

**REL\_1**

**Exploring the boundaries between religion and culture**

**About this free course**

Find out more about The Open University’s Religious Studies courses and qualifications: [www.open.ac.uk/courses/search-result/religious-studies](https://www.open.ac.uk/courses/search-result/religious-studies?utm_source=google&utm_campaign=ou&utm_medium=ebook). .

This version of the content may include video, images and interactive content that may not be optimised for your device.

You can experience this free course as it was originally designed on OpenLearn, the home of free learning from The Open University –

[www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/exploring-the-boundaries-between-religion-and-culture/content-section-0](https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/exploring-the-boundaries-between-religion-and-culture/content-section-0?utm_source=openlearn&utm_campaign=ol&utm_medium=ebook)

There you’ll also be able to track your progress via your activity record, which you can use to demonstrate your learning.

Copyright © 2022 The Open University

**Intellectual property**

Unless otherwise stated, this resource is released under the terms of the Creative Commons Licence v4.0 <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/deed.en_GB>. Within that The Open University interprets this licence in the following way: [www.open.edu/openlearn/about-openlearn/frequently-asked-questions-on-openlearn](http://www.open.edu/openlearn/about-openlearn/frequently-asked-questions-on-openlearn). Copyright and rights falling outside the terms of the Creative Commons Licence are retained or controlled by The Open University. Please read the full text before using any of the content.

We believe the primary barrier to accessing high-quality educational experiences is cost, which is why we aim to publish as much free content as possible under an open licence. If it proves difficult to release content under our preferred Creative Commons licence (e.g. because we can’t afford or gain the clearances or find suitable alternatives), we will still release the materials for free under a personal end-user licence.

This is because the learning experience will always be the same high quality offering and that should always be seen as positive – even if at times the licensing is different to Creative Commons.

When using the content you must attribute us (The Open University) (the OU) and any identified author in accordance with the terms of the Creative Commons Licence.

The Acknowledgements section is used to list, amongst other things, third party (Proprietary), licensed content which is not subject to Creative Commons licensing. Proprietary content must be used (retained) intact and in context to the content at all times.

The Acknowledgements section is also used to bring to your attention any other Special Restrictions which may apply to the content. For example there may be times when the Creative Commons Non-Commercial Sharealike licence does not apply to any of the content even if owned by us (The Open University). In these instances, unless stated otherwise, the content may be used for personal and non-commercial use.

We have also identified as Proprietary other material included in the content which is not subject to Creative Commons Licence. These are OU logos, trading names and may extend to certain photographic and video images and sound recordings and any other material as may be brought to your attention.

Unauthorised use of any of the content may constitute a breach of the terms and conditions and/or intellectual property laws.

We reserve the right to alter, amend or bring to an end any terms and conditions provided here without notice.

All rights falling outside the terms of the Creative Commons licence are retained or controlled by The Open University.

Head of Intellectual Property, The Open University

# Contents

* [Introduction](#Introduction1)
* [Learning outcomes](#LearningOutcomes1)
* [1 Either/or and both/and: belonging to land and ancestors](#Session1)
* [2 Either/or or both/and: eco protest](#Session2)
* [3 Interview with Theo Simon](#Session3)
* [4 Why do they do that?](#Session4)
* [5 Exploring the boundaries between religion and culture](#Session5)
* [Conclusion](#Session6)
* [What next?](#Session7)
* [Further reading](#FurtherReading1)
* [Acknowledgements](#Acknowledgements1)
* [Solutions](#Solutions1)

## Introduction

People have very different ideas about what counts as religion or spirituality. Some might even think of other people’s religions as superstition.

The following questions would make perfect sense to people in some religions but seem utterly bizarre to others. You might like to consider whether you would answer them positively or negatively.

* Do you eat fish every Friday?
* If you visit a religious building, do you cover your head?
* Do you pray when you are anxious?
* Do you wear religious symbols as jewellery?
* Do you say thank you for the food you eat?
* Do you say thank you to the food you eat?
* If bad things happen do you wonder who is to blame?
* Do you think that ‘acts of God’ should be insured against?
* Do you hope to see deceased relatives or friends in an afterlife?
* Do you hope to be reincarnated as a happier person?
* Do you think that good dogs go to heaven?
* When you can’t find something, do you ask a saint to help you find it?
* Do you talk quietly in religious buildings?
* Do you achieve mindfulness every day?

