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Religious  
Literacy  
Leadership

In Higher Education

# Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education

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**An Analysis of Challenges of Religious Faith, and  
Resources for Meeting them, for University Leaders**

Adam Dinham and Stephen H Jones

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*Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education* is an inter-university, multi-disciplinary partnership providing a two-tiered leadership development programme for Higher Education (HE) leaders and managers. Rooted in evidence and new research, and working with ten vice-chancellor 'champions', the project aims to equip Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to engage with religion as a resource for:

- supporting the best experience for students and staff of all faith backgrounds and none
- limiting 'equalities' challenges and litigation relating to religion and belief
- supporting international students and staff from a range of faith and cultural backgrounds with sensitivity and skill
- addressing good campus relations, especially in the context of freedom of speech
- considering how faith communities might contribute on issues such as unemployment, poverty, social justice and the environment.

In doing so, the programme seeks to enable HEIs to lead high quality public conversation about religious faith in a context which is often ambivalent, confused and anxious about religion. The programme is not about promoting religion but responding in a more thoughtful way to the increasing levels of religious diversity in HE.

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## Foreword

Contrary to the widely held belief in the last century that religion is doomed to decline and even disappear in the modern technologically advanced societies, it remains a powerful force. This is obvious in Muslim countries from North Africa to South East Asia. In the United States, which is among the most industrialised societies, religion has long exercised a strong influence and continues to do so today. In recent years it has even penetrated the constitutionally protected wall of separation between the state and religion, and shaped the domestic and foreign policies of several governments. Like other West European societies, Britain is more secular. However even here church leaders have been pressing in recent years for a greater public recognition of religion, and campaigning against human rights legislation for disregarding their deeply held beliefs about gay partnership and adoption of children and serving an allegedly secular agenda.

There is no simple and single explanation for the resurgence of religion. Singly or, more often, in various combinations, different factors are at work in different societies. In some it is a defensive reaction against aggressive and insensitive secularism. In some others, it represents a search for an alternative to the alleged emptiness of modernity and for moral absolutes. In yet others religion fills the vacuum left by the collapse of leftwing and nationalist ideologies, provides a basis for resistance to Western domination and its domestic collaborators, or supplies the basic services the state should but does not or cannot.

Whatever the explanation and whatever the differences between societies, there is a sharp and unhealthy polarisation in almost all of them. Many secularists know little about what different religions stand for, and tend to lump them altogether as if they were all cut from the same cloth. They equate religion with fanaticism, and have little understanding of what it means to the believers, what makes them tick, why they feel passionately about certain issues, how they reason about them, and how they can be at once both modern and anti-modern in their views and practices. For their part some religious persons exhibit equal ignorance of what the secularists stand for, why they fear religion, why they think that moral life does

not need religious anchors, and why they believe that the separation of state and religion is in the interest of both. In this climate of mutual ignorance and hostility, one naturally turns to institutions that are consciously designed to provide centres of critical reflection and dispassionate investigation. The universities are prominent amongst them. They are the custodians of great intellectual and moral values. They shape the intellectual and civic culture of society by research and publications as well as through the quality of students who go on to occupy positions of leadership in wider society. Since they too feel the impact of the resurgence of religion and need to find ways of coming to terms with it, they can also set examples to the rest of society.

Dinham and Jones have rendered a great service by taking a penetrating look at the role the universities can and should play in improving the quality of public debate on religion. They discuss why and how the universities could meet the legitimate demands of religious students and staff without compromising their integrity. At a different level they examine the nature and purposes of the university, and ask what it means for it to be secular, in what sense and what that entails. This leads them to analyse the epistemological basis of scientific knowledge, and to suggest that the conventionally overdrawn contrast between science and religion needs to be rethought.

*The Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education Programme* is a timely and most welcome call to universities to help promote a culture conducive to a much more thoughtful discussion of religion in public life. It provides a valuable basis for discussion, and I hope that it will receive the attention it deserves.

**Professor Lord Bhikhu Parekh,  
Universities of Hull and Westminster**

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## Religious Literacy Leadership

There is significant anxiety about the place of religion in society, and this is reflected in the UK's universities. Equalities legislation, concerns about radicalism and violent extremism, and increased numbers of international students place HEIs under pressure to respond to students and staff from an increasing range of religious cultures and backgrounds.

At the same time, more than almost any other topic, religion is capable of provoking deep controversy, much of it about the very foundational ideas and values underpinning HE teaching and research: the relationship between religion and democracy, science, liberalism, secularism, freedom of speech, and the role of women and minorities are all vexed issues about which the quality of intellectual and public debate has been stretched. As defenders—in many cases originators—of the ideas and values of the European Enlightenment, universities can sometimes be seen—and see themselves—as secular places, opposing the old world of the religious with the new, rational world of the scientific.

Yet within universities there are a variety of perspectives on faith and belief, and some institutions see themselves as more religious, or at least more sympathetic to religion, than others. In many cases, a position of 'neutrality' with regards to religion can be viewed as a position in itself, and one which is sharply experienced by students and staff. All find themselves under considerable pressure to develop the skills and expertise to engage successfully with religious faith in a highly pluralised society, especially at a time when the HE sector, like the rest of Britain, faces economic stresses and fiercely contested priorities.

There may be uncertainty about how engaging with religious faith fits with the traditions of the Enlightenment and, alongside this, a generalised sense that we live in a secular society. But one thing is certain: religious faiths, and the debates about them, will not disappear by ignoring them. Both in wider society and in HE specifically there is a serious risk that the absence of constructive conversation about faith could result in serious divisions. Indeed, there

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is a danger that, as Charles Taylor (2009, p.xiii) observes, “dictating the principles from some supposedly higher authority above the fray” will prevent some people from being “included in the ongoing process of determining what [...] society is about [...] and how it is going to realise [its] goals [...].”

*Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education* helps HEIs to engage with religious faiths by exploring their potential as a key resource for addressing the many practical challenges they face, equipping them to:

- comply with and broaden policies for equalities and diversity in relation to religion and belief
- ensure that people from the widest range of cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds—at home and internationally—are attracted by HEIs and supported when they get there
- make the best possible student experience which is responsive to the religious needs of students (and staff) from all faith backgrounds and none—and sustain a culture which can draw on the potential for religious faiths to enrich the learning environment
- address the challenges of hard debate about religion, including the protection of freedom of speech, the avoidance of harassment and the prevention of extremism on campuses
- work with faith communities in wider society as contributors to meeting the personal and collective challenges of unemployment, growing poverty and the stress associated with cuts in funding and resources.

This means considering how universities address faith in the whole range of their operations, including student support, food, catering and accommodation, faith and worship spaces, chaplaincies, timetabling, admissions and registry.

