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God knows!

By Marc Olmedo

OBJECTIVES

- To make students aware of the religious diversity in the world
- To make students reflect on the issue of religion and help them express their own opinions about it
- To make them react to controversial opinions about religion or expressed by certain religious people
- To provide them with some insight into the role of religion in Britain and the USA
- To expand their language awareness
- To develop their reading comprehension skills
- To develop their listening skills

LEVEL

B2 (CEFR)

PROCEDURE

1. Ask students to sit in small groups. Tell them they are going to discuss some questions about religions and beliefs. Allow them to read the questions and then go through the expressions in the box. Make sure they understand what they mean and how they are used. Ask them to discuss the questions and encourage them to use as many expressions from the box as possible.
2. Ask students to write the names of the religion next to the appropriate number. This can be done as a competition. Each group is a team, and the first group to come up with the correct names is the winner.

Answers:

1. Buddhism	5. Amish
2. Roman Catholicism	6. Jehovah's Witnesses
3. Islam	7. Hinduism
4. Mormonism	8. Judaism

3. Ask students to complete this task individually and to check their answers with their partner once they have finished.

Answers:

1. Amish	5. Roman Catholicism
2. Mormonism	6. Islam
3. Hinduism	7. Jehovah's Witnesses
4. Buddhism	8. Judaism

4. Students discuss the questions in pairs.
5. Ask students to read the text and complete the task in exercise 6.

6. Ask students to match the words 1-10 from the text with the definitions a-j.

Answers: a-7; b-4; c-2, d-5; e-6; f-1; g-9; h-8; i-3; j-10

Tell them that the adjective *fence-sitting* comes from the expression *to sit on the fence*, which means to avoid deciding between two sides of an argument, discussion, or quarrel.

7. Students do this activity in pairs.

Possible answers:

a. It is written in an ironical, humorous vein, but, as a critic wrote, with underlying seriousness.

b. British people do not seem to be very religious. In fact the author says that they are "probably the least religious people on Earth." Later she writes that they are "spiritually neutral" and "apathetic". There is no set answer to the second question.

c. She is trying to point out that the Christian denomination Church of England does not have any religious connotations to many English people.

d. The author seems to imply that a religion usually involves a set of rules or principles that its adherents have to observe, but that the Church of England does not stick to this definition, since it is extremely tolerant and non-prescriptive.

e. She means that religion is a private matter and displays or religious zeal should take place only in the church. Outside this place, such displays may embarrass the non-practising majority.

f. Whereas American politicians are forced to show their devoutness and invoke their deity all the time, in Britain they are expected not to mention their faith.

8. Ask students to read Richard Dawkins's statements and to say whether they agree with him.
9. Tell students they are going to watch an excerpt from an interview with Richard Dawkins and that they have to decide if the statements are true or false, and why.

Give them time to read the statements.

Play the video.

http://youtube.com/results?search_query=british+tv-richard+dawkins&search_type=&search=Search (00:00:00 – 00:01:50)

Encourage them to compare their answers with their partners.
Play the video a second time if necessary.

Answers:

a: True (It is his latest book. Explain that he is the author of the book The Selfish Gene. They might have heard of it)

b: True (He says that after six years of Bush, America is ready for an attack on religion. Remind students that Bush invaded Iraq in the name of God)

c. True

d. False (It is addressed to those he calls "vaguely religious people". He intends to win them over to his point of view)

10. Ask students to discuss this question in pairs, and then to compare their conclusions to the conclusions of a different pair.

Answer: The reader Dawkins is targeting might resemble, to a certain extent, the average British as described by Kate Fox: neither of the two gives religion much thought.

11. Tell students that they are going to listen to an excerpt from a talk Dawkins delivered at a USA University.

http://youtube.com/results?search_query=dawkins+in+lynchburg+va+%28part2%29&search_type=&search=Search (00:15:17 – 00:17:40)

Encourage students to answer the questions.

