

Signs and Symbols: What do they mean to a believer (3-5 years)

Key words and concept

- **Icon:** painting or mosaic of Jesus, Mary, a saint, or a Church feast. Used as an aid to devotion, usually in the Christian Orthodox tradition.
- **Devotion:** (in a religious context) an act of worship which usually involves prayer.
- **Orthodox:** (i) the Eastern Orthodox Church consisting of national Churches (mainly Greek or Slav), including the ancient Eastern Patriarchates. They hold the common Orthodox faith, and are in communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople. (ii) Conforming to the creeds sanctioned by the ecumenical councils, e.g., Nicaea, Chalcedon.
- **Belonging:** can be defined in a variety of ways including a sense of belonging through connections to: people, places, groups and communities. Belonging can enhance our sense of identity and aid the development of relationships within particular groups and communities.
- **Symbolism:** the use of one object / picture to represent another object, idea, action or thought. Widely used in religion and can evoke a sense of emotion and an affinity with an individual's faith.

Learning activity

Each activity is designed to have 10-15 minutes of teacher led input either as a whole class or in small groups, followed by children engaging in related activities.

Stage 1: Christ the Teacher:

- Show the children icon of Christ the Teacher. There are many images online. This icon shows Jesus holding an open book, has hand raised and a halo around his head.
- Ask the children some of the *questions* from the selection below, which can be tailored to specific age groups:
 - Who is it?
 - What are the letters for?
 - What does the book say?
 - What is the mark on his hand?
 - What's the shape on his head for?
 - What can you see?
 - What part of the icon do you see first?
 - Why do you think this is?
 - What did you notice next?
 - Where do you think you might find it?
 - Who is in the painting?

- What is the person holding?
 - What do you think the artist was thinking about when they painted this?
 - What might a Christian think about the icon?
 - What do you think about this piece of art?
 - What do you like?
 - Is there anything you don't like?
 - Would you change anything about it?
- Invite and record children's own questions. Keep them visible and answer them when you can.
 - Explain to the children that an 'icon' is a painting or mosaic of Jesus, Mary, a saint, or a Church feast. It is used as an aid to devotion (prayer and worship), usually in the Christian Orthodox tradition.
 - Ask if the children have any questions of their own about the icon.
 - Now ask the children where they think they might see a picture like this? You might want to display a selection of pictures for children to choose from, e.g. a church, a school, a house. Explain that you might see it in all of those places but especially in churches in the Orthodox tradition.
 - Find images of Orthodox churches and cathedrals online- show children a selection, showing icons and the richly painted walls and woodwork.
 - Explain to the children that icons are usually found in a Christian Orthodox place of worship but also in other Christian places too.
 - Give small groups a selection of icon pictures to look at, gathered from the internet. Look for icons of:
 - Jesus as a baby with Mary
 - Jesus and his disciples
 - Jesus and the saints
 - Scenes from Jesus' life
 - Give pupil five minutes to choose the one they like the best and to think of a reason why they like it.
 - Ask the children to show their picture to the class and take it in turns to share it and say why they like it.

Stage 2: Symbols

- Show children some of the images of the stained glass windows, asking the same questions as in stage 1 with the additional ones below, if appropriate:
 - How do you think these are made?
 - What do you think the person is doing?
 - What do you think the person is holding?
 - What do you think the colours tell you?
- Explain the meaning of some of the windows and introduce the idea of symbolism being a way to say something but without words.
- Can they think of ways to say things without using words? Ask children to mime: Hello, goodbye, I'm

tired, I'm grumpy, thank you.

- In small groups with an adult, can they think of a picture or a symbol to 'say' these things, e.g. draw round their hand to say hello or goodbye.
- You can also use road signs, commercial symbols, charity symbols and mascots.
- Work with the class to think about a picture for class stained glass window and the colours and symbols you might use and why. [The outline can be drawn for the children and then completed using a variety of media.] Throughout the activity, ask the children about what symbolism they want to use and why.

Stage 3: Symbolism from world religions

This can be split into 3 short sessions

Session A

- Remind children about the icons and the stained-glass windows they have looked at and tell them that as well as symbols being used in religious worship and celebrations that actions and music are also used. All these things help people to feel part of their religious group/community.
- Ask children to sit in a circle quietly and explain that they are going to close their eyes and listen to some special music.
- Play The 'Hallelujah Chorus' from Handel's Messiah and ask the children to think of one word to describe how it made them feel.
- Explain that the words were taken from the Christian Bible by a composer named George Frideric Handel over 300 years ago.

Session B

- Now ask the children to watch some dancing from the Hindu tradition. There are many clips online.
- Ask the children to think about a question they would like to ask about what they have seen, share the questions with the class and display.

Session C

- Explain to the children that Islamic art patterns have no beginning and no end – ask children to create their own using a variety of media such as pastels, paints, chalk, water and food colouring, drawing in sand. Along the lines of 'taking a pencil for a walk' rather than creating geometric patterns at this stage.

Bringing it all together

- Ask the children to report back on what have seen and heard: what was their favourite and why?
- Explain that these different ways of showing belonging are also about a person's thoughts, feelings and ideas (their identity). Work with small groups to either compose some music, make up a special dance or design a pattern based on Islamic art. Ask them to relate their ideas to themselves and what kind of person they think they are.

Stage 4: Personal signs and symbols

- Ask children if they belong to any groups e.g. football, dance, rainbows etc. Do they have to wear anything special when they go to the group? Do they follow special routines there?
- Explain that sometimes people who belong to / follow a religious faith wear special symbols to show belonging. You could use pictures of such items as: a cross, a hijab, a kippah, a tilak mark, a turban.
- It is useful to be able to have the objects available for the children to handle at this stage.
- Encourage children to ask questions about the objects:
 - What is it used for?
 - When is it used / worn?
 - Who wears it?
 - Why do they wear it?
- Ask the children to give their views on each item.
- In small groups support children to think of a special symbol for themselves. This can then be made using a variety of media. When all the children have made their own identity symbol, they can be put together to create a symbol of the whole class.