

Religion or Belief – A Definition

Religion or belief in one form or another plays a part in the lives of most of the world's population. DFID celebrates and values the diversity brought to its workforce through individuals and aims to create an environment where the cultural, spiritual, religious beliefs and non-religious beliefs of all its employees are respected.

Religion or Belief is defined as being any religion, religious belief or similar philosophical belief. The following factors help us to define this as:

- ***A belief in a supreme being or a philosophy for living.***
- ***A practice of worship (individual or collective).***
- ***The presence of a clear belief system.***
- ***Evidence of a profound belief affecting an individual's way of life or view of the world.***
- ***A group or following of people who observe the beliefs, values, customs and traditions as set down by a Supreme Being or philosophy of life.***

One of DFID's strengths is that a significant proportion of its staff, come from a wide variety of religious backgrounds and beliefs. This variety helps DFID develop its thinking about different cultures. Without such knowledge DFID will be a less effective development organisation.

DFID recognises the unique contribution faith based organisations can make in both delivering development on the ground, and connecting with communities in the UK and abroad. The work of governments alone will never be enough. For lasting change states must interact with voluntary groups, charities, faith and Diaspora groups and others.

Faith groups have potentially powerful roles in development, for example in fragile states faith groups play an important role providing direct assistance to the poor and tackling poor governance.

Background to the Law

Since December 2003, the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations have made it unlawful to discriminate against employees because of religion or similar belief.

The Equality Act 2010 received Royal Assent on 8 April and becomes law in October 2010. Over 2010/11 DFID will implement the duties in the new Act, which brings together over forty pieces of equality legislation into one single Act, including the Religion or Belief equality regulations.

The law applies to all aspects of employment (including recruitment, transfers, terms and conditions, learning and development, promotions, exits and dismissals). It is unlawful on the grounds of religion or belief to:

- directly discriminate against anyone
- discriminate indirectly against anyone
- victimise someone
- subject someone to harassment

Direct discrimination example - an individual's religion or belief is the determining factor in reaching a decision about their treatment. For example, if whilst being interviewed for a promotion, an applicant says that they are Jewish and even though they have the skills, behaviours and competence required for the job, the interview board decide not to offer them the job because they are Jewish – this is direct discrimination.

Indirect discrimination example - when the same criterion is applied to all individuals/staff whatever their religion or belief, and as a result, fewer individuals from one religion or belief than another can comply with the criteria, which means those individuals are put at a disadvantage. An example of this would be where a weekly team meeting is only held at lunchtimes on Fridays. This may disadvantage team members from the Muslim faith who pray during Friday lunchtime and therefore would be unable to attend the team meeting – this is indirect discrimination.

Harassment and victimisation includes behaviour that is offensive, frightening or in any way distressing. For example, if a staff member is continually teased about their religious convictions, is subjected to workplace teasing and banter and finds this distressing - this is harassment.

Conflicting Rights

In a world of religious diversity - a conflict of rights may arise between followers of one religious group and the rights of other groups. For example, some faith groups frown upon homosexuality and so followers may decide they do not wish to work alongside a gay colleague. However it is DFID policy that no one individual's rights may be exercised at the expense of another individual's rights. DFID staff would need to find ways of working constructively with each other.

DFID wants to ensure equal treatment for all staff, of any religion or none. This is based on the principle that everyone has the right to their own belief system; however they have no right to enforce it on others. DFID will on no account tolerate discrimination, harassment or victimisation on the grounds of someone's religion or belief and such discrimination is illegal.

The principles set out in the policy on religion or belief applies in the UK and DFID overseas offices. However, practice may vary from office to office to take account of local custom and practice in religious matters.

Individual responsibility

Often a lack of knowledge and insight can lead to stereotyping and misunderstandings, therefore it is important to become well-informed by:

- asking questions (for example ask colleagues how they would like to be addressed, how to pronounce their name and how to spell it)
- understanding what others actually believe and value, and letting them express this in their own terms
- respecting the convictions of others about food, dress and social etiquette
- correcting misrepresentations, not only of our own but also of other faiths whenever we come across them
- recognising and guarding against our own prejudices. Everyone has them.

Religious Festivals and Holidays

All staff are allowed to take time off for religious festivals in accordance with their annual or flexi leave allowance and where it is reasonable and practical to do so. Observance of festivals will vary from individual to individual and each case is considered on its own merit. Some religious festivals may last more than one day and may not always fall on the same day each year (for example, festivals based on the Lunar calendar).

DFID staff in the UK are granted the facility to have paid time off for UK public holidays, e.g. Christmas and Easter. Staff in overseas offices may have paid time off to celebrate the public holidays of those countries, e.g. Independence Days or Diwali in DFID India.

DFID's Diversity Calendar is a useful reference point for line managers in anticipating the need for time off for staff who practice a particular religion or belief. The calendar can be accessed via the diversity pages of PeopleSight on InSight (intranet).

Dedicated MEDITATION/FAITH ROOMS are available for staff use in UK offices as follows:

Palace Street – Room 1 South 14

Abercrombie House – Ground Floor, opposite reception

What is DFID doing?

- DFID promotes the annual **Young Muslim Leadership Programme**, which is a joint project organised by the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies and the Prince's Charities. The programme seeks to help participants become confident in their identity, be aware of their responsibilities to wider society, promote knowledge of diversity within British society and develop leadership skills.
- **The DFID Diaspora Volunteer Scheme** (a £3 million project) in partnership with VSO will lead over 600 new volunteering placements in the next 3 years and will increase the capacity of smaller organisations to become involved in volunteering and be given the chance to fight poverty in the developing world.

For further information please email The Diversity Team at: diversity@dfid.gov.uk

Useful websites:

Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC):
www.equalityhumanrights.com

BBC Religion and Ethics – for general information:
www.bbc.co.uk/religion/

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