

Cloud of Witnesses: A project for RE about God in Art!

Creative RE Lessons with brilliant art works.

Secondary Notepad.

<p>What is our project about?</p> <p>We are pleased to share new and creative materials for RE with strong imaginative and artistic elements and some interfaith themes. Developed from the ‘Cloud of Witnesses’ art and faith exhibition, we have eight sets of learning materials, each one needing two-three lessons to work on with pupils aged 8-14. You are reading the Secondary Notepad.</p> <p>These lessons use the highly creative art works from the 2025 ‘Cloud of Witnesses’ exhibition with permission from the artists, to inspire pupils to think in profound ways about God, faith, prayer, sacred space and related themes. They are presented as classroom-ready PPTs with all the info, worksheets and tasks ready to use.</p> <p>The resources have been written by RE adviser Lat Blaylock in collaboration with Fleur Dorrell from the <i>God who Speaks</i> and the Catholic Bishops’ Conference. They are for free use in any school and by any teacher. We warmly thank schools, teachers and learners who piloted the materials, enriching the work with some really interesting samples of pupils’ work.</p> <p>The learning activities are designed to set high standards. They fit well into all kinds of RE / RVE / RME syllabuses wherever pupils are studying questions about God. They use philosophical, theological and spiritual language and methods. Trial schools have been impressed by the energy, imagination and enthusiasm these lessons generate among learners.</p> <p>The Catholic RE Directory for England and Wales is referenced at the end of each PPT series to crystallise the kinds of contribution the lessons make to good learning in Catholic schools, but the project is for everyone and is adaptable to your needs and contexts.</p>	
<p>What are the primary lessons about? (2-3 lessons needed for each of these titles)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Searching for God• Sacred spaces• Palm Crosses – when life unravels• What if Jesus came to your town?	<p>What are the secondary lessons about? (2-3 lessons needed for each of these titles)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• God in Jesus• Inter-faith visions• Solidarity• Big Questions
<p>This notepad introduces the lessons and provides you as a teacher with the materials you need to make this learning happen.</p> <p>Here you will find copiable outlines, capture sheets, thinking materials, interviews and all you need to run the lessons.</p>	<p>Feedback please</p> <p>These lessons are provided for free, thanks to generous support from the God who Speaks and the Culham Saint Gabriel’s Trust. Please be a participant by sending us examples of work your pupils do in the project.</p> <p>Send to Lat Blaylock: lat@retoday.org.uk</p>

Secondary Module 1: God in Jesus.

Copy these templates for thinking onto A4 or A3 paper. Give a copy to each group of two or three to fill in.

8. We think this artwork expresses spirituality because

3. The most interesting thing about this is...

9. We think the hidden messages in this art might be...

4. We're not sure about...

10. Our own best ideas about this art are...

5. We noticed this artist connects to ideas from the Bible such as...

6. This made us think more deeply about...


5 Observations, 5 Reflections

1a. We noticed...

1b. Our title for this artwork is...

2. We liked the way this art...
...because...

7. We think the picture shows a religious belief about...



8. We think this artwork expresses spirituality because

3. The most interesting thing about this is...

9. We think the hidden messages in this art might be...

4. We're not sure about...

10. Our own best ideas about this art are...



2. We liked the way this art...
...because...

7. We think the picture shows a religious belief about...

5. We noticed this artist connects to ideas from the Bible such as...

1a. We noticed...

1b. Our title for this artwork is...

6. This made us think more deeply about...

5 Observations, 5 Reflections

Secondary Module 2: Inter-faith visions.

This framework enables two students to discuss and record ideas in an open and deep way. In these examples, it has Ali Caligraff's 'Noms d'Allah' in the centre.

8. We think this artwork expresses spirituality because

3. The most interesting thing about this is...

9. We think the hidden messages of the art might be...

4. We're not sure about...

10. Our own best ideas about this are...

5. We realised that this Muslim artist...

6. This made us think more deeply about...

7. We think the picture shows a religious belief about...

2. We liked the way this art...
...because...

1a. We noticed...

1b. Our title for this artwork is...

5 Observations, 5 Reflections

Calligraphy: a place of rest for the soul. Interview with Muslim artist Ali Caligraff.

