

A Question of faith: Suffering

New Religious Education Programmes from the BBC 2014

Age range	14-16
Topic	Religious studies. Beliefs and faith. Suffering and the idea of a God of love
Clip content described	<p>The clip opens with some questions: if there is a great God, full of love, why is it such a tough world? Where natural disasters such as a flood or hurricane affect thousands, is it harder to believe in God? Would a God full of love and power allow innocent children to suffer?</p> <p>Three young people, Muslim, Atheist and Christian, travel to a children's hospice in Scotland to consider the example of children living with terminal illnesses. They each find the encounter challenges their ideas. A chaplain and a parent explain their own views about suffering and God, referring to the work of the hospice, which, it turns out, is a surprisingly happy place.</p> <p>A studio discussion between our group of young people, a mix of atheists, Christians and Muslims explores some of the issues arising from the visit to the hospice.</p> <p>Arguments from the Bible are presented: God is with us in suffering, the mystery of life includes the suffering, but also the lessons we learn from it. The teaching of the Qur'an and Hadith is explained: Allah tests humanity through the trials we face, and passing the test leads to Paradise. Our sufferings on this earth should be received patiently. They will make more sense in the next life. But atheist perspectives aren't convinced: surely only a cruel God would 'use' children's pain in this kind of test or experiment. The world is a painful place, but we will do better to tackle the troubles we face by thoughtful compassion, not by prayer or imagining a future afterlife.</p>
Short synopsis	An atheist, a Muslim and a Christian visit a children's hospice meeting families facing major suffering. Examples seen raise questions such as whether a good God would allow innocent children to suffer. Angellica Bell leads a studio discussion with a dozen young people about suffering and faith.



Possible uses in the classroom	<p>Here are three learning strategies that will work well with this clip.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use the clip as a model for a debate. The motion might be ‘In a world where children suffer and die, it makes no sense to believe in a good God full of love.’ Students should research what different scholars and commentators say about the core questions, perhaps through selected quotations. Atheists might include David Hume, Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens. Christians could include C.S. Lewis, John Hick or Frances Spufford. Muslims might include Al Ghazzali This learning idea has close connections with aims about debating and quality speaking and listening in the GCSE English curriculum – and Standard Grade equivalents in Scotland. ▪ Weighing up the arguments: marks out of ten. Ask students to collect key points from the programme, noting down who says what. In pairs, they should evaluate the strength of the points made in the film from all sides of the argument by giving marks out of ten: 10 is a perfect argument, 1 is easy to argue against. This task looks simplistic, but is a good starting point in teaching the skill of evaluating arguments. Whether the students are more sympathetic to the views of the Christians, Muslims or Atheists, they need to be able to evaluate the arguments of others. Ask each pair to join up into a group of four and compare the strengths of the arguments as others see them. Following on, set a question for extended writing – useful examination practice. This might be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. How do atheists argue against God’s love or power using the example of suffering? B. How do Muslims and Christians respond to these arguments? C. Whose arguments did you think were strongest? Give three examples of your reasons for your answer. ▪ Emotional and reflective responses to the story. One powerful aspect of the film is that families and the hospice chaplain featured are not inclined to ‘blame God’, but rather use the spiritual resources of their faith to help them in dealing with their suffering children. Ask students to choose one or two of these more reflective tasks to engage with the issues: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Imagine the hospice has asked you to write a short prayer or meditation to go on the wall in the entrance, as an invitation to people to seek spiritual resources to help them. Write your text – no longer than 8 lines – and a paragraph to explain what it says what it does. B. Emotional words: watch the programme a second time and make a full list of every emotional word that comes up. From the list, pick eight emotions associated with the debate about God and suffering. Students write one sentence about each of these emotions in relation to the issues we are exploring. Do the 8 sentences make a poem? Could they? C. Two sides of the coin: this uses the metaphor of ‘two sides’ to help students explain opposite viewpoints well. Take a large circle of card, and design and illustrate both sides of the arguments about God and suffering, using logos, images, words and short argumentative sentences. One side should ‘defend God / Allah’, the other should make the atheist case. This is a useful idea for many of the issues in GCSE and Standard Grade studies of religion.
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Key words	Christianity, Islam, Atheism, suffering, hospice, terminal illness, theodicy, ethics, morality, religion, spirituality, discussion, opinion, thinking skills, debate
Take note	This clip raises sensitive issues about children suffering and good teaching of religious studies will provide sensitive points of response and adult support for any pupils who are personally affected by the content.

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