

Religion  
and Belief



Globalisation



Education



Level 2



Any (small  
groups: 5-6)



90 minutes



# Soon to be outdated

*Something which we think is impossible now is not impossible in another decade.*

Constance Baker Motley<sup>1</sup>

<b>Themes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Religion and Belief</li> <li>• Globalisation</li> <li>• Education</li> </ul>
<b>Complexity</b>	Level 2
<b>Group size</b>	Any (small groups: 5-6)
<b>Time</b>	90 minutes
<b>Overview</b>	In this activity people discuss how beliefs develop, how they are reinforced and how and why they change over time.
<b>Related rights</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Freedom of thought, conscience and religion</li> <li>• Freedom of opinion and expression</li> <li>• The right to participate freely in the cultural life of the community</li> </ul>
<b>Objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To develop understanding about the social construction of beliefs</li> <li>• To develop critical thinking and discussion skills</li> <li>• To cultivate attitudes of open-mindedness and enquiry</li> </ul>
<b>Materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Statement cards, one set per small group</li> <li>• A large sheet of paper and pens for each group</li> </ul>
<b>Preparation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Copy the handout sheet, add more statements or delete as required and cut out the statements. Make one set of cards per small group.</li> </ul>

## Instructions

1. Explain that this activity is about how beliefs change over time. First participants discuss the beliefs that past generations had but which are now outdated, and then they discuss those beliefs that they have and which their children and grandchildren will find outdated.
2. Brainstorm what people understand by the word "belief".
3. Now ask participants to get into small groups of 5 – 6.
4. Each group should choose someone to make summary notes on the large sheet of paper and to give feedback in plenary.
5. Ask the groups to look at the statements and choose 5 that have changed since their grandparents' time and that they would like to work on.
6. Take the chosen cards in turn and discuss the beliefs that their grandparents had about the statement. Where did those beliefs come from? How were they reinforced? With hindsight, were they wise beliefs? Why / why not?
7. Then try to imagine what life may be like in your children's or grandchildren's time and discuss what they will believe. In what ways will their beliefs about the chosen statements be different from yours? Why will they be different?
8. Bring the groups back into plenary and ask each group to report briefly on their conclusions.

<sup>1</sup>Constance Baker Motley, who said, "Something which we think is impossible now is not impossible in another decade" was, in 1966, the first Black Woman in the U.S.A. to become a Federal Judge.

## Debriefing and evaluation

Start with a short review of the activity and then go on to discuss the challenges of living in a globalised world where beliefs and values are changing.

- Were there any strong disagreements within the groups?
- How does the feedback from the different groups compare?
- Where do we get our beliefs from? Are there any general things to say about how it was in the past and how it will be different in the future?
- Why do beliefs change?
- Are any beliefs absolute? If yes, which sorts of beliefs and why? If no, why are beliefs not absolute?
- What are the advantages of holding beliefs in common?
- How do our beliefs limit us?
- What would make you change your beliefs?
- How easy is it to change beliefs? Which sorts of beliefs are harder, and which are easier to change? Why?
- How can people protect themselves from propaganda and false claims, for example spin by politicians, doubt by climate sceptics or ploys to get your money by bogus organisations?
- Give examples of limitations to the right to freedom of opinion and expression. Who should decide what these limitations should be?
- Can you name examples of violations of the freedom of thought, conscience and religion in your community, country, Europe and the wider world?

## Tips for the facilitator

Although participants are working in small groups, some individuals may feel shy about stating their opinions about some of the issues. One way to avoid this is to manage the small groups so that friends or those who feel comfortable with each other work together. Another way is to give people less “threatening” topics first and then, as confidence grows, present more controversial ones.

The process of building a world where human rights are respected as the norm means challenging most people’s beliefs in one way or another. Thus the point of this activity is to encourage participants to understand that people’s beliefs are social constructs and products of the society and the age they live in. Hopefully at the end of the activity participants will be more aware of why beliefs are deep-rooted and hard to view objectively. They will also appreciate that it takes education, the presentation of clear, factual evidence and good critical thinking skills to change beliefs that are either harmful or simply outdated.

The word “belief” is often used in relation to religion, as for example when people talk about their “a belief in God”. However, this is a narrow use and you need to be sure that participants are clear about the meaning of the word. A belief is an assumed truth. Thus, everything is a belief. We create beliefs to anchor our understanding of the world around us and thus, once we have formed a belief, we will tend to stick with that belief. There is a wealth of information about what beliefs are, how they are formed and how they function on <http://changingminds.org>.

## Variations

Introduce some of these ideas with the whole group by using the “Statement exercise” technique described on page 63. In this variation the participants need not say anything; they can listen to other people’s points of view to help them understand the issues better.

### KEY DATE



5 October  
World Teachers Day



“Spin” is a way of presenting information or a situation in a particular way, especially one that makes you or your ideas seem good  
(from Oxford Dictionary)





## Suggestions for follow-up

Depending on how the discussions developed you could go on to explore beliefs about personal relationships in the activities "Let's talk about sex!" or "Believers".

You may want to continue addressing the right to freedom of religion and belief with the activity "A mosque in Sleepyville" which explores a dispute over the building of a new mosque in a traditionally Christian area through the simulation of a town council meeting.



## Ideas for action

Together with your friends or classmates, pick out a collective belief that can prejudice or discriminate people in your locality, for example, beliefs about homosexuality, the use of contraception, abortion, relationships outside, or girl/boy roles. Invite an NGO or other organisation to come to speak about this topic so that you understand more about the issues. Then decide what action you want to take.

You could also create and produce a play about a chosen issue to perform for your local community. Remember that it is much easier to get an audience to come and watch if you time your performance to coincide with one of the international or European commemorative days.

If you feel comfortable doing so, adapt this exercise to use during informal moments with your friends, family, and colleagues. Ask them about their opinions / beliefs about certain issues. Be careful, however, as some people can be very sensitive about certain issues.



## Further information

A belief is a conviction that a suggestion, statement or idea is true. People may say that they believe something to be true for different reasons: because they've seen / witnessed it or because of personal experience, because there is good evidence for believing or because they have faith.

Faith is the confident belief in the truth or trustworthiness of a person, idea, or thing. It is the belief that something is true because an authority says so. Faith can have very specific meaning in some religious contexts.

Understanding how beliefs develop is an important step in promoting a human rights culture. Psychologists studying belief formation and the relationship between beliefs and actions have found that beliefs form in a variety of ways.

- We tend to internalise the beliefs of the people around us during childhood. Albert Einstein is often quoted as having said that common sense is the collection of prejudices acquired by the age of eighteen. Political beliefs depend most strongly on the political beliefs most common in the community in which we live. Most individuals believe the religion they were taught in childhood.
- People may adopt the beliefs of a charismatic leader, even if those beliefs fly in the face of all previous beliefs, and produce actions that are clearly not in their own self-interest. In such instances, rational individuals attempt to reconcile their direct reality with the belief and contradictions, the condition known as cognitive dissonance.
- Repetition forms beliefs, as do associations of beliefs with for example images of sex, love, and other strong positive emotions. This is the primary thrust of the advertising industry.
- Physical trauma, especially to the head, can radically alter a person's beliefs.

However, even educated people, well aware of the process by which beliefs form, still strongly cling to their beliefs, and act on those beliefs even against their own self-interest.

At celebrations for World Teachers Day 2010, Prabhakara Shishila of the Sullia Nehru Memorial College, said, "teachers should inculcate the quality of rational thinking in students." Do you agree?