



Our society and our communities are made up of people who hold varying religious beliefs, additional beliefs and of course people who hold none. Religion and belief can play a very important role in people's lives and can govern many aspects of behaviour and influence needs in relation to service and other provisions.

This briefing will consider why as providers of goods and services, and employers, housing organisations should be aware of and have some understanding of religion and belief and what it means for believers and followers. It will then attempt to provide a very brief summary of some of the larger and more widespread religions.

Religion is defined in the Oxford dictionary as:

- the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power , especially a personal God or Gods
- a particular system of faith and worship
- a pursuit or interest followed with great devotion

Belief is defined as:

- an acceptance that something exists or is true, especially one without proof
- something one accepts as true or real; a firmly held opinion
- a religious conviction
- (belief in) trust, faith, or confidence in (someone or something)

Paganism and veganism (and vegetarianism) are examples of strongly held beliefs which can have an impact on the believer's needs.

Religion and Belief in Service Delivery and Employment

A person's religious or other beliefs may affect their needs in relation to service delivery and employment. An example is requiring time off work for religious festivals. As we know most employees within the social housing sector will have the Christian Holy Days around Easter and Christmas off work as a matter of course, in the form of bank holidays. These are Christian Holy Days. In all other major religions there are also Holy Days where believers will celebrate or commemorate significant events. The system employed in the UK which determines when we have Bank Holidays uses the Christian faith, but not everyone living in the UK is Christian.

Service Delivery

Customers and clients may have particular needs in relation to their religious beliefs. Therefore the best way to find out about any is to ask. Resident profiling which asks about a customer's religion, belief and any other specific needs is one of the most effective ways to do this. Of course just asking the question alone will not be sufficient enough to result in appropriate or tailored services. Staff and often other tenants will require an understanding of what these needs are and how to respond to them appropriately.

This information will need to be considered in relation to all aspects of service delivery, from organising home visits and repairs appointments, to considering where and what type of involvement events are organised e.g. a meeting or event held which serves alcohol could be exclusionary.

The Equality Act (2006)

Under the Equality Act 2006, it is unlawful to discriminate against a person because of their religion or belief (or because they have no religion or belief):

- in any aspect of employment
- when providing goods, facilities and services
- when providing education
- in using or disposing of premises, or
- when exercising public functions

Good Practice: Taff Housing Association

Customer services staff at Taff Housing Association organise celebrations for various religious festivals during the year, including Chinese New Year, Christmas and Eid al Fitr. Taff are holding a competition during Ramadan where a hamper full of Halal products can be won. In order to enter the competition a short customer satisfaction questionnaire needs to be completed. There is also a colouring competition and word search with an Islamic theme during Ramadan.

When organising any tenant and resident events Taff always advertise that Halal food is available, this has been identified by Muslim tenants as a clear indication that the organisation is aware of tenant's needs and are encouraging them to join in.

At their offices in Cardiff, Taff also have a prayer room for staff and visitors.

Employment

An individual's faith is often embedded within them giving them a 'frame of reference' for how they look at the world. So, that person's faith affects everything they do. As a result, direct or indirect discrimination against a person because of their faith may lead to a reduction in work performance, which is a significant issue for all managers who must operate within the law.

Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003

Under these regulations it is unlawful to discriminate directly or indirectly, subject someone to harassment or victimise someone on the grounds of their religion or belief. These regulations cover both employment and vocational training, and apply to recruitment, interviews, pay, terms and conditions, training, promotion, dismissal and references.

What is the business case for taking account of religion and belief in the workplace?

Improved employee morale

The organisation is seen to actively engage with an important element of many people's lives. The reduction and/or elimination of discrimination or perceived discrimination are likely to have a beneficial effect on employee engagement.

Improved recruitment/retention

An open and tolerant environment may enable an employer to reach out to broaden its appeal to a wider cross-section of candidates.

Reduced conflict or resentment in the workplace can enhance an employee's attachment to the organisation and have a positive effect on productivity.

Positive public image of the organisation

An organisation that is well known for positive non-discriminatory belief policies is more likely to project a positive public image in the community and the market place.

Financial

There could be a lower risk of employment tribunals on issues of religion and belief, which can bring with them significant payments in compensation and adverse publicity if the tribunal finds against the employer.

Genuine Occupational Requirements

There are a small number of instances where it is lawful for an employer to treat individuals differently on the basis of belief, if possessing a particular religion or belief is a genuine occupational requirement for the post. This requirement has to be proved by the employer and must reflect the nature of the work and the context within which the specific role sits. For instance, a religious organisation advertising for a minister of religion is allowed to specify that applicants for the post must be a member of that religion.

What should policies take into account?