In doing so, *Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education* aims to help universities to lead an improved quality of debate about religious faith both on campus and in wider society at a time when a highly diverse, multifaith society presents significant challenges for understanding differences within, between and beyond faith and cultural traditions. Universities are in many ways ideally placed to help meet these challenges as places where people of all



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faiths and none gather to research, think and learn. Much of their work centres on young people, many of whom go on to become intellectual and public leaders of the future. They are crucibles of sophisticated and informed thinking about religious matters and their relationship to other intellectual fields, and can marshal these resources to take a clear and thoughtful stance on matters of religious faith.

Whatever that stance, university leaders have a special role in shaping the environment in which learning and personal development unfolds, and this will greatly influence public attitudes to religious faith, informing the responses made in wider society for decades to come. There is a risk that university communities may fracture in a context of economic and social stress, but there is also a real opportunity for the HE sector to help foster collegial relations between religious and secular traditions, both on campus and in wider society.

*Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education* is convinced that a clear, thoughtful stance is most likely to support helpful practices in relation to religious faith, and challenge the knee-jerk responses that have been common in the public conversation about religion. These unconsidered responses have tended to view religion simply as a risk to be managed rather than a resource to be drawn on alongside other public actors in civil society.

The programme is based upon an analysis of what universities do already and a review of the policy demands that shape their priorities. This analysis draws from a critical engagement with the literature and our own primary research. We have conducted 31 interviews and three discussion groups with operational staff and students, and 16 interviews with vice-chancellors (VCs) and pro-vice-chancellors (PVCs) to explore with them what religious literacy might mean in their universities and what the challenges and opportunities are.

The purpose of this publication is to introduce this analysis. It begins with an exploration of the concept of religious literacy, giving details of the many ways in which religious literacy may be relevant to HEIs. It then relates the idea to a number of areas in which religious literacy may be useful, including: equalities and diversity policy; teaching and curricula; the role of universities in shaping and engaging with wider society; student experience; and fostering good campus relations. It

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explores conceptual questions and relates them to education and HEI settings. We have also produced a set of case study materials to accompany this publication entitled *Leadership Challenges: Case Studies*, which offers further practical advice.

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For more information and contact details visit [www.religiousliteracyhe.org](http://www.religiousliteracyhe.org)

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## Religion in the UK

The religious makeup of the UK is extremely complicated and highly diverse. Over 170 distinct religious traditions were counted in the 2001 Census. Since the Reformation, the Anglican Church has been the UK's largest and most influential religious tradition, although, while it remains significant, its membership has declined in the recent decades. Other traditions that have a long history in the UK, such as the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, Methodism, and especially Roman Catholicism and Judaism, have also undergone significant changes over the second half of the twentieth century, many experiencing a similar decline in traditional observance. However, a number of other religious traditions have emerged in the UK due to immigration during the 1950s and 60s, and the popularising of new forms of spirituality. Many people in Britain remain attached to Christianity in some way also: although only around 10 per cent of people in the UK attend church regularly, 72 per cent described themselves as Christian in the Census. Particularly notable has been the emergence of various youthful forms of religiosity, which have been observed especially among ethnic minorities. Together, these trends have helped keep religion high on the agenda even in 'secular' Europe.

However, many people are unsettled by the persistent and resurgent role of faith as a marker of public identity, and the idea of public faith is controversial. Some are sceptical because they believe that religious people commonly seek to assert moral superiority by making appeals to deities and doctrine. In political theory, numerous scholars have concluded that faith threatens the secular public realm, including universities, which ought to remain carefully neutral on these matters. Some civil society practitioners have registered concern

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about what they see as the privileging of faiths in the public realm, with objections being raised about an illogical over-assertion of faith over other dimensions of identity. There is also frequently deep resistance to the perceived position of faith groups in relation to issues such as adoption, sexual orientation and abortion.

These debates are not easily resolved. Against these objections, a number of scholars have questioned the idea that public institutions can be neutral at all, suggesting that the public realm (or realms) is already infused with morality and values, and that certain assumptions are often made in public life about the nature and purpose of human life, giving legitimacy to particular viewpoints and excluding others. Others have contended that the public realm is already inextricably linked to specifically theological and religious traditions, particularly in the UK, where there is a state church. Given this, it has become necessary to think carefully about how to approach the distinction between public life and private faith, and indeed whether this distinction is ultimately useful.

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## What is Religious Literacy?

*Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education* aims to give shape to the idea of religious literacy and to relate it to the specific setting of HEIs. Yet even though the idea is in increasing currency it is unsettling, primarily because it is highly contested. Stephen Prothero, who has popularised the term in the US, uses it to describe “the ability to use religious terms and symbols” for civic purposes. His argument “is that you need religious literacy in order to be an effective citizen” (Prothero 2008, p.11). In the US the focus, and Prothero’s emphasis, is on Christian religious literacy, not just because Christianity is the largest religious tradition, but also because it is part of the ‘civic culture’. In the UK, the term has been interpreted differently.

Under the Labour Governments (1997–2010), the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG 2008, p.33) has defined religious literacy as “the skills and knowledge required to engage in an informed and confident way with faith communities”. This emphasises ‘community cohesion’ through mutual understanding between faith traditions and between them and others in wider society. There is a focus on learning each others’ cultural languages to ensure common

understanding as a basis for cohesion. The emphasis is on multiculturalism and on interfaith and multifaith relations. Faith groups were generally viewed by Labour Governments between 1997 and 2010 as repositories of ‘social capital’, a concept they tended to divide, following the sociologist Robert Putnam, into three distinct types: ‘bonding’, ‘bridging’, and ‘linking’ capital. Religious literacy has been seen as a means to the building of bridges and links across traditions to avoid social segregation and different groups of people living parallel lives.

Philosophers and educationalists have written extensively about religious literacy too. The majority of these writers work from within the liberal tradition. Liberalism and religion have an uneasy relationship, and many of the most influential liberal philosophers have advocated the restriction of religious discourse in public, notably John Rawls and John Dewey (although recently others, such as Jürgen Habermas, have acknowledged the revitalisation of religion, cautiously acknowledging it as a legitimate aspect of liberal societies). Equally, though, liberal writers have tended to emphasise the importance of exposure during education to a variety of worldviews. According to this perspective, one of the main purposes of education, alongside facilitating autonomy and critical thought, is to acquaint each member of society with different viewpoints, both so people may choose wisely and so they may understand those unlike them. Liberals have accordingly often argued, as David Carr (2007, p.668) has said, that “it would be hard to count anyone as properly educated who completely lacked any religious knowledge”. This approach is relativistic in the sense that it does not promote any one way of life, instead leaving such decisions to the individual based on his or her critical reflection.