RE Today interviewed Muslim artist Ali Caligraff, who works in France, about his dynamic and intriguing Islamic art, often infused with joy and vitality. There is an extended version of this article and a PowerPoint on the website to take the work straight into your classroom – meeting examination requirements with verve and flair.

When you were a child, growing up, how did you learn about Islam - and art?

I remember feeling as a young child a mystical dimension and a pleasure in developing a spirituality in a solitary way, long before I learned about Islam. I thought of the world, the cosmos, the meaning of life and events. When I was 10, a friend from school shared with me a piece of paper with the inscription "We are all brothers" written in Arabic. I couldn't read it, but it gave me real joy.

Aged 15, I began to perform my first acts as a Muslim, fasting in the month of Ramadan. In 25 years since I've been truly engaged in learning my religion, the joy of being able to live a more active spirituality and carrying out social actions on behalf of a religious organization. These years have anchored me, they gave me a good, solid foundation.

It is through calligraphy that I have renewed my faith, that I maintain and develop it.

Regarding art, I was educated in artistic practices by school, but also by my parents who took me with my brother and sister to museums when we visited Paris. My father drew. He painted canvases that my mother and sister collected. Even though I never saw him paint, today I really understand what it gave him. There is a truth in painting and all the more so in calligraphy, the geometry of the soul expressed by the body.

I was also fortunate to hang out with an amazing high school art teacher. In difficult years for me, in my dealings with authorities, he welcomed me fully and allowed me to develop with extreme freedom and lightness.

As a teenager and young adult I have been very active in urban cultures, starting with tag, graffiti, dance and then more fully rap. There is in these practices a vital energy which is expressed with force. These practices have been my main artistic school.

What influences your artistic style?

I have two jobs, or let's say two passions. My first is to intervene with people, groups and communities in order to reduce the tensions, violence and crises they may go through, and to enable them, by recreating more favorable conditions, to find new responses to their difficulties and challenges. And my second is Arabic, or rather Islamic calligraphy, like an anti-chamber of my first profession, a place of rest for the soul, of peace and of relationship to the Divine, to the beautiful, to the harmonious. In the history of Arabic and Islamic calligraphy, this double exercise, between a profession, a specific social function and the assiduous practice of calligraphy, is very common.

It is my spirituality that is joyful. It is a sweetness for my soul to give it meaning through my calligraphy. And I want a living, dynamic, organic spirituality. Spirituality and calligraphy feed off and respond to each other. Calligraphy, it is said, contains the energy of the calligrapher. It is a geometry of the soul and a poetry of the body. My calligraphy aims to synthesize and harmonize body and mind; rules-standards and their exceeding; harmony and struggle; tradition and modernity; east and west.



Since Islamic calligraphy is timeless, as highlighted by its inclusion in December 2021 in the intangible cultural heritage of humanity recognised by UNESCO, I recognize and draw inspiration from the work of master calligraphers, my illustrious predecessors and of the calligraphic tradition present all over the world. This "living heritage" is "a heritage from our ancestors that we pass on to our descendants", defines UNESCO.

Calligraphy certainly has a deep meaning for me in my life. And I realize through all the support, enthusiasm, blessings that I receive, how important, useful, resourcing, and educational it is in the lives of many people.

The power of calligraphy lies above all in its dynamism which must stimulate the imagination, and here the spirituality, of the beholder, and where the composition must become one. So that's what I'm aiming for. I am expressing here not only the word and its meaning, but a conception of the world and an energy to live it.

In the UK we teach students about Islam in RE. What do you want everyone to know about Islam?

Islam is our religion revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad. Our religious practice is organized around the 5 pillars, and it refers to the divine Word through the holy Qur'an and to the collections of the words and deeds of our beloved prophet Muhammad, called hadiths.

Al Ghazali, Muslim theologian and philosopher of the 11th century, affirmed that "One cannot conceive of the good without the beautiful", Islam is also an extraordinary civilization with a thousand riches: scientists, medics, historians, astronomers, mathematicians, architects and artists.

Abdul Karim Soroush, Muslim philosopher, notes that "Islam is a series of interpretations of Islam, just as Christianity is a series of interpretations of Christianity. And since these interpretations are historical, the element of historicity is there. This is why you need to have a good knowledge of the history of Islam." (In Q-News international).