Some of the questions are about ideas and practices that are more historically rooted. Some are officially encouraged. Others are less official but still important to many people. Some may have originated in different religions but make good sense to people who blend them in their own lives. It is also true that doing one or more of them might not make you religious.

This free course, Exploring the boundaries between religion and culture, engages with questions about the relationship between religion and culture. Are they different things or synonyms that emphasise different ways of looking at the same phenomena? The course uses ‘either/or or both/and’ to point to those possibilities for understanding how religion and culture relate to each other. In the next section, a short film enables you to engage with the views and experiences of some cultural performers and invites you to reflect on the issues they raise. Next you’ll explore two sections about an ecological activist and musician. People’s motivations for engaging in activism are many and various but, for some at least, they include what might be called spirituality – and are certainly expressed in cultural activities such as musical performances. ‘Either/or’ questions are often asked when people are not sure what the reasons are for doing particular things: ‘is it religion or is it culture?’ You’ll consider some examples, including in relation to the foods some religious people eat or avoid. The course concludes with some thoughts about how messy reality is, and you’ll be asked to discuss aspects of religion and culture that might cast new light on these issues.

Interested in taking your learning further? You might find it helpful to explore the Open University’s [Religious Studies courses and qualifications](https://www.open.ac.uk/courses/search-result/religious-studies).

Start of Box

**Resources for teachers**

There are discussion questions and a classroom activity suggested at the end of this course.

End of Box

## Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

* clearly explain an understanding of how culture and religion are related
* provide further examples of cultural activities rooted in or expressive of religion
* appreciate some nuances in the use of words like religion, spirituality, culture, performance and ceremony
* develop further ideas about religious people’s motivations and activities.

## 1 Either/or and both/and: belonging to land and ancestors

The following video invites further reflection on the relationship between religion and culture.

It is about indigenous people visiting London during the biennial ORIGINS: Festival of First Nations. It includes people talking about musical and other performances that are rooted in indigenous cultures (i.e. those of Native Americans, Māori, Aboriginal Australians and others).

Start of Activity

**Activity 1**

Start of Question

As you watch the video, pay particular attention to what the performers say about their reasons for participating in the festival. Add your notes to the text box below.

Start of Media Content

Video content is not available in this format.

Belonging to land and ancestors

[View transcript - Belonging to land and ancestors](" \l "Session1_Transcript1)

Start of Figure



End of Figure

End of Media Content

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

[View discussion - Activity 1](" \l "Session1_Discussion1)

End of Activity

## 2 Either/or or both/and: eco protest

In the audio that follows, Theo Simon performs one of his best-known anthems. He is the songwriter and lead singer for Seize the Day, a band that often performs at protest sites, as well as at green and pagan festivals. In addition to explicit protest songs, they also perform celebratory anthems inspired by ecological spirituality.

Start of Activity

**Activity 2**

Start of Question

As you listen to this anthem (or read the transcript), reflect on your responses to its message and performance.

Start of Media Content

Audio content is not available in this format.

Seize the Day

[View transcript - Seize the Day](" \l "Session2_Transcript1)

End of Media Content

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

[View discussion - Activity 2](" \l "Session2_Discussion1)

End of Activity

## 3 Interview with Theo Simon

In the next video, Theo Simon, singer-songwriter of Seize the Day, talks about what motivates his activism and his commitments.

Start of Activity

**Activity 3**

Start of Question

Watch the video now, paying particular attention to Theo Simon’s linking of celebration and protest, and his ideas about ‘spirituality’.

Start of Media Content

Video content is not available in this format.

Activism and reverence for nature

[View transcript - Activism and reverence for nature](" \l "Session3_Transcript1)

Start of Figure



End of Figure

End of Media Content

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

[View discussion - Activity 3](" \l "Session3_Discussion1)

End of Activity

This interview helps us understand how activism, protest and/or political activities can be shaped, motivated and energised by diverse religious or spiritual ideas and traditions. Precisely because it is not always easy to distinguish between culture and religion – or between religion and politics – it may be helpful to reflect further about these ‘either/or or both/and’ possibilities. The question ‘why do they do that?’ is explored further in the following sections.