One can also identify a ‘culturalist’ understanding of religious literacy. Advocates of this approach tend to emphasise that to know a religion one needs to be embedded in a system of practices and social associations, or in particular forms of experience. Proper understanding requires a grasp of the contexts which supply particular words, rituals and gestures with their meaning. This approach can be linked to what E D Hirsch (1988) calls ‘cultural literacy’. For Hirsch, communication between people requires a shared ‘background understanding’. In order to converse, people need to be able to recognise significant references to important historical events, legal



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judgements, maxims, artistic works and so on. In the UK, for instance, it might mean that a person is able to connect the words ‘Established Church’ to the constitution of Britain, or ‘Protestant work ethic’ to the Reformation.

Culturalist arguments take a variety of forms. A number of scholars have suggested that acquiring religious literacy is like learning a language, which is often understood to mean, as Victoria Harrison (2008, pp.599-600) has said, that “acquiring a religion without the help of a religious tradition is, if not impossible, extremely difficult; just as mastering a language without participating in a community that speaks that language is an onerous task”. Some, like Harrison, suggest that modern living itself engenders religious illiteracy by cutting people off from any kind of coherent system of cultural and religious practices. (This idea remains, of course, controversial.) Hirsch—and Prothero, who has been influenced by Hirsch’s work—argues that education should concentrate on making sure everyone can speak a ‘national language’, which means teaching people about the religious terms, symbols, themes and stories that are implicit or explicit in national public life. More modestly, Roger Homan (2004) argues that religious education should include visiting religionists and religious settings so that students can see for themselves.

Key amongst culturalist theories of religious faith is the idea that we live in an age in which globalisation and internet technology expose cultures, especially religious cultures, to one another without many people having an understanding of the underlying starting points and nodes of reference required to interpret them. This idea influenced Samuel Huntington’s (in)famous ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis, which posits a clash between the West and ‘the rest’, and underpins a widespread perception of an especial clash between Islam and the West. To some extent this contributes to an anxiety about religious faith which has driven public policy on community cohesion and prevention of violent extremism. It also highlights a tension in the culturalist advocacy of a ‘national language’, since religious faith is so often organised around transnational identities.

What religionists themselves think of religious literacy also varies. Some traditions reject the idea of religious literacy on the grounds that faith “is strongest in a heart unfettered by book learning” (an unnamed Methodist bishop quoted in Prothero 2008, p.109). Others, by contrast, have complained about the loss of an ability to ‘read’ the Bible (and other holy

books) intelligently, rendering them merely “springboards for piety”. Many believers’ stances on religious literacy have been deeply influenced by experiences of misrecognition. Suzanne Rosenblith and Beatrice Bailey (2008) have pointed out, drawing from data produced by the sociologist Robert Wuthnow (2005), that in the US many non-Christians, particularly Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims, regularly report being confronted with stereotypes and misinformation by their Christian neighbours. There appear to be parallels in the UK too, where Jewish and Muslim figures in particular cite misinformation as the single biggest barrier to developing amicable relations between the members of those religious traditions and the secular mainstream (see Suleiman 2009, p.19; Ahmed 2009, p.69). For example, people talk about ‘anti-Semitism’ as though Palestinian Muslims were not also Semites, equate the word *jihad* with terrorism, or write about *Shari’a* as though it were a fixed body of law rather than a symbol of God’s will which is subject to formal legal interpretation (*fiqh*).

In community practice settings, too, the idea of religious literacy is highly contested, though it is predominantly associated with practical dimensions of understanding religious faith; for example, between a local authority and a particular faith tradition or worshipping community. The focus here is usually on the ways in which public partners and those from other faith traditions engage with actual practices and ideas. Knowledge and understanding about holy days, rites and ceremonies, and theological emphases, are the currency of such (mis-) understandings and religious literacy is rooted in instrumental ideas of how to practise encounters with difference.

Against this backdrop, it becomes easy to see why having a fixed stance on religious literacy is not easy. Many people want greater religious literacy—government, people of faith, civic bodies and others—primarily because they see it as a mechanism for building bridges between different groups of people. But the idea is underdeveloped, and people want it for many different, and sometimes conflicting, reasons, including: the desire to be understood and to understand; as a basis for interfaith conversation and sometimes proselytisation; to engage better in public partnerships and community initiatives; to maintain or strengthen a particular cultural language; or out of sheer curiosity and interest. Whatever the rationale for religious literacy, it will not satisfy the aspirations, or reflect the outlooks, of all.

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Nevertheless, it is possible to identify some points of consensus between the different approaches as a basis for a working definition of religious literacy:

- Religions deserve to be articulated publicly, not only so their positive aspects are acknowledged and engaged with, but also so they can be criticised constructively and risks identified and addressed.
- Religious literacy has the potential to mediate cultural, moral and cognitive differences and to broaden intellectual, social and cultural horizons. It can also challenge any attempt to close down debates with conversation-stopping certainties and absolutes.
- Religious literacy can help the development of a level of background understanding, so a person may be able to grasp the inner meaning of literary works, political events or public actions, or the history which has shaped particular public institutions or national norms.
- Today building religious literacy is a challenge: partly because of disinterestedness, partly just because the world is increasingly diverse, people often find that religious traditions are poorly understood. This can lead to resistance—even violence—against them (and by them) and to missed opportunities to enrich experience.

We suggest that religious literacy lies, then, in having the knowledge and skills to recognise religious faith as a legitimate and important area for public attention, a degree of general knowledge about at least some religious traditions, and an awareness of and ability to find out about others.

Its purpose is to avoid stereotypes, respect and learn from others and build good relations across difference. In this it is a civic endeavour rather than a theological or religious one, and seeks to support a strong, cohesive, multifaith society, which is inclusive of people from all faith traditions and none in a context that is largely suspicious and anxious about religion and belief.

The overall aim may be summarised as seeking to inform intelligent, thoughtful and rooted approaches to religious faith that countervail unhelpful knee-jerk reactions based on fear and stereotype.

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## Religious Literacy in Higher Education

Universities can be seen as both microcosms and reflections of wider society. The processes of secularisation and desecularisation that social scientists have identified as general trends in Europe are reflected in the universities, as are implicit assumptions about what religion is and suppositions about the inevitability of its decline. Similarly, the political struggles and tensions found in UK civil society are played out in concentrated ways on university campuses. They are at the same time self-consciously spaces of intellectual contest, challenge and development — crucibles of thinking. The key question is, do universities reflect these deliberations or lead them?