Policies will vary from one organisation to another. Differences in the size of an organisation, employee profile and environment will determine what is effective and required. However, the following aspects could be considered:

Prayer time

Some beliefs have set times for prayer and other individuals may want to pray or contemplate within the workplace. While there is no requirement for employers to provide the time and facilities for religious observance, it is good practice to provide a prayer room or a common room for all staff.

Food & fasting

Many faiths have dietary restrictions or the requirement to fast. Managers may wish to consider how staff can be supported in this regard.

Holy days/festivals

Some religions may require employees to take time off for Holy Days, religious observance or to attend pilgrimage. There is no absolute right to this time off; however a consistent policy on when and where time off could be granted should be in place and employers will need to ensure they are complying with the religion and belief legislation and regulations.

Religious dress and symbols

A number of faiths require certain items of clothing to be worn. A specific item of jewellery may also be a requirement. This will impact upon organisations where wearing a uniform is a strict policy, and also where health and safety considerations must be adhered to.

Good Practice: Wales and West Housing Association

Wales and West Housing Association have a dress code policy which has been equality impact assessed to take account of employees religious and other beliefs.

The Equality Act (2010)

The Equality Act will introduce a new 'positive duty' for public bodies, where they will be required to actively promote equality and good relations in relation to religion and belief. This will be in addition to the existing duty to eliminate discrimination, in both employment and the provision of goods and services.

Don't forget...

We are all unique and completely individual. As with all equalities issues, no one group is homogenous. The best way to find out about someone's needs and requirements is to ask them or provide them with the opportunity to tell you.

Please note, this briefing provides just one perspective on some of the world's key religions. Individuals may have differing beliefs or experiences of these religions, all of which are equally valuable.

World Religions

The Bahá'í Faith

Bahá'ís believe that throughout history, God has revealed Himself to humanity through a series of divine Messengers, whose teachings guide and educate people and provide the basis for the advancement of human society. These Messengers have included Abraham, Krishna, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad. Their religions come from the same Source and are in essence successive chapters of one religion from God.

It is believed that Bahá'u'lláh, the latest of these Messengers, brought new spiritual and social teachings for our time. His essential message is of unity. He taught the oneness of God, the oneness of the human family, and the oneness of religion.

The Bahá'í faith originated in Persia in 1844, it is the youngest of the world's monotheist religions. It is believed that Bahá'u'lláh said, "The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens," and that, as foretold in all the sacred scriptures of the past, now is the time for humanity to live in unity.

Key Principles of the Bahá'í Faith

- All humanity is one family
- Women and men are equal
- All prejudice – racial, religious, national or economic, is destructive and must be overcome
- We must investigate the truth for ourselves without preconceptions
- Science and religion are in harmony
- Our economic problems are linked to our spiritual problems
- The family and its unity are very important
- There is one God
- All major religions come from God
- World peace is the crying need of our time

Buddhism

A Buddha is someone who was awakened from ignorance to perfect enlightenment. Buddhists follow the example of Prince Siddhartha Gautama who attained enlightenment while sitting under a Bodhi tree in India 2,500 years ago. His teaching became known as the Dharma, and is founded on the Four Noble Truths, namely that life is suffering; that the root of suffering is craving and desire; that it is possible to find an end to suffering, and that following the Noble Eightfold Path is the way to find an end to suffering.

Buddhists believe that changing and purifying one's mind is possible and can be the key to an ultimate liberation: meditation, mindfulness and developing compassions are central to their daily practice.

Buddhists also believe in the Eightfold Path:

- Right understanding
- Right intention
- Right speech
- Right action
- Right livelihood
- Right effort
- Right mindfulness
- Right meditation



Christianity

Christianity centres on Jesus of Nazareth, a teacher and healer who lived in first century Palestine. We know about him through the Christian Gospels, which were written after his death and became the first four books of the New Testament.

Jesus' teachings focused on themes of the kingdom of God, love of God and love of neighbour. Along with some of his teachings, his growing popularity with the masses was seen as dangerous by the religious leaders of his day and the Roman Government, leading to his execution by crucifixion.

Christians believe Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead, and in doing so made it possible for those who believe to be forgiven of sin and attain eternal life.

Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and is the Messiah promised in the Old Testament. They believe in One God in Trinity of three persons: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. They believe that Jesus walked the earth both fully God and fully man.

There are many branches of Christianity.

Hinduism

Hindus have many different practices that vary from country to country, even from community to community. Hindus believe that no one religion is exclusively true, but that all genuine ways of faith are aspects of the one universal, all-encompassing truth.

Most Hindus believe that the whole universe is permeated with the Divine, a reality called the Brahman. This Divine can be known by many names and take many forms, and it is fully present in the human soul.

Hindus believe that God is one but has many attributes and many functions, and that God can take many forms:

- Brahma is Creator
- Vishnu is Sustainer
- Shiva is Destroyer

Hindu tradition is contained in the Vedas, a body of ancient hymns and chants recited orally in verse. Hindus believe in reincarnation, the belief that the soul's journey to liberation or salvation (Moksha) takes the soul from one life to another and its journey from one life to the next is influenced by the deeds one performs in present time.