In this, we must always remember that it is not Islam who speaks, but always a Muslim, from a given territory and time, who speaks about Islam.

Only God knows.

Islam is one worldview among many in France and the UK. How would you describe your Islamic world view as a creative?

I care about living here as if I was going to live there forever, but also as if I was going to die tomorrow.

I have a firm belief based on my experience that everything is dependent on a quality of the link.

A sufficiently good bond, firm, authentic, free, emotional, forgiving, to God, to oneself, to others, to loved ones, to fellow human beings, to those with whom I fraternize easily, but also to my neighbors, those who are different to me, distant, strangers, and more still, develop in me confidence, the power to act, beautiful and healthy ambitions.

We can of course live in a feeling of strictly individual success, but this vision is a delusion. Life spares no one from its fair share of trials, so we have to prepare as calmly as possible by training ourselves through all these connections to genuinely deal with the negative, the difficult and its effects.

And to take the next step, I need to be truly in those connections. I need this steadfast connection to God, His blessing, His mercy.

My calligraphy is an expression of my spiritual experience and corresponds to this same experience of others, Muslims or not. I repeatedly experience a strong but also fleeting feeling during my calligraphy sessions. And when I enter this state, I feel that my pen has fixed something in my composition. I hope those who see it may appreciate the beauty, the justness and the harmony exuded by these works.

Complete the writing frame after learning about the art and discussing your own ideas.

What's good about the example of stained glass from the Brighton Synagogue?	
What's good about Ali Caligraff's Muslim calligraphy?	
Is it true that you can understand people's beliefs better from art than from arguments?	
Do you think atheists' responses to this art might be positive in some ways? What would atheists make of this art and art forms?	
What is similar between Muslim and Jewish ideas in this art and art forms?	
What else would you say about what you learned?	

Secondary Module 3: Solidarity.

Select three of these ideas that you agree with - to discuss and write about.



Here are 9 ideas about solidarity connected to this learning. Are there three you agree with most? Select them and explain your choice to a partner.



“I believe showing solidarity with victims of oppression is always good.”

“I like the idea that in Jacob’s story, God shows solidarity with humanity.”

“If Jesus were here today, he would help save the refugees in the small boats.”

“God became human, flesh and blood, in Jesus. When Christians remember Jesus with bread and wine, that’s an example of solidarity.”

“The solidarity we need to oppose evil is illustrated well by the Black Lives Matter movement.”

“Art can be used really well to express solidarity with oppressed people.”

“What does God require? He’s shown us. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk with God.”

“I have experienced the power of solidarity in my own life. I can think of an example.”

“Solidarity notices the needs of others and refuses to accept evil. That makes it a kind of love.”

<p>I mostly agree with this one:</p>	<p>My reasons:</p>
<p>I strongly agree with this one:</p>	<p>My main thought about this:</p>
<p>I also agree with this idea:</p>	<p>My own ideas on this are:</p>

Lorna May Wadsworth's image of Christ's Last Supper. Sheffield, 2009.



Bible text: "While they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take and eat. This is my body." He took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from this, all of you. This is my blood of the Covenant, which is poured out for many so that their sins may be forgiven. I tell you, I won't drink wine again until that day when I drink it in a new way with you in my Father's kingdom." Then, after singing songs of praise, they went to the Mount of Olives."

What has Lorna used from the Bible to make her art?
What has she added to the Bible?

How is this painting connected to the 'Black Lives Matter' movement?

How is this painting connected to the Eucharist?

Do you think this painting is spiritually powerful?
Explain your answer.

Secondary Module 4: Big questions.

Use this outline blown up to A3 to get 4 learners to collect all the questions they would like to ask a 'supreme being'. Write them inside the Question Mark. Then pass the sheet on to another group to suggest all the answers they think a 'supreme being' might give. Answers can be written outside the QM in different colours.



**Inside this question mark
write all the questions you
can think of that you would
like to ask God. Imagine you
could ask the 'Supreme
Being' anything at all: what
would you ask?
Questions about life, the
universe and everything.**

An interview with Rani Salan

Q: You created the artwork ‘Vishnu and Lakshmi dreaming the multiverse’ based on a Hindu creation narrative. How did this come about?