The oldest universities in Britain, Oxford and Cambridge, pre-date the Reformation, but these universities remained until fairly recently under the purview of the Established Church, and they remain to a certain degree tied to it, at least in terms of their cultural norms. Before the Victorian era the Church's dominance over academic and community life inevitably meant the exclusion of Dissenters, Jews, Roman Catholics, and those unable to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (Gilliat-Ray 1999, p.22). Since these were the only two universities in England, very few people actually went into HE. In the 1820s England only had a small number of university students: 1,000 compared to 4,250 in Scotland, where four universities (St Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh) were founded between 1400 and 1600. Compared to other European countries the system in England reformed very late (Rüegg 2004, pp.61-64; Graham 2005, pp.7-9). The establishment of University College, London (UCL) in 1826 as (arguably) England's third university was self-consciously an avowedly secular affair and the institution is often known informally as 'the godless institution of Gower Street'.

Public pressure eventually led to the passing of two bills in 1852 and 1854 requiring reforms at Oxford and Cambridge, although only in 1871 were religious tests finally abolished. At the same time, the university system in England expanded, driven by a combination of commercial interests and civic and Nonconformist challenges to the Established Church. Together these changes opened HE up to people for whom university had not been an option, and today no-one is excluded, formally

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at least, from UK universities because of their religion or belief. During this period the number of practising Christians also declined, and as a result religion was, until relatively recently, pushed to the margins.

In recent years this has altered. It has become widely accepted that at some point during the 1970s a significant cultural shift occurred in nations on both sides of the Atlantic. This is sometimes referred to as the beginning of a 'post-modern' era, or is connected with the rise of 'identity politics'. It is frequently seen as a change that entailed a challenge to Western secular norms, and in particular the idea that a person's beliefs should remain entirely private. In his reading of the history of the American university, Mark U Edwards Jr (2008, p.84) links the secularisation of HE in America with the emergence of academic disciplinary communities which challenged dominant forms of Protestantism. Each discipline developed its own procedures and vocabularies for understanding its subject matter, and as they did so inadvertently various alternatives to theological knowledge emerged, with these alternatives eventually becoming the norm. The sciences, the social sciences and then the humanities each "declared their independence from religion".

But this had a side-effect too. This challenge to Protestant dominance in the US also made possible the expression of other forms of faith—multiple strands of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and many others. As the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (or WASP) norm was weakened, various alternative identities and lifestyle groups began to clamour for attention and recognition. These various identities were not just religious—they may have been grounded in a person's gender, sexuality, ethnicity or disability. But this shift (which coincided with the development of the New Left and the protests against the Vietnam War) made it possible to talk about religious identities in the same way that one might talk about these other identities. "It became possible", writes Robert Wuthnow (2008, p.35), "to argue that:

- Having a religious studies program at university might be just as legitimate as having one in gender studies
- Having a campus religious group which was recognised by the administration might be as acceptable as a group for gay people
- Including a course on the Protestant Reformation in the history department curriculum might be just as valuable as one on the French Revolution

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- Encouraging students to talk about their religious backgrounds in a seminar could be just as useful as prompting them to discuss their ethnic heritage or where they grew up
  - And sending one's son or daughter to, or deciding to teach at, a church-related college where Christian values could be openly discussed could be just as beneficial as being at some larger institution dominated by 'secular humanism'".

The experience of the UK has, of course, differed from the US in a number of important respects. The emergence of these kinds of issues has been set against the backdrop of the declining British Empire and new immigration to the UK, most of which came from former colonies. The country's discussions of the marginalisation of black or Asian populations, and of non-Christian religious groups, have been influenced to a large degree by that historical experience. But there are parallels. The accusation that the dominant—which is to say, white Anglo-Saxon—way of looking at the world marginalised other ways of seeing it emerged in the UK too. In some cases this meant, as Tariq Modood (2007, p.2) has noted, "emphasising differences as embodied in the ideas of Afrocentricity, ethnicity, [or] femaleness". At other times, though, it involved religion, with Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs seeking some kind of recognition, for example in Sikh campaigns against the compulsory wearing of helmets on motorcycles and construction sites.

The impact of these shifts upon education has been multifaceted. School-based religious education has shifted significantly from an emphasis on the teaching of Christian morality to teaching about the 'world religions'. These changes have influenced equalities legislation put together in the UK during the 1990s and 2000s, with religious, ethnic and sexual differences each gaining increasing protection. There has been a shift, too, in university chaplaincy from parochial to pastoral ministry available to people of any faith and none. There have been calls for 'culturally responsive' teaching that is sensitive to how learners might experience learning through the lens of their own cultural (and religious) experiences.

These changes were all reflected in our conversations with VCs, many of whom are self-consciously moving away from secular assumptions about the role of their institutions and engaging with religion as an increasingly recognised marker of identity. They regularly commented that within their institution

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chaplains of whatever tradition almost always minister to all students regardless of their religious beliefs (or non-belief). Some mentioned they run courses which require students to engage with the 'values' of the university, sometimes including religious and spiritual dimensions.

Nevertheless, difficult questions for university leaders and managers emerge about how to mediate between these different worldviews and identities. Opening up space for conversation about different identities and religious beliefs can bring about an increase in mutual understanding. Yet such conversations can also leave people feeling personally vulnerable. Students' experience of their university years, and the way university staff relate to their different vocations, will be affected by how and where these conversations take place. Leadership on how religious faith ought or ought not to permeate those experiences is key.

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## Policies and Practices in HEIs

*Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education* aims to help universities to lead an improved quality of debate about religious faith, both on campus and in wider society. This means exploring the different settings in which religious faith emerges as an issue for HEIs. Our review of policy documents suggests four key arenas where issues of religion and faith have an impact in HEIs: equalities and diversity; student experience; widening participation and social mobility; and fostering good campus relations. We propose a possible role for religious literacy in these different contexts.

Many of these policy contexts have, for a variety of reasons, undergone significant changes in recent years, causing uncertainty and in some cases conflict. It is reasonable to expect further, and perhaps more drastic, changes in the context of enormous political and economic shifts and resulting cuts to public spending. Universities face significant challenges. More potential students will be seeking either fewer student places, reduced resources per student, and/or increased costs to students. The consequences are likely to fall disproportionately on minority ethnicities and faith groups who are over-represented already in the indices of poverty. At the same time, fewer staff will be asked to deliver 'more for less'. We propose that universities may seek to meet the challenges

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in part by working with faith groups in the wider community, to engage effectively with as broad and diverse a potential student body as possible. Religious literacy can support such an approach by ensuring targeted widening participation and social mobility strategies aimed especially at these 'hard to reach' groups.

In addition, with a cap being imposed on home (including European Union [EU]) student numbers, universities will be intensifying their efforts to attract students from countries outside the EU. If HE in the UK is to retain its international reputation and competitive advantage in the face of intensifying competition (particularly from non-English-speaking countries increasing the number of programmes they offer through the medium of English) it is imperative that HE managers develop a good understanding of the range of cultural and religious backgrounds from which their students come. Religious literacy can help HEIs to promote, recruit and retain students of all religious traditions (and none).