## 4 Why do they do that?

Start of Figure



[View description - Uncaptioned Figure](" \l "Session4_Description1)

[View description - Uncaptioned Figure](" \l "Session4_Alternative1)

End of Figure

Sometimes people say ‘that’s not religion, it’s culture’ – or even ‘it’s just culture’.

Sometimes those who object to Islamic veiling and other costume choices argue this is more culture than religion. Much the same has been said of Sikhs wearing turbans, Orthodox Jews insisting that animals should not be stunned before they are slaughtered or Christians wearing religious symbols over their work outfits.

On the other hand, the phrase ‘it’s our culture’ puts a positive spin on this. When people say this, they don’t remove whatever ‘it’ is (costume, food etc.) from also being ‘our religion’ or ‘my religion’. Insisting that a particular style of costume or way of cooking food is ‘culture’ does not end the discussion. Indeed, these labels might not really be a useful contribution to a conversation.

## 5 Exploring the boundaries between religion and culture

There are stories that ask ‘why do Jews do that?’ One variation goes like this:

Start of Quote

A woman is asked by her daughter, ‘Why do we cut the corners off beef when we roast it?’ Both realise that this is not in any typical list of traditional Jewish practices, but they assume that there must be an authoritative rule to explain the requirement. Possibly it is to do with Moses or ancient temple rituals. To find out, the mother asks her own mother the question, which causes bafflement until the older woman realises what started all this. ‘When you were a child,’ she says, ‘my roasting tin wasn’t very big so I always had to cut the corners off the beef’. Laughter all round.

End of Quote

But the point of the story has yet to be revealed. It is not that people get confused or make mistakes. The point is that a family tradition has evolved and now has a similar force to more widely known food practices. This will now be what this family will do – but they will know where the tradition began.

This is intended to be a humorous story. But at its heart is the serious point that people (religious or otherwise) do not have to know the origins or rational explanation for any particular action. Explaining what people do can legitimately be as straightforward as saying ‘we do this because we do it’. Or, ‘to be a Jew, a Muslim etc. is to do these kinds of things’.

Put another way, it is not common to eat horses or dogs in Britain (even though their meat is not so different from that of cows or sheep) and this is probably ‘just’ because ‘horses and dogs are not commonly eaten here’. History doesn’t provide full explanations for this food avoidance and it certainly isn’t fully rational. But this does not make it any less important.

This story shows how some members of a religion might come to do their religion differently from others. This is important in understanding:

* the ways in which religion and culture are woven together
* one of the ways in which religious practices may change over time
* the ways in which our questions about what people believe and why they do certain things might receive unexpected answers.

## Conclusion

Culture and religion are rarely easy to disentangle.

Perhaps the effort should not be made. Maybe the claim that something is ‘not religion but culture’ misunderstands the role of religion in many people’s lives.

Indeed, perhaps this is true in the lives of many communities and nations. The assertion seems to want us to decide between ‘either/or’ when reality is often a more messy affair of ‘both-and’.

Similar choices are often offered between ‘good religion’ and ‘bad religion’. The former is usually presented as quiet and peaceful; the celebration of cooperation and harmony. The latter is denigrated as extremist and prone to violence or division.

Messy lived reality suggests that religions can be all-encompassing, inviting commitments to make the world a particular way, but they can also be add-ons to busy lives of work and leisure, inviting people to inject meaning or value by occasionally participating in ceremonies.

Start of Figure



[View description - Uncaptioned Figure](" \l "Session6_Description1)

[View description - Uncaptioned Figure](" \l "Session6_Alternative1)

End of Figure

Start of Box

**Questions for discussion**

* Is there anything you or your family do that is part of your ‘culture’ that might fit within this discussion of religion/culture being difficult to separate?
* Why might people join in ceremonies of religions to which they do not belong?
* Do you think religious music or activities should be protected from becoming entertainment? Should religious buildings be kept apart from tourism?
* Do you think (some) ecological movements have a religious element to their beliefs? Are you aware of other examples than the one discussed here?
* Can you think of other social movements or activities which could be considered to blur the boundary between religion and culture?