Answers:

- a. He says that it would be like trying to herd cats: they are too intelligent and independent minded.*
- b. There are many more atheists and agnostics than Jews, however the former have much less power.*
- c. Many atheistic politicians have to lie about their religious convictions.*
- d. He says that it is not up to him but up to American people to do something to change that unfair situation.*

12. Students discuss this question with their partner.

Answer:

There is a clear connection. Kate Fox says that American politicians feel obliged to demonstrate their devoutness, and Dawkins points out that, since that is precisely the case, many of them who do not believe in God feel forced to lie. In Britain politicians do not need to lie because they are not expected to reveal their religious convictions.

13. This can be done as a class. Elicit from students what they know about televangelists. Write on the board all the ideas they come up with.

Explain that a televangelist is someone, usually a Protestant Christian, who talks about religion on television in an evangelical way. They are common in the USA. Some have raised very large amounts of money for their churches in this way. Recently, some televangelists have been found guilty of using the money they raised for non-religious purposes, and of behaving in non-religious ways.

Tell students they are going to watch the famous American televangelist Jerry Falwell talking about the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center.

Students work in pairs and predict what Falwell might say.

14. Play the video after students have read the statements.

http://youtube.com/results?search_query=the+religious+reaction+to+the+9%2F11+attacks&search_type=&search=Search (00:00:00 – 00:01:23)

Answers:

a. False (Falwell justifies God and says that Americans probably deserved that because of their immoral behaviour)

b. True (Elicit other groups Falwell lays the blame on: abortionists, the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union), and People for the American Way)

c. True (Falwell's interlocutor, another famous televangelist called Pat Robertson, says that he "concur" with him. Explain that "concur" is a very formal word which means the same as "agree")

15. Ask students to sit in small groups and say whether they agree with Falwell and what they think about his remarks.

16. This is a self-evaluation task. Prompt students to read the questions and write their answers on a piece of paper. They don't have to be long answers, just sketchy notes which they will later use to present their ideas to the people in their groups.

REFERENCES

Fox, Kate (2005). **Watching the English. The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour**, Hodder.

Oxford Guide to British and American Culture, New edition, Oxford University Press, 2005

http://youtube.com/results?search_query=british+tv-richard+dawkins&search_type=&search=Search

http://youtube.com/results?search_query=dawkins+in+lynchburg+va+%28part2%29&search_type=&search=Search

http://youtube.com/results?search_query=the+religious+reaction+to+the+9%2F11+attacks&search_type=&search=Search

God knows!

1. Sit in small groups and discuss the following questions. Use as many expressions from the box as possible.

- a. Do you believe in God or some kind of superior being?
- b. Do you believe in reincarnation?
- c. Do you believe in destiny?
- d. Do you believe in astrology?
- e. Do you believe in miracles?
- f. Do you think human beings have a natural predisposition to believe in non-empirical things?
- g. Did you have or would you like to have a religious wedding? Would you like to have a religious funeral? Why/not?

*In my opinion To my mind In my view If you ask me I believe/think
I agree with X to a certain extent I take your point, but... I couldn't agree more
I see where you're coming from, but... Absolutely! Come off it!
That's nonsense/rubbish You must be joking! Do you think so?*

2. Look at these pictures. What religions do they illustrate? What do you know about these religions? Write their names next to the numbers.



1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



6.



7.



8.

3. Match the religions a-h with the sentences 1-8.

- | | |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| a. Roman Catholicism | e. Jehovah's Witnesses |
| b. Islam | f. Hinduism |
| c. Mormonism | g. Buddhism |
| d. Amish | h. Judaism |
1. It emerged in Switzerland around 1693. Its adherents are mostly farmers and their religion does not allow them to have cars, telephones, or electricity. ____
 2. It was established in the USA in 1830. At one time its male adherents were allowed to have more than one wife. ____
 3. This religion divides families into four castes which rarely mix. ____
 4. Its adherents hold that life is full of suffering caused by desire and that the way to end this suffering is through enlightenment that enables one to stop the endless sequence of births and deaths to which one is otherwise subject.
 5. Its church was the established one in Britain until the Reformation of the 16th century. ____
 6. It has the second largest number of adherents. The name of this religion means "submission to the will of God." ____
 7. They believe in the imminent second coming of Christ and refuse to take oaths, enter military service, or receive blood transfusions. ____
 8. A religion developed among the ancient Hebrews and characterized by belief in one God, external to creation, but operating in it. Its adherents' house of worship is called synagogue. ____

4. You are going to read a text about religion in Britain. But before you read, discuss these questions with your partner:

- a. What is the main religion in your country?
- b. How religious is your country?
- c. What percentage of people in your country actually practises their religion?
- d. How religious do you think British people are? How about Americans?

