

# WHY DO PEOPLE BELIEVE IN GOD?

## You will find out

- The reasons why many people believe in God.
- What the words 'theism', 'agnosticism' and 'atheism' mean.
- What it means to be a 'humanist'.

## In the glossary

- Agnostic
- Atheist
- Bible
- Conscience
- Free will
- Humanist
- Miracle
- Theist



## DOES GOD EXIST?

This is an impossible question to answer, although everyone asks it at some time. For centuries people have looked up into the night sky, gazed at the stars and felt overwhelmed by the vastness surrounding them. They have agreed with the words in the **Bible** in extract A:

**A** *“The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the works of his hands.”*

Psalm 19.1

As science discovers more about the universe, the feeling of being overwhelmed by it all increases for many people. We know, for instance, that it takes a single ray of light 15,000,000 light years to travel from one side of the universe to the other – and light travels at 300,000,000 metres a second! Try taking that in! It is equally astonishing to realise that, within this one solar system – and there are many of them – we know of just one place where life certainly exists. That is Planet Earth. People have always found this thought alone quite terrifying [B].

**B** *“The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me.”*

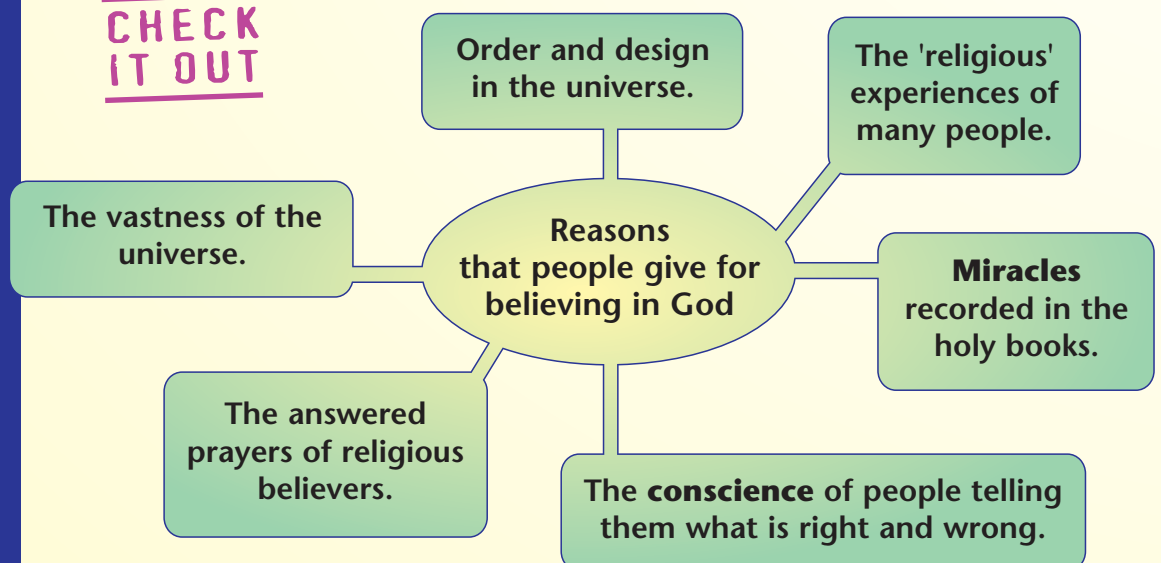
Blaise Pascal, 17<sup>th</sup> century mathematician

## DOES EVERYONE BELIEVE IN GOD?

People can be divided into:

- **Atheists** – they believe that God does not exist and that to think otherwise is just wishful thinking. The atheist believes that there are too many reasons for not believing in God, e.g. suffering, natural disasters, etc.
- **Agnostics** – they believe that the existence of God cannot be proved either way and, until it can, it is better 'to sit on the fence'. Opinion polls suggest that there are far more agnostics than atheists in the UK.
- **Theists** – believers in God. Opinion polls suggest that 3 out of every 4 people in the UK are theists.

### CHECK IT OUT





The tsunami disaster challenged the faith of many religious people.

## HUMANISTS AND GOD

**Humanists** are people who do not believe in God. Instead they believe that all of the goodness and kindness found in this life happen because people are basically good. Human beings treat other people kindly because they know that it is the right and sensible way to live. They do not need to believe in God to do so.

## BELIEVING IN GOD WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN

Bad things happen to all of us sometimes. When people see events like the tsunami which struck the countries around the Indian Ocean on Boxing Day 2004, killing thousands of people, they wonder whether they can continue to believe in God. Others, though, keep their faith because they believe:

- God may be testing the people's faith.
- Suffering often leads to acts of great kindness from others.
- Human beings have **free will** and often bring suffering on themselves.
- The actions of God are beyond human understanding.

## OVER TO YOU ►►►

- 1 Give three reasons why many people believe in God. Do these reasons go some way towards convincing you that God exists?
- 2 Write down three examples of what appears to be order and design in the world of nature.
- 3 Think of one reason why a person might be:
  - a) A theist
  - b) An atheist
  - c) An agnostic
- 4 Do you treat other people in a kind way? If so, why?
- 5 Do you think that human beings are basically good and kind? Give two examples to illustrate your answer.
- 6 Think of three 'bad' things that you have heard or read about. If you had been involved in each situation, would you have found it difficult/impossible to continue to believe in God? Explain your answer.

# WHAT ARE PRAYER AND MEDITATION?

## You will find out

- The important part prayer plays in a Christian's life.
- The different ways Christians use both private and communal prayer.
- The meaning and importance of meditation as a way of communicating with God.

## In the glossary

- Bible
- Church
- Crucifix
- Icon
- Lord's Prayer
- Soul

## DIFFERENT WAYS OF PRAYING

In the picture you can see a young Christian who is praying quietly on her own at home. This is how many Christians prefer to pray. They find it easier to speak to God and to listen to God speaking to them when they are alone. Christians also pray, however, when they are worshipping with others in church.

You can also see a picture of someone meditating. This simply means that they are:

- Thinking deeply about God.
- Keeping their mind open so that God is able to speak to them.

When they are meditating, some Christians find it helpful to have an object, such as a **crucifix** or **icon**, in front of them to help them to centre their thoughts. Others prefer to read a passage from the Bible or to listen to a piece of music as they meditate.

Most Christian parents teach their children to pray and read their Bibles from a very early age.



## CHRISTIAN PRAYERS

There are many Christian prayers which are very old and are found in different prayer books such as the Book of Common Prayer [Anglican] and the Missal [Roman Catholic]. These are included in many church services. Other prayers are not written down but are made up by the person leading the service – called 'extemporary' prayers. The most important Christian prayer is the **Lord's Prayer** [A], as this is the only prayer that Jesus taught his followers to use:

**A** *“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”*

Matthew 6.9-13

## TAKE TIME TO THINK

Do you ever pray? If so, what kind of things do you pray about? Do you think that prayer makes a real difference for yourself and others?

## COMMUNICATING WITH GOD

Christians pray because they want to come into contact with God. Why do they feel this need? It is because:

### CHECK IT OUT



### OVER TO YOU ▶▶▶

- 1 Why do you think that many Christians prefer to pray to God quietly on their own?
- 2 Why do you think that most Christians close their eyes as they are praying?
- 3 Copy the Lord's Prayer into your book. Use different colour pencils to underline:
  - the reminders in the prayer of the greatness and holiness of God.
  - the willingness to accept that God has a purpose for this world.
  - the need to ask God to meet one's basic needs.
  - the need to seek God's forgiveness and to forgive others.

Many people find that meditating is spiritually beneficial.

