

**Religious Literacy for Equality in Religion or Belief**

**Report of Summative Conference, held 18 April 2013**

This summative conference had two main purposes: to present findings from the four round table dialogues which preceded it; and to build on those with participants to develop action points. These are intended to improve the religious literacy of employer and service provider groups and to underpin better practice in dealing with issues related to religion or belief.

Presentations were made to introduce the conference by Dr Karen Jochelson, Director of Economy & Employment Programme, EHRC, followed by Stuart Hoggan, Director General in the Department of Communities and Local Government, who outlined the Government’s commitment to engaging with religion and belief groups. Professor Adam Dinham, Director of the Faiths & Civil Society Unit at Goldsmiths, University of London then presented findings from the previous roundtable dialogues.[[1]](#footnote-1) The ideas and concerns that emerged from these had been organized around four overarching themes: articulating, approaching, talking and doing. ‘Articulating’ is about how usefully challenges and debates associated with religion or belief are articulated, and how they could be made simpler, sharper and more accessible; ‘Approaching’ is about the approaches and thinking which underpin action – what preparations can employers and providers make to build towards good practice, and how can that be shared?; ‘Talking’ emphasises the importance of communication and developing skills for that; the ‘Doing’ theme focuses on possible actions and activities to help.

During the course of the day, delegates explored these four themes through a series of facilitated group discussions. In each case they were given the specific task to identify ‘SMART’ (specific, measureable, attainable, relevant, time-bound) action points to support better practice in this area for each of a) trade unions and service providers, b) religion or belief and civil society organisations and c) EHRC and Government.

The aim was to end the conference, and the series, with the production of a range of specific action points that could be practically considered for next steps by EHRC. The action points which emerged were displayed around the conference room for delegates to consider in down time.

What follows is a summary of the action points by theme. Where action points were very similar, they have been merged to avoid repetition and some have been rephrased for purposes of clarity. They are reported here with the intention that they continue to be part of the conversation and comments and feedback are welcome via k.jochelson@equalityhumanrights.com

**Articulating**

***Actions for Employers and Trade Unions***

* Create a visible mission statement re: religion or belief and equalities
* Employers to be clear about the diversity of religion or belief in their work places
* Unions outline the benefits and risks of discrimination/affirmative action in recruitment based on religion
* Education and training for employers and even school children and pupils
* Articulating good practice to avoid and prevent fear - sharing stories and experiences

***Actions for Religion or Belief and Civil Society Organisations***

* Establish a religion and belief equality index as the basis for assessing companies/organisations’ performance
* Faith groups need to reach out and engage with employers and employers groups
* Strengthen partnerships with employers and government
* Invite marginalised groups into the debate
* Encourage dialogue with young people and children
* Confront issues of initiating engagement with grass roots organisations
* Develop a framework for creating a myth-busting resource in which different faith/religion/belief groups can say what is important to them
* Organisations to develop statements on what they do to deliver equality and diversity as they understand it
* If government/EHRC created a resource to provide information on faith/signposting to useful resources, that religion and belief oganisations take responsibility for participating in that process and feeding material in

***Actions for EHRC and Government***

* Make the business case for accommodating religious diversity and economic growth, including historical analysis
* Produce on-line resource outlining essential characteristics of various religious trends (avoiding rigid list) and signposting to religious organisations
* Provide clear guidance
* Proportionate guidance based on needs of workforce and workplace, within context of equalities legislation and duties
* Give practical examples of solutions that make sense to employers (inc. SME’s)
* Implement code of practice on equality duty (impact assessment)
* Clear cross-departmental guidance emphasising the benefits of religious literacy
* EHRC to publish easy-read guidance on equality entitlements of all employees with regard to all protected characteristics including religion and belief, including “opt outs”.
* Create awards for good practice in religion & belief in business/NGOs/government departments/local government public agencies such as the NHS, police, etc. Make it a celebratory approach.
* An online resource providing examples of best practice in the workplace