I love stories, mythologies that connect with nature, the potential of the mind. Fables carry teachings, and to understand them you have to suspend disbelief. That takes you on a really interesting journey. I was reading Joseph Campbell's book 'Myths of Light' and learned about the ancient Hindu creation story of Vishnu and Lakshmi. It struck me that I didn't know the story. When I looked at traditional Indian paintings of this story, I never thought to explore what was going on and why. Once I knew what the symbols meant, the deeper narrative I connected more with the paintings. Then I felt compelled to create my version. It really allows me to remember things better when they are distilled in images, and when I talk about my work, I am connected to it and can share a more personal stance.

Q2: Your image is very original. What led you to paint it in this way?

During my research, through reading and collecting visuals, I try to capture the essence of the story rather than recreate it in ways that are familiar. That's how an artist can make sense of the world through their vision. This is why my work turns out the way it does - because it was created by me! I create work which reflects my interest in science as well as art. My art explores the visual history of images. I take whatever resonates with me as inspiration. Example: symmetry fascinates me, so I cannot help using symmetry in my compositions. In this painting it dictates the overall image layout. When I read a mythical story, I pick out elements, symbols, characters or archetypes that really stand out: these have a purpose in the narrative.

Q3: Would you like to explain how different images in your painting connect to the Hindu creation story?

In my painting, the white draped cloth represents Vishnu. The snake in which Vishnu is seated is wrapped around. The Eye become the universe. The lotus flower symbolises the connection of Vishnu's naval: he's dreaming up the universe. The female hands represent Lakshmi, seated at the feet of Vishnu, massaging his feet. Without her female energy, Vishnu cannot dream up the universe, it is her action of massaging his feet that enables him to do this. So her hands become an important aspect in this story - her importance is too often forgotten. There is a joining up of all the elements as the outcome cannot happen unless all the elements come together, the deeper interconnectedness of everything. Nothing exists in isolation. It almost becomes a game of deciphering the symbols because Hinduism is so heavily rooted in this.

The Creation of this Universe

From Hindu scripture.

This is a simplified version.

“Aeons ago, the god Vishnu slept on the great snake in the mighty primeval ocean. He slept for ages. Nothing happened.

Then the beautiful goddess Lakshmi came to Vishnu and began to massage his feet. Life began in Vishnu's dreams. First a great stalk grew from Vishnu's belly button, and a great lotus flower blossomed on the end of the stalk.

When the flower opened, the god of creation, Brahma, was revealed inside. He held the scriptures, the four Vedas in each of his four hands and with his four faces gazed in every direction. He began to make the beauties of the heavens and the earth.

And that is how this universe was created. Or maybe it was not like that. In truth, god alone knows. Or maybe even god doesn't know!

Q4: There are lots of traditional images of this story – but yours is completely fresh. Can you say more about that?

I suppose I have made it different from other images as I don't use the entire figure, it is abstract in the sense I use symbols to depict a representation of the thing itself. It might look contemporary because it's quite muted in the colour palette compared to traditional Indian images. I have also used anatomy, a part of the brain, the cerebellum to depict the conscious mind, the dreaming state, crossing into the universe, connecting to a higher state. I suppose it's not literal, and art tries not to be literal too.

I always hope viewers respond with the same curiosity to look further and question and learn new things. To enable this curiosity, that provokes someone else to research any aspect of what I put in my art is a joy. To inspire knowledge, curiosity and simply create more beauty is my intention.

Q5: Do you have any thoughts for students who look at this image?

I really hope you end up recreating images of your own. Make some collages! Everyone learns and takes something different from a story.

Thank you for your interest in my work. It's not often that I get asked profound questions so I really hope I can offer you some insight. My artistic practice is rooted in narrative and sharing stories. My painting is like a visual essay.



Discussion questions:

- a. What do you like about Rani's art?
- b. What do you think she used from the Hindu scriptures, and what did she add to the scriptures?
- c. What made her work hard to understand – and is there anything you still need to find out about it?
- d. This is a spiritual piece of art. There may be beliefs behind it, and there may be emotions in it. How would you explain it to someone younger than you? Come up with a 120-word explanation.

Lat Blaylock, 2026