End of Box

Start of Box

**Classroom activity**

Discuss the questions above as a group.

End of Box

## What next?

Check out the [Religious Studies content on offer from OpenLearn](https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/all-content?filter=date/grid/76/all/all/all/all).

Interested in taking your learning further? You might find it helpful to explore the Open University’s [Religious Studies courses and qualifications](https://www.open.ac.uk/courses/search-result/religious-studies).

## Further reading

The [Religious Studies Project](https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/) (an expanding and searchable online resource for the social-scientific and critical study of religion) has some fascinating podcasts and other material relevant to [religion and environments](https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/?s=environment).

## Acknowledgements

This free course was written by Graham Harvey.

Except for third party materials and otherwise stated (see [terms and conditions](http://www.open.ac.uk/conditions)), this content is made available under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 Licence](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/deed.en_GB).

The material acknowledged below is Proprietary and used under licence (not subject to Creative Commons Licence). Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following sources for permission to reproduce material in this free course:

## Images

Course image: © krblokhin; Getty Images

Section 4 image: © bojanstory; Getty Images

Conclusion image: © Rae\_The\_Sparrow; Getty Images

## Audio-visual

Seize the Day: ‘Child of the Universe’ and Theo Simon

Every effort has been made to contact copyright owners. If any have been inadvertently overlooked, the publishers will be pleased to make the necessary arrangements at the first opportunity.

**Don't miss out**

If reading this text has inspired you to learn more, you may be interested in joining the millions of people who discover our free learning resources and qualifications by visiting The Open University – [www.open.edu/openlearn/free-courses](http://www.open.edu/openlearn/free-courses?LKCAMPAIGN=ebook_&MEDIA=ol).

## Solutions

## Activity 1

#### Discussion

The flow between ritual and performance is an interesting example of a relationship between religion and culture. You might also be familiar with other examples. Music originally intended for religious ceremonies (such as Catholic Masses, Islamic Sufi dhikr, Hindu and Sikh kirtans) is performed in many musical concerts. It can be appreciated for its beauty rather than for more ‘religious’ purposes.

Similarly, people walk traditional pilgrimage routes, like the Camino de Santiago de Compostela in Spain, for reasons other than seeking redemption or specifically religious benefits. But music and pilgrimage routes are also carefully designed and presented for the benefit of religious people. In these and similar experiences, religion and culture inform each other.

[Back to - Activity 1](" \l "Session1_Activity1)

## Activity 2

#### Discussion

It is important to recognise that sometimes religiously motivated protest is closely linked with celebration.

[Back to - Activity 2](" \l "Session2_Activity1)

## Activity 3

#### Discussion

The band has performed at many peace camps and activist events (sometimes labelled ‘protests’ but also thought of as ‘protections’), including Extinction Rebellion events.

He explains how celebration and protest weave together in the band’s activism. While he is not keen on the word ‘religion’, he is clear that devotion to the Earth infuses his songs, and in ways that might be considered ‘spiritual’. The terms ‘spiritual’ and ‘spirituality’ are often used to refer to more personal practices and experiences, in contrast to those associated with more formal or institutional ‘religion’.

[Back to - Activity 3](" \l "Session3_Activity1)

# Uncaptioned Figure

## Description

This is a colour photograph of a woman lighting a candle in a church.

[Back to - Uncaptioned Figure](" \l "Session4_Figure1)

# Uncaptioned Figure

## Description

This is a colour photograph of a group of children dancing around a tradition Maypole on a village green.

[Back to - Uncaptioned Figure](" \l "Session6_Figure1)

# Belonging to land and ancestors

## Transcript

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

KELVIN BIZAHALONI: In Arizona, I am a sheepherder, a wood chopper, a hiker, and a lover of plants. But outside, I am a musician, an artist, an Indigenous person. And now I'm a world traveller.

GABRIELLE HUGHES: I've lived in the UK now for four years. And it's very interesting coming from my nation in Canada to sort of the heart of the empire. I think it's really important that the people who live here can see that we are living peoples their living traditions.