The Coalition Government has also announced a review of counter-terrorism legislation, in effect signalling the end of the strategy outlined in 2007 by the previous Labour Government known as Prevent. This strategy had attempted to lessen the risk of violent extremism by increasing funding for community initiatives, and had drawn a mixed response. As resources tighten, it is possible that a narrower security agenda may be emphasised, with softer policy agendas, which have been balancing this emphasis, being cut. In this context it is crucial that universities have excellent levels of religious literacy, both in order to deal with extremism crises, if and when they arise (or are perceived to arise), and to educate their communities towards a realistic perspective on radicalism that recognises the dangers inherent in overstating the risk of violent extremism.

Although these policy agendas are of great significance, in framing a religious literacy leadership programme it is important to balance the demands of policy with the intellectual questions raised. Any advice that is given to HEI leaders will not be relevant if it is not related to specific policy requirements; yet to sideline more substantial questions risks encouraging universities to just follow the logic of current policy-making at a time when politics and economics are especially contested. There was a strong feeling among the VCs we spoke to that practical responses to policy demands must be based upon

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prior consideration of intellectual issues. Accordingly, *Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education* sees as essential a critical leadership role for universities, supporting VCs and senior managers to take a sophisticated, analytical and intellectually informed approach which reflects their institutions' characters rather than submitting to an impossibly dogmatic scheme. For some, this will mean identifying and implementing what is necessary for compliance with the law. For others, it may mean going beyond compliance with legal requirements and policy recommendations to a broader engagement with religious faith in HE that challenges prejudices and assumptions and encourages a much higher quality of debate about religious faith in wider society. We hope that this will help each university to respond in the best way possible, and initiate debates that shed light rather than simply generating heat.

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## Equalities and diversity

Discrimination on religious grounds in the UK is not new, and the first legislation to combat it dates to the 19th century. Nevertheless, only very recently has religious discrimination been formally prohibited in law. Since the 1970s, and particularly since the election of the Labour Government in 1997, the idea of equality has come to be located as a central issue for social justice, and it has found expression in a range of legislative measures and policy guidelines. Measures taken to combat religious discrimination can be regarded as one part of this emerging and as yet unfinished 'equalities project'.

There are 11 key pieces of legislation which make up the context for equalities policy in the UK and one EU Directive. They were introduced gradually into UK law, but will be brought together when the Equality Act (2010) begins to come into force in October 2010. They are (in chronological order):

- The Equal Pay Act (1970)
- The Rehabilitation of Offenders Act (1974)
- The Sex Discrimination Act (1975) [and amended 2000]
- The Race Relations Act (1976) [and amended 2000]
- The Disability Discrimination Act (1997)
- The Human Rights Act (1998)
- The European Union Employment Framework Directive on Religion or Belief [2000]
- Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations (2003)

- Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations (2003)
- The Gender Recognition Act (2004)
- The Equality Act (2006) establishes the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), a new integrated equalities body covering sex, race, disability, criminal offending, religion and belief, and sexual orientation. It also introduces new age discrimination regulations as well as prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of religion and belief and sexual orientation in the provision of goods, facilities and services, in education and in the exercise of public functions.

Three of these Acts deal specifically and explicitly with issues of faith and belief: the European Union Employment Framework Directive on Religion or Belief (2000); the UK Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations (2003); and the Equality Act (2006). There are, however, implications in many of the other measures too. The Sexual Orientation Regulations, for example, have affected numerous religious groups and individuals, one of the best known cases being that of registrar Lilian Ladele, who was dismissed from her post in January 2008 after she refused to officiate for civil partnerships because of her religious beliefs.

A number of the VCs we spoke to commented that issues of religion and belief are often viewed in HEIs primarily through the lens of equalities and diversity. However, because the equalities framework is spread across a range of policy instruments there is widespread uncertainty about what it demands in practice. As Linda Woodhead (2009, p.4) has observed, "research, reflection and legislation in relation to the mandates for religion or belief are nowhere near as well developed as for gender, race and disability". In particular, there is often confusion about what the Acts cover. One area of debate concerns what constitutes a religion or a belief. In much human rights law religion has been defined in terms of belief in God. The Equality Act and the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations differ on this, referring to a person's right to hold not just 'religious' beliefs but also other 'philosophical' beliefs (such as humanism), as well as the right to have no religion or belief. It is still too early to say what the full implications of this definition will be, but notably in November 2009 the Employment Appeal Tribunal held, in the case of *Grainger Plc vs Nicholson*, that environmental concerns constituted a belief capable of protection under the 2003 Regulations.

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There are at least three other central debates. The first of these concerns indirect discrimination. Together, the legislation outlaws almost all forms of discrimination on grounds of religion or belief, both 'direct' and 'indirect'. 'Direct' is simpler to recognise and understand, referring to formal practices or informal prejudices which exclude members of a particular religious faith from employment in a particular occupation, or which prevent them from progressing in their career as quickly as others. 'Indirect' is more complex, however. It refers to selection criteria, policies, employment rules or any other practices which, although they are applied to all employees, have the effect of disadvantaging the members of a particular religious tradition.

A good example of this is given in Sophie Gilliat-Ray's book *Religion in Higher Education* (1999, p.15), which cites an example from the 1990s in which a Jewish applicant for a part-time academic post was forced to withdraw his application when the institution refused to re-schedule an interview due to be held on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. In this case, the university, in the view of its Jewish chaplain, disadvantaged the person despite treating everyone in exactly the same way. Similar issues emerged in our interviews in relation to provision of food and timetabling:

*The orthodox Jewish student might have difficulty with his lectures late on the Friday which would make it difficult for the Sabbath, particularly in the winter [...]. For example, this week now that the clocks have changed, so Sabbath officially comes in, if I'm not mistaken, at something like about four twenty-five [...]. Making it from [the university] to north-west London [...] that's a fair journey—which means [...] students that have got lectures which begin at two can't go.*

**Jewish chaplain, London**

*Timetabling is a major issue, particularly for students for observance of their prayers. [If they are] observant they are aware that they need to go and pray—I've had this recently, I've had two queries from students who had to have lab sessions from four until six. The problem with that is that it affects their prayers, their religious obligations because at four we have a dusk prayer, [or perhaps] ten past, quarter past four.*

**Muslim chaplain, London**

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In these cases, students are seen to be disadvantaged by the university. But here it may also be appropriate to ask whether or not the procedures that cause the disadvantage constitute a 'genuine business need'. A practice will not be judged discriminatory if it is necessary to the functioning of the university or other organisation. Timetabling is affected by many different pressures, and it may not always be possible to accommodate religious observances without seriously disrupting courses. The following quote illustrates the problem:

*There are implications on all sorts of things: people with childcare or other carer responsibilities; students with part-time work—how on earth are they going to hold down a part-time job if you're coming in on a Wednesday night? Then we have people saying, "Oh, I can't make a nine o'clock lecture because I have got to drop the kids off and I've got the three of them at different schools". That's not easy. Then you have people saying, "I'm sorry, I can't go to a lecture on a Friday afternoon in winter", particularly if you're Jewish because you can't; you've got the travelling. Then that extends to Saturday morning. You can't do Saturday morning because certain Christian religions [sic] can't do Saturday morning.*

**Head of student support, London**

The second key debate concerns what is known as a 'genuine occupational requirement' (GOR). The only time it is lawful for an employer to directly discriminate on grounds of religion or belief is when a GOR has been formally established. Generally, a GOR will only be established in cases where a person's being of a certain religion or belief is an essential requirement for the job. (For example, a halal butcher must be a Muslim, so a GOR may be justified.) This may be relevant in certain university contexts, particularly for universities whose history or ethos means they have connections to a religious tradition which might be embodied constitutionally.

This may apply in chaplaincies too. A number of chaplaincy posts are funded by universities, and recently some authors (for example, Siddiqui 2007) have advocated expanding university-funded chaplaincy posts to faiths other than Christianity. This had prompted debate amongst a number of the HEI leaders we spoke to about the possible application of GORs. Additionally, while many Christian chaplains are funded by their churches, other traditions tend to contribute volunteers. Universities may be judged to be discriminating where part-funding by a church



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prompts them to provide match funding to one religious tradition while others do not participate. In some cases, there is a GOR applying to the post of the vice-chancellor. There are recent examples in the UK sector and learning about how these have been addressed may be instructive.

The third key debate concerns harassment and bullying. All forms of harassment on religious grounds are outlawed, but the Regulations and the Equality Act are careful to note that harassment need not be intentional. Remarks which are not intended to cause offence may still be deemed offensive by a member of a faith community, and prevent him or her from feeling settled or welcome in a particular position. They are also careful to cover perceived religion—that is to say, the assumption that a person has a religious belief or background of some sort. In cases where misperceptions of a particular religious tradition have caused problems, employers and public providers are advised to offer guidance. The Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) has offered the following example:

*A particular religion featured largely in the media due to an international crisis. Stereotypical, pejorative and hurtful comments in the workplace were routinely made about all the followers of that religion. A group of distressed workers complained to managers who promptly arranged a training session during which it was explained that not all followers of that religion agreed with what was happening elsewhere and that they were hurt and worried by their colleagues' comments. Better understanding helped resolve the situation (ACAS 2005, p.17).*

There are various ways in which religious literacy can help avoid problems in the area of equalities and diversity. But as Woodhead (2009, p.v) observes, “the low level of knowledge about religion at all levels of society [...] can foster discrimination, as well as hinder attempts to understand and counter it”. The ACAS guidelines (2005, p.30) on the subject are also careful to stress that “Employers will not escape liability in an Employment Tribunal by showing that discrimination was inadvertent or accidental”. As a starting point it is therefore necessary for universities to take into account the timing and relative significance (both cultural and religious) of religious festivals as well as any dietary taboos and cultural relations between men and women, all of which require a level of prior knowledge.

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Yet it is also important not to simplify or homogenise religious traditions. People and communities of faith are likely to be committed to an assortment of moral, ethical and theological standpoints (some of which may go against the trend of equalities legislation). Indeed, many of the problems that emerge in relation to anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and anti-Catholic sentiment stem from the assumption that there is only one way of being Jewish, Muslim or Catholic. For this reason there may be good grounds to make space for conversation about religious faith in universities, if only to ensure relevant parties have an idea of what a person's faith entails. In some universities this has been done by setting up a religion and belief working group.

There are other areas that call for conversation too, such as when making provisions for the observance of faith. It may be reasonable within a small institution with limited space to decline a request for a prayer room, whereas a larger organisation may act unreasonably by not allowing free space to be used, or by not making certain allowances. In our interviews with students and chaplaincy staff, most recognised the inherent difficulties in making special arrangements and were aware that, as one Jewish chaplain put it, “The whole world does not revolve around us”. This indicates that working out religious accommodations can be, if it is done openly, a positive experience.

In turn, this suggests that there are different approaches that HEIs can take in relation to equalities and diversity. As a minimum, an HEI will have to comply with the law, but it may choose to adopt a broader stance rooted in the social justice dimensions that are at the heart of equalities legislation, where equalities legislation and diversity frameworks are conceived of in human rights terms, or as a means for challenging oppression (including indirect or accidental) of minority or ‘hard to reach’ groups. The kind of leadership provided in relation to these issues will determine whether an approach is taken which narrowly follows legal developments or whether one is taken which builds on legislation to ensure a university experience that feels more thoroughly thoughtful, nurturing and even inspiring in relation to religious faith. These are, of course, normative positions, which is precisely why leadership about them is a matter of VCs setting the tone of their institutions in relation to religious faith.

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## Student experience

The strength of the policy emphasis on student experience points towards the prioritisation, among HE leaders, of universities as highly responsive providers of what students require. It involves a commitment on the part of universities to the needs students have and to resolving the problems they may encounter while at university, covering everything from a student's ability to participate in sports, societies and social groups to his or her ability to proceed through university without encountering serious financial difficulties. Arguably the dominant way of understanding student experience at present is what Brendan Bartram (2009) calls the 'instrumentalist' approach, where the focus falls upon how students 'consume' university services, in a market/provider model. This is reflected, for instance, in Labour Government publications on this subject (for example, BIS 2009), as well as in the Coalition Agreement under the Coalition Government after May 2010. It is also reflected in the National Student Survey, the main instrument for comparing different institutions' provisions. For this reason the focus often falls on such things as the quality and quantity of contact and teaching time, personalisation, coursework and feedback, student facilities, and employability and careers advice.

This interpretation of student experience is, however, disputed. Bartram (2009, p.311) himself objects, quoting R Smith, that "the commodified roles of student-as-consumer and institution-as-product-provider undercut the authenticity of the relationship" between student and tutor. He supports an alternative approach he describes as 'holistic' and 'humanistic', which places much greater emphasis upon personal development. These two interpretations are built upon very different understandings of what the role of the university is, and what experience a university ought to provide for its students. In the first case, the main role of an HEI is to provide a qualification which will help the student to pursue a career. In the second, university education is not simply viewed as a process which results in a student obtaining what Paolo Freire calls a 'bankable commodity' (for example, a qualification which can be used to procure a job) but as something that helps the learner to be everything they can be, with HE ideally offering the opportunity to explore fundamental personal and social questions. The role of religious literacy in such an environment is likely to be somewhat different to when a consumer model

is adopted. For example, a university might seek to recognise a spiritual dimension to learning or emphasise imagination and intuition, whereas the consumer model might satisfy itself by setting aside a prayer room and, having made provision, leave its use to the 'market' of student choice.

