

## Lesson 5: Religious Studies

### Is football the new religion?

#### **Aim:**

To compare similar aspects of the world's major religions, and to compare these with the growing international culture of football, discussing whether the game is replacing religion on a social and spiritual level.

#### **Objectives:**

- To discuss and identify the ritualistic aspects of the major religions
- To compare the spiritual and social aspects of organised religions
- To compare aspects of organised religion and organised sport

#### **National curriculum links:**

RELIGIOUS STUDIES: KS4 AO1, AO2

#### **Materials:**

Information Sheets RS 1 and 2 (included in this document)

#### **Activities:**

1. Read Information Sheet RS 1.
2. With a partner, complete the table with information about how many followers there are for each of the different faiths mentioned.
3. In small groups, discuss the religions in the table. Make a list of all the elements that make up the ritual of worship for each religion.

**Note:** encourage students to think about the practical manifestations of worship, including place (church, temple, mosque etc), singing or chanting, veneration of gods/idols, taking of food/drink etc.

4. Compare the lists you have made, making another list of all the similarities between them.

5. Now, in the same group make a list of all the elements that make up the ritual of going to a football match. If you have never been to a match, imagine what it must be like.

**Note:** encourage students to think again about the manifestations of this sporting ritual, including place, chanting/singing etc.

6. Now compare your 'religion' list with your 'football' list. What are the similarities and differences? Is football becoming the new religion?
7. Read Information Sheet RS 2. High-light all the reasons suggested that football IS the new religion and all the reasons that it is NOT.

**Note:** Information Sheet 2 is an extra reading option. Otherwise, do the same exercise through discussion in pairs.

8. Teacher: split the class into small groups of three or four. Half of the groups will prepare to argue that football is becoming the new religion, and half that it is not. Then either:
  - 1) Team up two groups representing opposite views, or
  - 2) Facilitate a whole-class debate

Alternatively, if the class seems to have a mix of views, you could ask them to team up according to their individual opinion.

This may be a sensitive topic to approach. Look at the 'Introduction' pages in these resources for further guidance on leading discussion.

## Activity Sheet: Religious studies 1

### Is football becoming the religion of the masses?

Roman Catholicism is the league champion of the world's religions with 18.7% of the global population supporting this giant club.

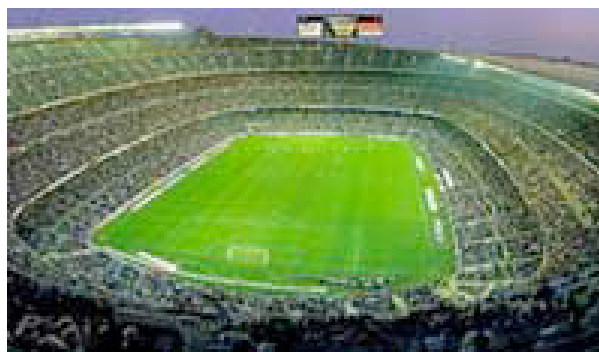
Christianity as a whole claims a massive 2 billion adherents, narrowly beating Islam to the top spot, which with its 1.3 billion followers gets 18.3% and has to settle for the runners-up medal.

Hinduism is in fourth place this season, with 900 million fans packing the temples, and Buddhism further down the table with 360 million members.

The Sikhs enjoy full support of their 23 million members this season, with Judaism in seventh place with 14 million supporters.

Many self-professed Christians claim to be so because their grandparents used to go to church. Perhaps they have also been christened. But most are far more likely to spend Sunday mornings watching TV whilst nursing a hangover rather than attending church. Agnostic is a term much more suitable for describing these 'Christians', and indeed the many non-practicing members of other faiths. Officially this point of view already represents 16.3% of the population, its 1.1 billion members (including atheists and the non-religious) making it the number three 'religion' in the world faith league.

But if we moderate this figure with the actual number of non-practising faithful, then it would almost certainly claim league domination. So where are the people going? Are we turning into faithless heathens or are we finding alternative gods? Football is becoming more and more popular throughout the world. Is it possible that a sport could be replacing Christianity as the religion of the masses?



Use the information in the article above to complete the table.

Religion	Number of Followers
1.	2 billion
2. Islam	
3.	
4. Hinduism	
5.	
6.	23 million
7.	

## Activity Sheet: Religious studies 2

### Praying to win

Whether you think football is a religion obviously depends on what you think religion is. And given that the definition of religion is "contested" - as we like to say in polite circles - this discussion has the potential to run on endlessly for years to come. So is football really a religion? Some people have likened players to deities who are worshipped in the sacred space of the hallowed football ground. All I can say to that is that it bears little relation to my experience of watching West Bromwich Albion play. When you go out with a worsening cold on a freezing winter's night to watch your team getting knocked out of the League Cup by Hereford United, then worship is not exactly the best way to describe your feelings towards the players. It's true that we do sing Psalm 23 (The Lord's My Shepherd) at the Hawthorns on a regular basis, but this is usually as an expression of gratitude to whatever miraculous force has allowed the Albion to build up a lead.

It is easy enough to see how football could be counted as a religion, if a religion is a force that binds people into communities focussed around common values, stories and symbols. The emotional intensity of football fandom is one in which people become bound to the stories (eg of previous triumphs) and symbols (eg the football shirt) of their club. The intensity of this attachment is such that true fans remain loyal to their club for their whole lives regardless of what other relationships may change for them, and the idea of abandoning support of one club for another would be seen as a total act of perversion.

Unlike other forms of religion in which people believe they are connecting with some God or divine force, with football, people realise that the source and focus of their devotion is nothing more or less than a social group - the football club. So in this sense it does not fit into the religious category.

In a modern world, in which people's sense of identity and belonging are often uncertain, it is easy to see why the sense of community offered by football fandom can exert such a strong appeal. As people are less inclined to turn to traditional forms of religion for a sense of identity and belonging, so alternative secular sources of community have become increasingly important, such as national or ethnic groups, family or friendship networks. Football fandom forms part of this phenomenon, offering its participants the opportunity - if only for part of their lives - to know who they are, what they are committed to and where they belong. This is obviously something picked up by marketing departments who are careful to use the passion and belonging of football fandom as the hook on

which to sell their product ("Heroes come and go. Our Passion is Forever", as the recent Sky bill-boards put it).

Football clubs were originally set up to provide tangible benefits for people in local communities and many still do this. Football can still be an extraordinary source of pleasure, as well as a remarkable force for bringing people together across different cultural divides. But when we turn uncritically to football clubs as a source of identity and community - when football clubs start to become sacred things in their own right - it's worth taking time out to think about whether we're asking too much of football. Is there a point, we might ask, at which football becomes too important for us?