

Who is it? Where is it? Why?

Julie Grove is wondering why a picture of Jesus has been painted on the ceiling of a Hindu temple in Leicester. She is a member of the RE Today Editorial Team.



Julie Grove

Worldviews come in different widths; some are narrow and exclusive, others are expansively wide, and there are all kinds in between. Decoration in a religious building in the Midlands offers a concrete example of a local community whose worldview is inclusive, and of a faith that is open and deeply respectful of the beliefs of others.

This is the Shree Jalaram Prathna Mandir, a Hindu temple in the centre of Leicester. Conventional architecturally on the outside, it has a visually stunning feature inside that illustrates powerfully the worldview of its community. It is the ceiling of the Shrine Room where worship takes place, and it offers a wonderful teaching resource.

Suggestions for learning activities

Ask before you tell! Project the image for the whole class to look at, with all the figures but one concealed. Choose to reveal one you know pupils will recognise, possibly Krishna (with the flute) or Guru Nanak or Jesus. Display just that figure and invite pupils to share what they know about it. Show another of the three and ask what the connection might be. Encourage talking in pairs.

Unveil the third image and challenge pupils to find a reason for all three of these images to be presented together in one painting. Add the image of Mahavira (Jain) to increase their curiosity. Talk about where this painting could be. Depending on prior learning, pupils may be able to recognise all four. However, they may need help to take note of significant features of the images to help them to identify Sikh, Hindu, Jain and Christian holy men, and hopefully name them.

Add another of the Hindu images – perhaps Rama (with the bow) – as a further clue. What kind of building would show these images?

Alternatively, pupils in small groups could be given a cut-out of one of these figures and be invited to agree three significant features of the image before sharing their thinking across another two or three groups with different figures. Once identified, the challenge would be the same. Where could they be portrayed together, and why?

Unveil the whole ceiling and invite pupils to look carefully at all the figures. Can they identify any more of them? Can they say which faiths are represented and by which images? Can they group any of them together?

Explain where this painting is and help the class to recognise which are the Hindu figures. Name them and invite pupils to talk in pairs about why they think, in a Hindu temple, there are images from other faith traditions.

What might this be saying about the worldviews of the people who worship here?

Listen to pupils' ideas, then share the metaphor that Hindus use to describe the diversity of beliefs in the world: they imagine we are all, religious and non-religious alike, on a journey up a mountain. That's life.

We are all climbing to the summit, seeking what is true for ourselves – we could call it 'ultimate reality' or 'personal fulfilment' – but there are many paths, each as valid as the others. This worldview is pluralist; it acknowledges and respects difference; it recognises that we have many identities but we are all human.



The ceiling painting at Shree Jalaram Prarthna Mandal in Leicester features Guru Nanak (Sikh), Mahavira (Jain) and Jesus (Christian) as well as images of Hindu gods and goddesses such as Vishnu and Krishna. See the online supplement for a PowerPoint to support this work.

What do you think it would mean to live out such a worldview in a bustling, multi-cultural city like Leicester?

Luke is a young Christian from Leicester who has experienced first-hand some of the ways in which the Hindu community of the Shree Jalaram Prathna Mandir put their worldviews into practice. He tells *REtoday* what he's learned through a project in which he's been involved:

Please can you describe the homelessness project's work and aim?

The winter night shelter was a project started by 1Roof, a sort of umbrella organisation for work with the homeless and vulnerably housed in Leicester. The winter night shelter used seven different faith-based buildings to supply ten beds per night to those who had been vetted by the council. This allowed up to ten men to have a guaranteed warm meal, bed and breakfast for as long as they needed it from December to March.

What did you learn about the religious buildings and communities you went to from this project?

I worked as an overnight volunteer in Holy Trinity Church, Charles Street Baptist Church [CSBC] and Shree Jalaram Hindu community centre. The first of these is the church I grew up in. The other two were new places for me. I learned about the history of the CSBC because they have a little exhibit about their links to missionary William Carey. As for the Shree Jalaram, it's a vital hub for the Hindu communities in the city and has enormous catering facilities. I spoke to a staff member who came to make breakfast. He told me on festival days they serve upwards of 2,000 people.

What do you think as a Christian about the fact that the Hindu temple includes an image of Jesus in its artwork?

It does not wholly surprise me, as the Hindu religion does allow for these sorts of amalgamations of spiritual leaders who they think are worth including in their own pantheon. As with the inclusion by some Hindus of Buddha, the inclusion of Jesus represents their recognition of his philosophy and practice and provides an explanation for his claims of divinity and humanity (as a human avatar). I have never had a theological debate with a Hindu but would like to see how it can play out with these different interpretations of the same beliefs about Jesus and his power.

What do you think is good about the religious mix of your city, Leicester?

Everything! The first time I went to the Shree Jalaram Mandal I was eight years old and it was very exciting. As someone who works in the tourist sector of Leicester, I believe our religious, linguistic and ethnic diversity should be a bigger point for tourism: we have some of the only Jain and Sikh visitor centres (museums) in the country. When I went to college I debated theology with Muslims who shared belief in and about God with evangelical Christians – it makes for a more interesting debate than one with Atheists, in my view, and brings us closer to understanding our own faith.

What difference did your project make to the lives of the homeless people who came along?

It was difficult to quantify, but one elderly man was sick throughout his entire three months and would likely have died without our help. Several men only stayed for a fortnight, then were able to sort out other housing. We expected they could not do without the 'security of mind' they had, knowing there was a meal and a bed waiting for them. Everyone got a chance to shower, to sleep and to stay in the warm and dry during the coldest months of the year, which spared many hospitalisations and potential deaths.

'Religions may disagree about beliefs, but they often share values and a commitment to justice.' What do you think?

Most religions nominally have commitments to helping the oppressed; some more than others. Older religions have hierarchies expecting people to end up poor and at the bottom. I believe Christianity is uniquely focused on this echelon of society and historically was mostly made up of these sorts of people. What was shared in the night shelter was a sense that if God – whatever name God answers to – does not let us down, we cannot let others down. This was shown by the 'extra mile' attitude of the volunteers and how whenever a volunteer was sick or had to drop out another would step up and fill their place.

As a final point it is worth mentioning that homeless support in Leicester used to be entirely left up to churches before the council were encouraged to provide proper state support. The uneasy relationship between churches and council has now been somewhat superseded by a new Muslim-led group that provides massive amounts of resources but, because they have not recognised the historic work already done, is struggling to work for long-term solutions getting folks off the streets. It is interesting to see that Muslims in Britain now have enough numbers to be able to do this and some more committed membership than some churches.

Julie Grove

For discussion

- What responsibilities, do you feel, a group of religious people have to their local community?
- What makes the work of the homelessness project that Luke describes so effective?
- Why is it so important that Luke and those with whom he's working on the project are respectful of each other's different religious beliefs?
- How far are their worldviews similar and how are they different?
- Why might it be dangerous for people to insist their worldview is the only one that is valid or true?
- How would you describe your worldview?