**Approaching**

***Actions for Employers and Trade Unions***

* Understand the business case for religious literacy
* Large employers to include smaller local businesses and SMEs in training sessions/dialogues on religious literacy, in association with FSB, BCC, CBI and trade associations
* Management training to include sensitivity to religious literacy supported by ILM, practitioners, CIPD, IPM etc and HR trainers
* Religion and belief mainstreamed in equality and diversity training
* There is a need to re-train staff as they move into more senior/representative roles
* Create a code of conduct –with regards to engagement with issues relating to religion or belief
* Be clear about when employees are expected to represent corporate values – in and out of work
* Employers should offer support to those in breach of values/law – try to minimise role of lobby groups etc.
* Trade unions to boost capacity/knowledge of religious literacy through networks of representatives, equality reps and union learning reps, alongside other strands – using and promoting good practice
* Employers should accommodate requests unless compelling reason not to
* Ensure dialogue in work place between employees, employer and seek expert advice

***Actions for Religion or Belief and Civil Society Organisations***

* Take/make opportunities to educate employers about the diversity of traditions and differences of belief
* Religion & belief communities to provide help, advice and information to employers etc on ad hoc and more formal basis
* Build relationships with local businesses on 1-1 basis
* Religion and belief groups need to educate their own members and constituencies on the current landscape and religion & belief issues in the workplace, addressing knowledge gaps, stereotypes, misinformation etc.
* Religion and belief groups to establish dialogues at local and national levels to pre-empt possible conflicts through better mutual understanding
* Mobilise networks of activists to promote religion as a concept
* Civil Society groups should review their equality practices so as to better integrate religion and belief issues and deal with intersectionality of identities

***Actions for EHRC and Government***

* Raise the profile of the debate so it is higher on the public agenda
* Needs leadership, and commitment at government level
* Government to dedicate more resources
* Politicians to frame the debate as a civic endeavour, not a religious one, and not a security one, thereby removing the toxicity of the rhetoric
* Explore issue of ‘belief’ - potential use of ‘conscience’ – including individual manifestations of belief
* Make better connections with organisations that develop business/leadership skills (e.g. Common Purpose) to ensure religious literacy is part of their service
* EHRC needs independence from government and the resources to undertake work in this area
* EHRC set up myth-busting team
* As part of PSED review, stress the importance of consulting with faith groups, rather than relying on fixed perceptions
* Stress the need to recognise dissenting perspectives
* Take time and don’t be prescriptive

**Talking**

***Actions for Employers and Trade Unions***

* Employers need to create space and time for discussion, information sharing and issues relating to religion or belief to be discussed
* To encourage open and ongoing dialogue at the factory floor level
* Briefings re: local/national issues – to allow discussion between employer and employees which could encompass sensitive issues
* To seek advice so that they feel confident to ask questions about religion/belief (including potential training)
* Unions should provide examples of good practice and benefits of engaging employees and management at all levels
* Advice sent via enhancers of commerce/CBI/TUC and trade union reps
* Worker/employer groups should speak up more in wider debates/discussions –make their voices heard

***Actions for Religion or Belief and Civil Society Organisations***

* Involving other organisations in existing interfaith dialogues?
* Engage in a collaborative project to explore mediation/conflict resolution skills between religion and belief groups – would help with negotiating mutuality
* Religious groups and civil societies should listen in flexible locations beyond their usual audience or locations
* European Network on Religion and Belief could use a UK section in which to develop a safe space for practitioners/academics/R&B professionals/local community groups to share experience and expertise
* Find consensus in the ‘lived experiences’ (current issues) – use them to bring people together and build bridges- relationships!
* Communication and dialogue between religious organisations and others before disputes arise and during and after - find common ground outside the controversial issues. Build respect.
* Religious organisations and civil societies should listen without a preconceived agenda or desired outcome