Hindus uphold the following qualities:

- Non-violence, all life is sacred, to be loved and revered.
- Moral behaviour
- Service to others
- Seeking knowledge
- Worship and devotion to one's personal deity

Islam

Muslims believe that the prophet Muhammad, an Arab and a descendent of Abraham, received the divine revelations of Allah contained in the Muslim scriptures, the Holy Qu'ran. The Qu'ran names twenty five messengers of God, including Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Muhammad is believed to be the final messenger of God until the Day of Judgement.

Muslims believe in God, creator of all things. Muslims believe that Islam is the one true religion given to Adam and to all the prophets after him.

Muslims faith and practice is grounded in the Five Pillars of Islam:

Inman (Faith): There is none worthy of worship except God and Muhammad is the messenger of God'. The only purpose of life is to serve and obey God.

Salah (Prayer): Obligatory prayers are performed five times a day. Prayer is the direct link between the worshipper and God.

Zakah (Financial Obligations): Since everything belongs to God, wealth is held in trust by humankind. Muslims are enjoined to set aside a portion of what they have (a fortieth of one's capital annually) for those in need. They may also give as much as they like in secret.

Sawm (Fasting): Muslims fast from dusk until dawn during the month of Ramadan. Fasting allows the faithful to focus on God.

Hajj (Pilgrimage): Those who are physically and financially able to do so are called on to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime, during the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar. Mecca in Saudi Arabia is connected with the life of Muhammad and Abraham, the spiritual father of Muslims

Islam is a way of life based on peace and moral conduct. Muslims are usually either Sunni or Shia.



Judaism

Jewish people belong to a unique tradition of faith and practice that goes back 4,000 years in the Middle East. The roots of Judaism come from Abraham who brought his people to faith in God. Jewish people believe that Moses is the greatest of the prophets and that He led His people to freedom from slavery in Egypt and received the law.

Over the centuries Jews have been dispersed to all parts of the globe. Jewish people suffered horrific persecution at the hand of Nazi Germany during World War II, in events which are now known as the Holocaust.

Judaism focuses on one's relationship to God and to others.

Rambam's set of thirteen principles of the faith, widely accepted by Jews is the following:

- God exists
- God is one and unique
- God is incorporeal
- God is eternal
- Prayer is to be directed to God alone and no other
- The words of the prophets are true
- Moses' prophecies are true, and Moses was the greatest of the prophets.
- The written Torah and the oral Torah were given to Moses
- There will be no other Torah
- God knows the thoughts and deeds of humankind
- God will reward the good and punish the wicked
- The Messiah will come
- The dead will be resurrected.

The most important ritual for a Jewish person is the observance of Shabbat or Sabbath which begins at sundown on Friday and ends at sundown on Saturday. Observant Jews pray three times a day.

Within Judaism there are three movements; Orthodox, Conservative and Reform.



Sikhism

Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak who was said to have received a divine revelation from God in India in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. Guru Gobind Singh was the tenth and final guru, or teacher and he created the khalsa, the Sikh brotherhood.

Sikhs believe in the unity of all people and the equality of men and women. Sikhs confess God as creator, sustainer of the universe and one intimately involved in the events of the world and the lives of human beings. They believe that divine help is available for those who seek deliverance from the power of evil and put great emphasis on a personal relationship between the believer and God. The Sikh Holy Scripture, which is revealed by all Sikhs, is called the Guru Granth Sahib.

Sikhs believe that God is One and that all religions that seek to know God have beauty and power. The Sikh religion has strict moral standards.

Believers are held to a code of five virtues:

- Truthfulness in living
- Contentment
- Patience
- Faith in the Great Teacher, Nanak
- Compassion

Sikhs put great emphasis upon humble service for the welfare of others and are strongly opposed to any form of discrimination, especially that which is based on social class or gender.

Traditionally Sikh men wear the five K's as a sign of their faith:

- **Kes:** uncut hair
- **Kirpan:** a short dagger symbolising self-defence
- **Karha:** a steel wristband or bracelet
- **Kangha:** a wooden comb worn in the hair knot to show cleanliness
- **Kacchera:** a special undergarment symbolising purity

In addition men wear a turban, although it is not a requirement of the religion.



Contributors:



Taff Housing Association
www.taffhousing.co.uk



Wales and West
Housing Association
www.wwha.net

References

Inter-faith Wales-Building trust and respect between people of all different faiths throughout Wales.

www.interfaithwales.org

The Equality and Human Rights Commission

www.equalityhumanrights.com

If you require this leaflet in another language or format please contact info@taipawb.org or telephone 029 2053 7630