DAVID MILROY: It's quite interesting to be here in London and to be performing in the British Museum. People could argue it's one of the bastions of the colonial empire and housed in the catacombs may be things that need to be repatriated to all the colonies and all the other first nations people and Aboriginal people throughout the world.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

ALICK TIPOTI: Yeah, I'm from Badu Island in the Torres Strait. Maluga Nation, Zenadth Kes, that's the language name for where I am, my identity. I am standing in the land of the Christianity where Christianity came to us. But that is not us. Our culture we have our own totems, our own beliefs, our own culture. So we acknowledge our ancestors for I speak my language. And I love [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH].

They are with us. That is my identity, the language. My ancestors come with us. And when we finish perform, we thank them and we release them again.

DAVID MILROY: I'm a Palku man. I'm from the East Pilbara in Western Australia. That's our tribal area. It's on the edge of the western desert. It's one of the most isolated places in the world.

KELVIN BIZAHALONI: I am of the reed people born for the Bitter Water. My maternal clan is the Edge Water people. And my paternal clan is of the Salt people clan of the Navajo Nation. The Diné is what we call ourselves, the caretakers who respect and take care of the Earth.

GABRIELLE HUGHES: And when I identify as a First Nations person, I usually identify more closely with being Wampanoag or from a Mi'kmaq community. To me that means looking to your past, and respecting your past, and living that past in the present, looking to your ancestors where you came from. But it doesn't mean living in the past. It means making sure that those traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation are honoured in the present.

In my community, I'm the drum carrier, which means I carry the songs of our people.

[NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

People could feel a sense of connection or hope. That's what most of our songs are about. It's really connecting through the drum beat.

SALOMON BAZBAZ LAPIDUS: The ritual ceremony of the Voladores, it's a ceremony. It's a ceremonial dance that started 1,500 years ago. And it has been passed from generation to generation to generation till our days. But it's a great feeling to share this and to see all the people get moving and gets moving not for watching the thing on TV or watching-- for watching a live ceremony and being part of it.

DAVID MILROY: It's always interesting in these sorts of festivals or conferences where you have a lot of Indigenous or First Nations people together. There's always the recurring theme of connection to country. The Earth is our mother.

You'll find in every performance there is always that thread that goes through each group and that longing. And all the politics of being separated from that as well. But that always seems to be the bottom line.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

(SINGING) Feel the waves against your skin. Let those waters flow within.

ALICK TIPOTI: First and foremost, we are raising our flag. It's not a political message. It's nothing political. It's just we are survivors. And we are here to let the world know, let England know that, recognise us. It doesn't bother me if they think this or think that. As long as they know, wow, Zenadth Kes Islanders, Torres Strait Islander people, they exist.

[NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

DAVID MILROY: Sometimes you can see a performance that will go right through you. You really feel it. It really lands heavily deep inside you. And I think that's because of that connection to country, that deep connection.

SALOMON BAZBAZ LAPIDUS: It's a communal ceremony. You cannot fly one person. There's four people flying there. And if there were three, they couldn't fly. It's a ceremony that changes the people, not only the performance. Because the people that sees it and that leaves it-- we as public will also live it.

[APPLAUSE]

ALICK TIPOTI: I actually feel proud when I make people realise that, wow, they just did something that is ceremonial, that is spiritual, cultural. That is them. That is their identity. And then they start looking within. Then they research, and they find themselves.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[Back to - Belonging to land and ancestors](" \l "Session1_MediaContent1)

# Seize the Day

## Transcript

Here’s a little history of a bigger mystery,

I have written this story into my song.

If it isn’t what you're used to,

I hope it will amuse you.

And maybe if you choose to then you’ll sing along.

It goes:

‘I am as old as the universe,

I’ve been here before and I’ll be here again.

I am a child of the universe,

A part of all women and a part of all men.’

Once upon a sometime and once upon a somewhere,

And once upon a somehow there was a big bang.

Energy revolving and energy dissolving

And energy evolving, and that’s what I am.

I’m a little flower to blossom for an hour,

But in me there’s a power that grows on and on.