***Actions for EHRC and Government***

* Government to conduct ongoing listening and reporting back eg face to face community engagement in the community setting – must be well advertised in advance
* More positive government discourse on the role and contributions of religion in public life
* Government needs to make available adequate resources for dialogue and mediation to take place – invest in good relations
* EHRC should disseminate best practice with regard to effective and professional mediation and dialogue
* De-mystifying and myth busting to balance public perceptions

**Doing**

***Actions for Employers and Trade Unions***

* Conduct values, beliefs and attitudes survey of staff
* Find out about employees –monitor, equality impact assessments, review of policies, in light of equalities
* Employers should monitor for religion using more than just census categories – possibly enquiring about practice and needs as well as identification
* Set up multi-faith forums
* To take steps to make prospective employees aware of job requirements, considering possible needs for accommodation/difficulties
* Better resourced champions
* Embed strong equality and human rights organisation policy
* The unions were seen as being key to mainstreaming awareness and good practice
* TUs and employers’ training on general equality awareness and interface between religion and belief and other protected characteristics
* TUs offer guidance, including model policies, to their branches and stewards/representatives
* Employers/TUs challenge assumptions – engage in dialogue
* Employers/TUs become as religiously literate as possible within equalities literacy
* Trade Unions to provide guidelines on monitoring and to give advice
* Publicising ‘good practice’

***Actions for Religion or Belief and Civil Society Organisations***

* Signpost for employers/employee groups to help them find religion/belief groups in their area
* Publicise interfaith directory/religious education council
* Encourage participation/adopt a position to go into work places and debate/discuss interfaith/religion
* Faith based employers/service providers to ensure their own equalities literacy
* Need to raise awareness of religion and belief regulations being a secular endeavour
* For religion and belief organisations to engage with employers in their areas (eg open day at a mosque in Leeds)
* Religion and belief groups making more effective and positive use of the media, including social media, eg an analysis of how they engage with it
* Religion/belief groups to cater for ‘gaps’ created by cut-backs to funding

**EHRC and Government**

* EHRC to consider any lessons for the area of religion and belief from other areas (eg sex and race discrimination).
* Address flashpoints in guidance – areas of conflicting rights
* Is EHRC paying sufficient attention to religion and belief in its evaluations of the Public Sector Equality Duty?
* EHRC to facilitate and bring together the vocabulary of religious literacy in relation to conservative and liberal views on sex and sexuality
* Publish a network of networks (eg a directory)
* Provide better quality of information (especially in relation to ‘belief’)
* Involving professional (including media training) bodies in religious literacy – professional training
* Seek to provide updates and information to more ‘grass roots’ groups – for example, by making contact with religious press or by email mail-out
* Moving away from the illusion that law is neutral
* EHRC to produce guidance raising awareness of believers/humanists’ rights in the work place (can be distributed to places of worship etc)
* Greater clarity within government over leadership of equality and faith
* Bring back the DCLG Faiths Unit and Faith Communities Consultative Council
* Ensure public spending supports and helps foster religious literacy
* Ensure high quality of advice on religion and belief, particularly when services are outsourced
* Reinforce current employee rights – not weaken them!
* Do not weaken the Public Sector Equality Duty
* Ensure all government departments know equalities legislation. Develop specialist knowledge between broader equalities frameworks. Feed design of government programmes – proactive eg curriculum (not just RE) of equalities in proactive way.
* Government to fund faith and equality infra-structure
* Engage with other constituencies
* Encourage the community co-production of public services enabling system change within public agencies and empowerment of religion and belief multi-faith groups
* Provide incentives for religious literacy
* Support impact assessments
* Engage more with religious leaders
* Work with TUs on issues of religion or belief, especially monitoring
* Recognise the difficult issues that exist. Analysis of conflicts and non-resolution - how can it be handled?
* Engage more with systems of belief as opposed to religion
* ACAS (or similar) guidance to update to reflect 2010 Act.
* Explore possibility of electronic (eg calendar) resources.
1. Presentations from the day and reports from the four dialogues are available on the project website: [www.religiousliteracy.org](http://www.religiousliteracy.org) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)