

This transcript accompanies the *Cambridge in your Classroom* video on 'What can different religions share?'

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## What can different religions share?

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Look through the window. Our world is in constant movement. Its cycles make life possible.

We know that the human impact on climate and the environment may be disastrous, but we should remember that we also have old and diverse traditions of care, attention and reverence for this little planet we happen to inhabit.

The harsh consequences of even slight changes to our ecosystems have been long known to us, which is why the understanding of weather and communication with water, plants, animals and other beings have been important ingredients of religious teachings.

The curious turn of the seasons, although not the same around the world, has long shaped human beliefs about life, death, fertility and resurrection.

Many of our holidays celebrate the remarkable capability of flora and fauna to recover after their growth, development and physical activity is temporarily stopped.

Some humans believe that, similar to plants after winter, we may have a life after death.

The honouring of seasonal change and the often dramatic, colourful blossoming of nature has had strong spiritual meanings around the world, particularly for those communities whose lives are closely tied to the land.

Hi, my name is Safet HadžiMuhamedović. I'm an anthropologist of religion and landscape, and I work for the Cambridge Interfaith Programme, a research centre in the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge.

I have always been fascinated with how stories, practices and beliefs travel across time and space to connect different communities.

In class, you learn about what's specific to each religion, how they are different and how they can sometimes clash. They can and do, but if we study actual lives, like I do as an anthropologist, we can find countless similarities and shared ideas, practices and beliefs.

In this video, I will give you one example of something shared not only by people of different religion, but also between religious and non-religious people. We will look at a mythological character known as al-Khiḍr, 'the Green One'.

This example interests me because it shows a deep and widespread human concern with nature and the environment. When it is spring in the Northern Hemisphere, it is autumn in the Southern Hemisphere, and the other way around. Spring is a wonderful time of the year. Days become longer and warmer and plants begin to grow.

There are many celebrations of springtime around the world calculated according to different calendars. You might know about Holi, the Hindu Festival of Colours, the Chinese Spring Festival, Jewish Passover or Christian Easter.

There are others like Nowruz of ancient Persian origins, or Basant - the Muslim, Sikh and Hindu Kite Flying Festival of spring in the Punjab region of India and Pakistan, or Hidrellez in Turkey, Iraq, Syria and across the Mediterranean, or May Day, which is also the International Workers Day.

Then, there is the Feast of St. George, celebrated by Muslims and Christians, and especially by Roma people of different religions. We could go on and on.

Many of these festivals involve spring cleaning, joyful get togethers, carnivals, colourful food, celebration of youth and communal bonds, dance and rituals related to water, fire and plants.

These feasts celebrate the rebirth of nature, the awakening of the warm season and the beginning of agricultural activity. They also show us how the boundaries of religion are blurred and how knowledge travels. Stories about one peculiar interfaith character known by many names, most commonly as Prophet al-Khiḍr, which translates from Arabic as 'the Green One' or the 'Verdant',

represent him as the mortal keeper of divine knowledge.

You may recognise the similarities with the so-called 'Green men' carvings of faces in churches across the UK, which are made up of tree leaves and flowers, with vegetation bursting out of their mouths. Few people know that carvings of the 'Green woman' also exist. Khiḍr is endowed by God with power to rejuvenate dead plants, animals and even humans, according to Majlesi, a 17th century Safavid scholar, whenever he sat on Earth, that piece of earth became green and grass grew on it. If he touched the dry piece of wood, it would sprout leaves.

In some traditions, Khiḍr's knowledge is attributed to his discovery of the fountain of life, a magical spring from which he either drank or from which he ate a dried fish that came back to life. He is said to be dressed in green and travelling on top of that miraculous fish. Sometimes the 'Green one' is considered to be the anonymous servant of God, described in the Qur'an in the surah 'The Cave'. Prophet Musa, or Moses, travels to the 'confluence of two rivers' to find the Green One.

These two rivers represent life and afterlife, or human and divine knowledge. As they journey together, The Green One commits a number of inexplicable acts that leave Moses in disbelief, like piercing a ship belonging to some poor people. Before they part ways, the Green One explains his actions. For example, the ship would have otherwise been seized by an oppressive king with dire consequences for the poor people. When they are on this ship, according to one hadith, the Green One notices the bird scooping some sea water with its beak. He tells Moses that their knowledge, compared with God's knowledge, is like the water in the bird's beak compared with the sea.

What the Green One teaches us is that human understanding is limited, fragile, fallible and always small in comparison to

the divine, and that learning requires patience and trust. Khidr bears striking similarity to a number of old deities and personifications of spring, as well as with many British and Irish mythical characters like the Green Knight of Mediaeval Arthurian Tales or Fionn mac Cumhaill of Irish and Scottish mythology who, like Khidr, acquires wisdom by eating the fish, in this case, the 'Salmon of Knowledge', or Jack in the Green celebrated around England with dance and song led by a figure covered in green garlands, or even Robin Hood, the heroic green outlaw of English folklore.

Across the wide Mediterranean region, Khidr merges with the figure of St. George or Jirjis. You might know him as the patron saint of England. If you go to al-Ludd or Lod/Lydda in Palestine, you will find the tomb of St. George beneath an intricate architectural ensemble consisting of the remains of an old Byzantine church, a twelfth-century Crusader Church and two actively use temples, the Greek Orthodox Church of St. George and the al-Khader Mosque.

People of different faiths come here to pray for wealth, children and protection. The dragon, the legendary enemy of St. George and the Maiden, represents winter or drought, a danger to the fertility of the world.

To counter this menace, intricate fertility rituals are conducted. Around the world, prayers for rain, the fertility of the land or human conception are linked with Khidr and St. George. In Bosnia, Muslims, Christians and Roma people of different faiths celebrate the day of St. George each May.

On the eve of the feast, Bosnians, regardless of religion, join hands in the circular kolo dance around a large bonfire. Colourful stews are cooked with the intention to resemble the diversity of life. Eggs are coloured bright red, like blood. Red ribbons or ties to shrubs of cornel.

With each ribbon, one makes a wish for the prosperity of another person and utters: 'I choose health, forsake disease.' Young women go to rivers or watermills and bathe themselves in magical droplets of water called omaha. Children run around, playfully stinging each other with nettle branches and push each other high into the air on swings attached to old trees.

The day is all about the joy of a world awakened in movement, colours, sense and warmth. The more we know about the mobility of ideas, the less we can imagine some bounded, discrete religions. Looking into the richness of springtime traditions, we will notice both the differences and the similarities of green characters and rituals.

They invite us to think about the certainty of our knowledge and their own presence in the world, and to respect and celebrate our entanglements with other forms of life. Violent political programmes often try to divide people in such religiously plural spaces like Bosnia, Palestine and Israel, India or the U.K., attempting to gain power by inciting fear of the religious other.

We should always be careful not to equate the politics of religion with how people actually live their everyday lives more often than not, peacefully, and by making deep and meaningful connections across religious boundaries.

Look through the window. Our beautiful green world is in constant movement ...