The most recent survey of student experience by the National Union of Students (NUS) works largely within the terms of the instrumentalist model, one of the consequences being that issues of faith and belief are not analysed in great depth. It does provide evidence that the majority of students come to university primarily to further their career (NUS 2008, pp.6-7). However, the finding is limited by the fact that their questionnaire only offers four possible responses, three of which are career-orientated. Where religion and belief is examined, however, interesting results emerge. There is some evidence from the 1990s (Aida et al. 1996, p.59; cited in Gilliat-Ray 1999, p.54) which indicates that students, and students from ethnic minorities in particular, become more aware of their faith identity while at university, with many feeling their religious beliefs have to be bracketed off. In some cases this may result in the decision to assert and perhaps over-assert that religious identity. The NUS Survey (2008, pp.21-22, 38) reports a significantly less favourable view of university among ethnic minorities too, indicating that there are "different cultural needs that are not being accommodated". The relationship between religious belief and student experience was also commented on in a number of our interviews, with some of the students mentioning that they felt marginalised:

*[Religious belief] directs what kind of friends you're going to have, once you've got that, once you're in a particular circle of friends, then that directs everything else you do [...]. It gives you a path to walk on.*

**Male, Muslim**

*I feel like [in this university] there's not much understanding of what life is, and certainly of what spirituality and religion is. I don't think that the college aims to... sure, it has an interfaith room [...]. [But] I don't feel accommodated for.*

**Male, no formal religious affiliation**

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*There's tons of [religious symbolism] here. [T]here's churches everywhere, they have the chaplains. But at the same time I feel like, most of the [time], that all it comes down to is the external stuff.*

### Female, Catholic

The evidence is vague, and this may be in part because of the kinds of questions that are valued and therefore asked. Nevertheless, perhaps it hints that not only does a person's experience in HE differ significantly depending upon his or her religious orientation, but also that some identities are not catered for as well as others. This raises questions about how universities should respond, if at all. Public institutions are often conceived of as being, at least ideally, neutral on questions of religion and belief. This connects to values at the heart of liberalism and the liberal arts university. It is reflected too in the recent equalities legislation. There is a generalised consensus that public institutions do not—or at least should not—exhibit partiality toward a person based upon his or her beliefs any more than they should the colour of a person's skin. In universities, moreover, it is generally accepted that lecturers should not attempt to instil a Christian disposition—or for that matter a Marxist or Kantian one—in their students, but teach about those different traditions.

However, in another sense assumptions about the neutrality of universities may be hard to sustain. As the philosopher Kwame Appiah (2005, p.88) has observed, public institutions cannot be neutral in their effects, even if they manage to be so in their intent: their actions “will have differential impacts on people of different identities, including religious identities”. A person who, for religious reasons, does not drink alcohol or eat certain foods will not experience university in quite the same way as someone who does. The legal theorist Stephen L Carter (1993) has added to this, arguing that different religious and secular traditions adhere to ‘alternative epistemologies’. The liberal and rationalistic traditions that are dominant in the West make, he argues, certain assumptions about the nature and purpose of human life, and about what counts as meaningful knowledge. Other religious and cultural traditions begin from different starting points and with different assumptions. These traditions have, therefore, to be considered stances in themselves which are in no way neutral. Religionists may well perceive and experience university differently, and have to

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negotiate different challenges. This extends to what is taught in them, as the following quotation helps to illustrate:

*Whenever a lecturer [...] talks about a specific thing, then you can't help but relate it to, like, a creator; you're amazed by it. But sometimes it can have the opposite effect as well, when you talk about something that's less inclined towards your religious approval, [like these] materialistic [...] theories where nothing became something. You have to take it on the chin, but also you have to not believe it, but you have to... in the exams I feel like you just have to tell them what they want to know, rather than exactly what you believe.*

### Muslim undergraduate

When university leaders consider how to ensure a positive student experience for all, there are at least two major questions to answer. The first is how to respond to the different ways that students understand and relate to the universities in which they study, think, learn and spend much of their free time. Given that the experience that students have appears to relate to their specific worldviews, HEI leaders need to make choices about whether universities should ignore, appeal to or engage with people's religious beliefs and, if so, when and in what way. The second, which links to the first, is what an HEI should seek to provide for its students in response. A narrow definition might restrict itself to modes of commodified education in pursuit of employability, to the acquisition of knowledge for the purpose of pursuing a career. In this, religious faith might be expected to be largely irrelevant. A broader interpretation might consider how the university helps shape the wider human experience and outlook of the individual student and, in due course, society's future leaders, scientists, thinkers, artists and so on. But this, in turn, raises significant questions about what the purpose of a university is. Given the diversity of the HE sector it is unlikely one approach will be suitable for every institution, but it is important for HEIs to be aware of what is at stake in their choices. Any number of stances may result. For example, in the case of a more formation-orientated institution the role of religious faith may be understood as an aspect of that formation. In the case of an employability-focused institution, it might, alternatively, be regarded as a risk to be managed, a distraction to be avoided, or merely an irrelevance.

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## Widening participation and social mobility

Widening participation in HE has been one of the main goals of UK Government policy for almost a decade, but the principles underlying the general aim are complex, and have shifted over time. It has been justified as necessary as a matter of social justice, with successive governments attempting to ensure that, regardless of background, everyone with the ability is given the opportunity to attend university. But it has also been linked with efforts to expand the HE sector so that the country remains competitive within a global knowledge economy. In 2003 the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) stated that one of its main objectives was “to increase participation in education towards fifty percent of those aged 18–30 by the end of the decade” (HEFCE quoted in Greenbank 2006, p.142). Widening participation was seen by the Labour Government between 1997 and 2010 as a means to achieving both of these ends.

There have been various suggestions as to what changes might be required to try and widen participation in HE. Raising educational achievement in schools and colleges is viewed as the main driver, but it is also regarded as important to raise the aspirations of people who, for whatever reason, do not have the ambition to go into HE or who feel it is not their place.

Reflecting this, measures taken to widen participation have been diverse, including: the re-shaping of traditional entry points and delivery modes for courses; university outreach programmes; the nation-wide Aimhigher programme, focusing intensively in disadvantaged areas; and efforts to promote science and engineering among school leavers. Increased emphasis on widening participation through new learning models had also led to increased provision for lifelong and continuing adult learning and community-centred education, though this is highly contested under financial pressures in the emerging political and economic climate.

