THE RELIGIOUS MACHINE

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Introduction:
Is religion part of our human nature? Why do we believe what we believe and why do we have so many different beliefs? Sometimes it is difficult to go beyond the belief system we were born into. This short story about a robot might allow us to look at religion in a more neutral way.

You can use a small robot toy to pass between participants during the discussion.

Stimuli:
An engineer who was programming the most advanced robot in the world noticed that something else was missing from his work. The machine was ingenious. It looked and talked like a human; it could even feel and think. After a long debate with his team of builders, the engineer decided to program the robot so that it could also become religious. He wanted it to resemble a human being as many ways as possible. The robot could pray and even sing religious praise more beautifully than any human. "Here is the perfect robot," the engineer thought to himself. He unveiled his work in a splendid show attended by an intrigued crowd.

Warm-up questions:
Does the robot need prayer?
Could the robot's prayers be answered?
What would a robot's god be like?
Would the robot's god be the same as the people's god?

Task Question:
Are humans religious by nature?

Additional questions to get you further:
What is religion?
Do people need religion?
What are the main reasons some people need religion?
Do people need prayers?
Are human prayers answered?
Can animals also be religious?
Can you pray without being religious?
Where did religion come from?
Do people have to believe in something?

What would happen if people stopped being religious?
How would people know if a religion is true?
Is there anything that all religions of the world should/could agree to?
At which point of history 'Christianity' (or 'Buddhism') started?
Does it matter if a religion is true in the sense you understand 'true'?
Why do people worship so many gods?
Would it be better for the robot to believe in nothing?
Would a religious robot be safer, or more dangerous, to humans?

<u>Additional Activities:</u>

1) As an extension of the session, you could add another layer to the original story - the robot's self-awareness.
   During the show, the robot suddenly wakes up and becomes a fully conscious being and begins to wonder if, now that it is free to make its own decisions, it wants to continue the religion programmed originally by its creators? The robot begins to wonder which religion to choose ...

   Put a chair in the centre of the circle and ask one of the students to represent the "awakened" robot. Ask the students to advise the robot how to choose a religion that is right for it? What should the robot believe in?

2) Work in teams of three to draw a picture of this robot and to outline its robot-like belief. These could include:
   - Picture of the robot
   - Name of the robot
   - Name of its belief system
   - List of its key beliefs

3) Ask Alexa on Amazon device or Siri on Apple about their beliefs.

<u>Video to watch with your students:</u>

<u>The Prayer: An AI powered robot singing prayers, by Diemut Strebe</u>

<u>Japan's Buddhist robot preacher | DW Stories</u>

<u>Further read:</u>

<u>Siri's Religious Beliefs: Does Your iPhone Believe In God?</u>