

## **Universities, faith and respect: background paper**

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### **Religion in the curriculum – use of comparative material, core modules and insights into other religions**

Interfaith education has perhaps become even more essential since the events of 11 September 2001 which ushered in a climate of greater social tensions and increased discrimination toward the 'other'. It could be argued that religion has become one of the hot topics of discussion worldwide and is therefore educationally unavoidable. As the topic of religion cuts across different disciplines of academic study, it follows that objective analysis is desirable. On secular campuses religion has been seen as relegated to the periphery and is noted as something 'private' with not much constructive discussion encouraged. Conversely at many faith-based universities, religion still tends to be very much in the curriculum – however it is variable as to the extent that other faiths are incorporated in comparative discussion thus providing insights into other religions.

There are clearly some great advantages to modules and courses which incorporate a comparative analysis of religions in the university curriculum. For example the promotion of greater mutual understanding to avoid misunderstandings and discrimination. Interfaith modules in the curriculum can therefore be seen as having similar goals to broader interreligious dialogue which aims to promote an empathetic understanding of other faith traditions so that we all may live in harmony with mutual respect. Prejudice can be tackled by teaching tolerance, which is the acceptance, appreciation and respect of diverse cultures, traditions and human expression (UNESCO, 1995). Incorporating tolerance in interfaith education can help to counter fear and aversion towards other groups. UNESCO believes that education is the most powerful tool in addressing intolerance – it could therefore be argued that it is a responsibility of the education system to educate global citizens appreciative of differences with an ability to prevent and resolve disagreements amicably.

There are particular ways that incorporating interfaith comparative modules and courses can promote such understanding (Castro, 2006):

#### **Shared values of the world's religions**

Incorporating into the curricula shared common values of diverse cultural and faith traditions to promote co-existence. For example shared values of compassion, nonviolent resolution of conflicts, etc. By discovering these shared core values, the student can gain an appreciation of the underlying common humanity of people.

#### **Enlarged social identification**

Studies on human behaviour have discovered there is a tendency for individuals to distinguish between groups as 'us' and 'them'. 'This awareness challenges us to enlarge our social identification to include broader human groups and even the whole human community, so that we can transcend the pitfalls of exclusivism'.

#### **Re-examination and rejection of prejudice against other religions**

Modules and courses can directly address misconceptions of other religions and challenge prejudices head-on.

#### **Shared responsibility of the religions**

Interreligious cooperation for the good of society by exercising shared responsibility in promoting peace, reducing tension and building trust.

## Questions for consideration

- How can religious literacy be encouraged among staff and students and how is a balanced approach reached?
- Is there a role for the concept of 'scriptural reasoning' in the curriculum whereby students and academics share key aspects of their own scriptures in a mutually appreciative environment? Is this even possible?
- Does a faith-based university have a responsibility to educate students on interfaith matters? Is it any different to the responsibility that secular universities have?
- How does a HEI go about choosing the faiths it is going to include in modules? Only so many you can logistically incorporate.
- How do you engage students in religion-modules if they are not doing a faith-based degree? It may seem unnecessary to their degree – how do you walk the fine line of intellectual freedom and imposing what is deemed 'necessary'?