Power in the root of me,

Power in the shoot of me,

Power in the fruit which will pass my seed on.

I am not a somebody, I am not a nobody,

I’m a cell in one body filling all space.

All I ever could be and all I ever should be

And all I ever will be is here in this place.

[Back to - Seize the Day](" \l "Session2_MediaContent1)

# Activism and reverence for nature

## Transcript

THEO SIMON

I don't like the word spiritual just because of the way it's been used so much, that it's become one of those words that it's hard to know what it means anymore. But for me, it's been like a spiritual path or discipline because when I'm on the front line, by which I mean any protest site where there are people trying to do something else, or trying to move me, I have to get into an awareness where I am not treating the person who's coming against me with anything but respect.

I think that non-violence isn't just a tactic. Non-violence is an attitude, which is that I respect you as another human being. It's only because of circumstances that you've ended up in a yellow jacket. And I've ended up on this side of the protest. I have complete faith in that.

On an existential level, I think that's just the truth. I do not believe that any human being is greater or lesser than me because we are all essentially-- we're all animals. And we're all connected to a bigger living process. We're not separate from it. We are actually brothers and sisters, in a very real sense. There's no way of-- and we're actually brothers and sisters to every other living thing.

These are objective realities. But they're also, I think, an experience that we can have. We do have to reconnect, which is what religion means, I think relegare to re-connect, re-bind-- something like that. And I have thought about this a lot recently. So I thought, in a way, we need a new religion.

But that's not true because religion, it's not going to work. That's over now. That's a period of our development where we've got these big monotheistic religions. Now we find there's no room left. We're all on the same planet.

But that's not to diss it because it's OK to have a framework and a story because that's all I've got, a framework and a story within which we can live. And we need that. And we need these meta stories. We need this big meaning. There is a bigger entity. Objectively, we could call it the biosphere. So science now, we can say the biosphere exists.

I don't think everyone-- I don't think scientists necessarily really grasp what that means. I don't really exist. Except this is a temporary-- this is a process occurring here. Cells are being created and recreated and falling off all the time. This isn't still. I'm not a solid being.

The water's flowing in and out. The air's flowing in and out. The Earth stuff is coming in as food, and going out as excrement. Everything's just happening here. And this is holding itself together, as organisms do, for a short period of time.

What it is that animates that, and whether there is a being beyond that, I really find that hard to even-- I live as if there is. I have a communication sometimes. I know that religious people do too. And yet that isn't, for them, embodied in the world around them necessarily. They might have it more abstractly, or more somewhere else.

I don't know where Allah or God is for people. But for me, there's a spirit. There's sometimes an entity. But I don't know if that's a part of me, if that's a part of my consciousness. But I'd say that there is an awareness which is at the heart of every single atom. There is a beingness. And that is in me.

And my consciousness, my awareness, comes from that place. I think the beauty of our situation is previously, a member of the government could stand up and say, while we all acknowledge that we need to take better care of our environment, we have to do so in a way that doesn't compromise our other need for economic growth.

And you could say that. And it's like, most people think, yeah, that kind of makes sense. But now it's so obvious that that model will kill the planet. It's like, you can't get away with that anymore. We just have to do it in the right way. We don't put it off anymore.

We've kind of put love and caring and religious values to one side. They're a matter of personal conscience. Oh, he's a Muslim. Oh, be respectful of him. He's a vegetarian because he doesn't think we should kill animals. So these things, where we kind of put it in one place, the real world now has to become the place where we're trying to embody love and care for each other, and for the world around us, or we are finished.

I only care that you show respect for me. I show respect for you. And you attempt to live in a way that shows respect for all life-- and that you realise that that is your responsibility. That's all I care about because I think if we do that, something new will emerge.

[Back to - Activism and reverence for nature](" \l "Session3_MediaContent1)

# Uncaptioned Figure

## Description

This is a colour photograph of a woman lighting a candle in a church.

[Back to - Uncaptioned Figure](#Session4_Figure1)

# Uncaptioned Figure

## Description

This is a colour photograph of a group of children dancing around a tradition Maypole on a village green.

[Back to - Uncaptioned Figure](#Session6_Figure1)