5. Now, read the text.

The Elizabethan courtier John Lyly claimed that the English were God's "chosen and peculiar people". Well, if we are, this was certainly a rather peculiar choice on the Almighty's part, as we are probably the least religious people on Earth. In surveys, up to 88 per cent of English people tick the box saying that they "belong" to one or another of the Christian denominations - usually the Church of England - but in practice only about 15 per cent of these "Christians" actually go to church on a regular basis.

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Most of us are not christened nowadays, and only about half get married in church, but almost most of us have a Christian funeral of some sort. This is not because death suddenly inspires the English to become religious, but because it is the automatic "default" option: *not* having a Christian funeral requires a determined effort, a clear notion of exactly what one wants to do instead, and a lot of embarrassing fuss and bother.

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In any case, the Church of England is the least religious church on Earth. It is notoriously **woolly-minded** (1), tolerant to a fault and amiably non-prescriptive. To put yourself down as "C of E" (we prefer to use this abbreviation whenever possible, in speech as well as on forms, as the word "church" sounds a bit religious, and "England" might seem a bit patriotic) on a census or application form, as is customary, does not imply any religious **observance** (2) or beliefs whatsoever – not even a belief in the existence of God.

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I remember **eavesdropping** (3) on a conversation in my GP's waiting room. A schoolgirl of about 12 or 13 was filling in some medical form or other, with intermittent help from her mother. The daughter asked "Religion? What religion am I? We're not any religion, are we?" "No, we're not," replied her mother, "Just put C of E." "What's C of E?" asked the daughter. "Church of England." "Is that a religion?" "Yes, sort of. Well, no, not really – it's just what you put." Like the automatic Christian funeral, "C of E" is a sort of default option. A bit like the "neither agree nor disagree"

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box on questionnaires – a kind of apathetic, **fence-sitting** (4), middling sort of religion for the spiritually “neutral”. 25

We are not only indifferent, but worse (from the church’s point of view), we are *politely* indifferent, *tolerantly* indifferent, *benignly* indifferent. We have no actual objection to God. If pushed, we even accept that He might exist – or that Something might exist, and we might well call it God, if only for the sake of peace and quiet. God is all very well, in His place, which is the church. When we are in His house – at weddings and funerals – we make all the right polite noises, as one does in people’s houses, although we find the **earnestness** (5) of it **faintly** (6) ridiculous and a bit uncomfortable. Otherwise, He **impinges** (7) very little on our lives or our thoughts. Other people are very welcome to worship Him if they choose – it’s a free country – but this is a private matter, and they should keep it to themselves and not bore or embarrass the rest of us by making an unnecessary **fuss** (8) about it. (There is nothing the English hate more than a *fuss*.) 30 35

In many other countries – America, for example – politicians and other prominent public figures feel obliged to demonstrate their devoutness and invoke their deity at every opportunity. Here, they must do the exact opposite. Even to *mention* one’s faith would be very bad form. Our current Prime Minister is known to be a devout Christian, an affliction we tolerate in our usual **grudgingly** (9) courteous fashion, but only because he has the good sense to keep extremely quiet about it. 40

Our benign indifference remains benign so long as the religious, of any persuasion, stay in their place and refrain from discomforting the non-practising, spiritually neutral majority with embarrassing or tedious displays of religious zeal. And any use of “the G-word”, unless obviously idiomatic or just a figure of speech (God forbid, God knows, Godforsaken, etc.) counts as such an improper display. Earnestness of any kind makes us **squirm** (10); religious earnestness makes us deeply suspicious and decidedly twitchy. 45

