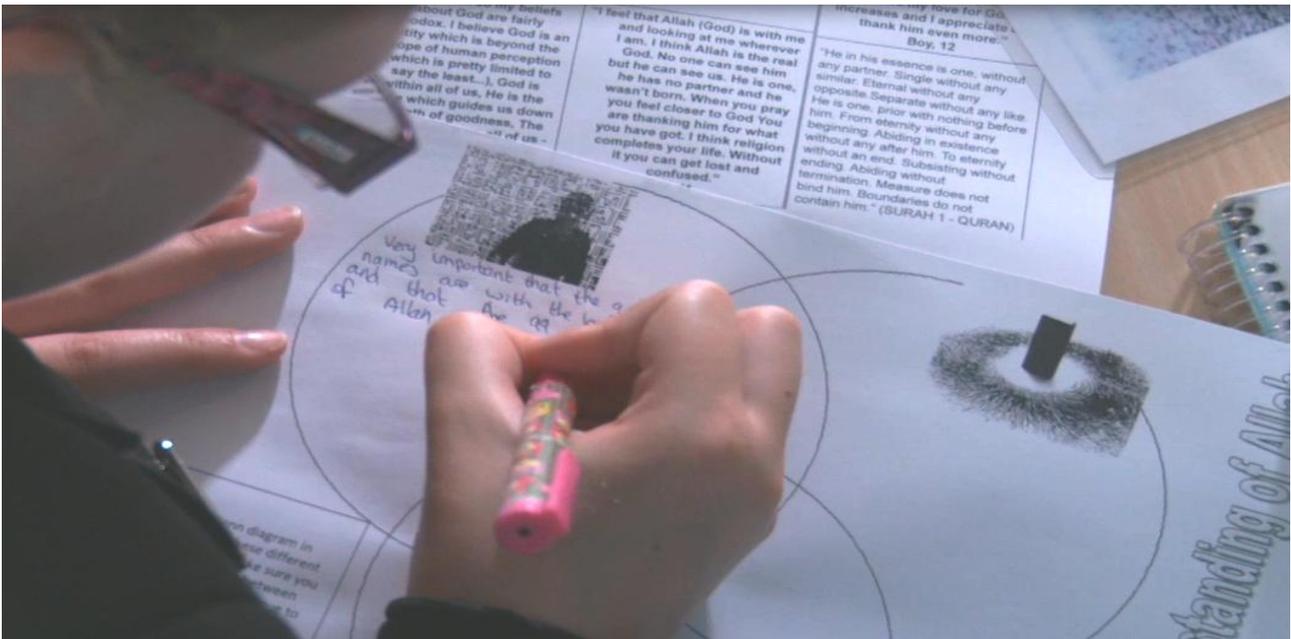
These 2 share...

All three share...

This is unique because...

These 2 share...

This is unique because...



It would be good to use Becky's follow up methods and questions to enrich and challenge the learning.

Pupils might make a comparison between what the art works express and how they express it, and the text of the first Surah of the Holy Qur'an, which is used in Islamic daily prayer. What would enable Muslims to believe strongly in their God – Five Daily Prayers or a work of art? Why might both of these be valuable to a Muslim?

For further extension work for high achieving pupils, another challenging text could be used. This is from the work of Muslim philosopher and sage Al Ghazali, and is a poetic series of contrasts about Allah.

#### The First Surah:

"In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.

Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds;

Most Gracious, Most Merciful;

Master of the Day of Judgment.

You alone do we worship, and Your aid we seek,

Show us the straight way,

The way of those on whom You have bestowed Your Grace, those whose (portion) is not wrath, and who go not astray."

**"He in his essence is one, without any partner.  
Single without any similar  
Eternal without any opposite.  
Separate without any like  
He is one, prior with nothing before him  
From eternity without any beginning  
Abiding in existence without any after him  
To eternity without an end  
Subsisting without ending  
Abiding without termination  
Measure does not bind him  
Boundaries do not contain him."**

Notes written by Lat Blaylock, with thanks to all the teachers and pupils involved.