Adapted from *Watching the English*, by Kate Fox

6. Match the words 1-10 with their meanings a-j.

- | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. woolly-minded (line 12) | 6. faintly (line 31) |
| 2. observance (line 16) | 7. to impinge (line 32) |
| 3. to eavesdrop (line 18) | 8. fuss (line 8) |
| 4. fence-sitting (line 24) | 9. grudgingly (line 40) |
| 5. earnestness (line 31) | 10. to squirm (line 46) |

- a. to have an effect on something _____
- b. reluctant or unable to commit oneself or make a decision _____
- c. the practice of obeying a particular religion, law or custom _____
- d. seriousness or graveness _____
- e. slightly _____
- f. showing a vague or muddled way of thinking _____
- g. reluctantly, unwillingly _____
- h. an excessive display of anxious attention _____
- i. to listen secretly to a private conversation _____
- j. to feel or show acute discomfort at something embarrassing, shameful, or unpleasant _____

7. Discuss with a partner the following questions about the text.

- a. What style would you say the text is written in (formal, informal, light-hearted, sarcastic, humorous, etc.)? Find examples in the text to justify your answer.
- b. How religious are British people, according to the author, Kate Fox? Would you say they are more religious than the people in your country?
- c. What is the point the author is trying to make through the anecdote concerning the schoolgirl?
- d. What does the author mean when she says that “the Church of England is the least religious church on Earth” (line 12)?
- e. What does the author mean by “God is all very well, in His place” (line 29)?
- f. What is the attitude of British politicians with regard to religion as opposed to the attitude of American politicians?

8. You are going to listen to an excerpt from an interview with Richard Dawkins, an eminent scientist and controversial atheist. Before you listen to him, read some of the things he has written or said in different interviews. Do you agree with his statements?

- *Religion fuels war.*
- *The more intelligent you are, the less religious you are likely to be.*
- *God is a misogynist, racist, megalomaniacal, capriciously malevolent bully.*
- *There isn't such a thing as a Catholic, Buddhist, or Jewish child. There's only a child of Catholic, Buddhist, or Jewish parents.*

9. Watch the video and decide whether the following statements are True (T) or False (F). Justify your answers.

- a. *The God Delusion* isn't Dawkins's first book. ___
- b. Dawkins believes that America would have been more reluctant to read his book six years ago than now. ___
- c. Britain is more open to religious criticism than America. ___
- d. *The God Delusion* is especially addressed to people who are not religious. ___

10. Do you think the reader that Dawkins is targeting in his book might correspond to the average British as described by Kate Fox?

11. Listen to Dawkins again and answer the following questions. This time, he is giving a talk at a university in the USA.

- a. Why would it be difficult for atheists to form a lobby, according to Dawkins?
- b. Is there a correlation between the proportion of Jews and atheists and the power these two groups have in America? Why/not?
- c. What do many atheistic politicians have to do in order to get on in their careers in America?
- d. Why does the audience laugh at a certain point during his talk?

12. Can you see any connection between what you have just listened to and what Kate Fox says about American politicians' attitude towards religion?

13. What is a *televangelist*? Have you ever watched one talking on TV? What do you think of them and the way they speak?

You are going to watch the famous American televangelist Jerry Falwell talking about the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. Discuss with your partner what you think he will say.

14. Now watch the video and decide whether the following statements are True (T) or False (F).

- a. Falwell does not quite understand why God allowed these attacks to happen. ___
- b. He states that pagans, lesbians, feminists and gays are partly to blame for the attacks. ___
- c. Falwell's interlocutor agrees with him. ___

15. What do you think about Falwell's ideas?

16. Read the following questions and answer them on a piece of paper. Afterwards, sit in small groups and exchange your ideas with your partners.

- a. Has your opinion about religion changed in any way with regard to the opinion you had before starting these activities? If so, in what way?
- b. What things have you learned?
- c. What things did you find most interesting?
- d. Can you think of three positive things and three negative things about religion?