For the most part, the strategy of widening participation has been viewed through the lens of class, which has been identified as “the most persistent failing of the post-compulsory education system in the UK” (Thomas 2001, p.67). But the strategy has not focused narrowly on a student’s economic

background, as it has been argued that aspirations and the resources necessary to progress through university might be affected by personal or cultural factors, including those relating to religion and belief. The now defunct Department for Education and Skills (DES 2006, p.6) suggested parental and family background can play a crucial role in a person’s likelihood of entering HE. Recent sociological research has also suggested that students’ educational attainment is influenced by faith background. For example, for a number of complex reasons Muslim women are significantly under-represented in the workforce in the UK, and Muslims in the UK generally do less well in education even when compared to other South Asian religious minorities (Lewis 2007, pp.26-28). A high number leave with no qualifications (Khattab 2009). This indicates the need to view the issue through a ‘faith lens’ as well as a ‘race lens’ and ‘class lens’.

The widening participation agenda has been somewhat recast in recent months and years to take account of social mobility. *Higher Ambitions*, a government policy document released in 2009, emphasises this and represents a subtle but significant shift from the goal of recruiting more people numerically to that of recruiting a greater diversity of students who use HE as a route from one social class to another. The goal of getting 50 percent of people to enter HE is still named in the report as an official goal but rather than relying on school leavers it emphasises the need to increase the number of adults at university and promote “a broader range of course models” (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS] 2009, p.3). More recently, the Coalition Government has abandoned the commitment to getting half of school leavers into HE, and, although no detailed plans have yet emerged, emphasis on social mobility may increase further. This can be understood as a response to economic demands in the context of recession. But the shift from more people to more social mobility could also imply a narrowing of the gateways into universities in real terms. It also re-emphasises class as the dominant issue. Yet critiques of social exclusion in the past decade have shown that wealth and class are not the only variables to exclusion and there is a correlation between class, ethnicity and religious faith, which means that many of the disadvantages of being part of a minority ethnicity are reflected in minority faith traditions too.

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This raises questions about how HEIs ensure there are no real or perceived barriers to people from different religious backgrounds coming to university. It also raises questions about what means institutions might employ to reach those who may not have, or recognise, ambitions to go to university, and to keep them at university once they get there. It may be that universities can look upon measures to accommodate minorities (religious or otherwise) as part of a programme of widening participation as well as a response to equalities legislation and to improved student experience. In our own research, equalities and diversity teams raised concerns about the character of their universities, whether secular or Christian, putting some religionists off. Indeed, one voluntary Muslim chaplain argued that his presence helped attract students:

*When I made my case to become chaplain here, one of [the things I said] was [...] at --- [anonymised], for example, the university has a chapel outside and a mosque very close by and that's very attractive to students [...]. That actually attracts [people] when the university provides those facilities; that meets the needs of the international students.*

In addition, it may be that universities can seek to use existing faith networks in their surrounding communities to form bridges and links with people who may be 'hard to reach'. There are also national bodies and agencies that support this approach (for example the Faith Based Regeneration Network). One of the universities we visited follows this model, and has attempted to make connections with local religious groups with the aim of encouraging wider constituencies of young people into university education. Such an approach requires university staff to have a good knowledge of the character of the religious groups in their area, particularly recognising that some harder to reach groups may be 'minorities within minorities' and not accessible via obvious routes such as community centres or places of worship. Engaging with people of faith in surrounding communities may support universities in their efforts to broaden and sustain diversity, and is likely to lead to fruitful and enriching partnerships in the long term.

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## Good campus relations

The aim of maintaining good relations on campus has become a highly controversial matter in recent years, partly because of

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concerns about extremism—and partly because of concerns about the government's response to extremism. Recently reports have been published which have come to significantly different conclusions about how much of a problem religious extremism is in universities in the UK, and what the best strategy for dealing with it is. Some recent publications from prominent think tanks (for example, Thorne & Stuart 2008; Glees & Pope 2005) have claimed that the UK's universities have been for some years points of focus for extremists, and continue to be problem areas. Other writers (for example, Kundhani 2009) have contended cohesion is being undermined, not by religious people, but by a 'securitisation' agenda, with Muslims being unfairly turned into a suspect community.

The most significant challenge for universities in this area, one acknowledged by BIS, is to balance the threat or perceived threat of extremism (especially incitement to hatred) with maintaining freedom of speech and academic independence. This was identified repeatedly in our conversations with VCs as a key challenge. It is also the emphasis of the Universities UK panel on this subject, chaired by the Provost of UCL, Professor Malcolm Grant, which regards this as a freedom of speech issue rather than a specifically religious matter.

It is not, however, the only challenge that VCs face. As the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) has stressed, maintaining good campus relations goes beyond terrorism to incorporate much broader concerns around hate crimes and intolerance (see ECU 2005; 2007). It encompasses, for example, abuse against religious people as well as abuse motivated by religious belief, for example that which is based upon a person's sexual orientation.

Similarly, it covers the problems that have been recorded involving anti-Semitism on university campuses. Concerns have been raised about some critics of Israeli policy—which some students' unions take an official stance on—adopting anti-Semitic terms and phrases. Often the individuals using such tropes are not aware that they may be hurtful. At one of the universities we visited, for example, some of the students and staff had raised objections about comparisons being made between current Israeli policy and the strategies of Nazi Germany. One of the members of staff commented about an event held in support of the people of Gaza:



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*I tried to get involved because I thought this could be a really constructive way of showing solidarity [...]. So I went into that, and it turned into an anti-Zionist thing again, and I ended up getting chucked out just for trying to debate some of those principles [...]. The Facebook group became host to some rather nasty instances of anti-Semitism, straightforward anti-Semitism [...]. Articles were posted that talked about Jews unfavourably, Jews and media control and all these kinds of old stereotypes.*

Each of these areas of difficulty raises questions about how universities can develop an atmosphere in which religious debate feels safe. BIS, under the Labour Government, recommended universities put in place formal policies on external speakers. It also suggested taking reasonable steps to set up opportunities for interfaith, multifaith and intercultural dialogue and interaction, arguing that universities ought to build bridges not just between faith groups, but between them and those with no religious affiliation too. One of the most striking things we found was that our interviewees, particularly the students we spoke to, were keen to open these kinds of discussions:

*I find that it's a bit frustrating sometimes that people are scared to have very frank and honest discussions about religions, and how religions have been placed with different cultures as well, because there is always this fear you are going to be accused of being racist, Islamophobic or anything.*

**Female, atheist**

*I think a discussion where both views are involved is very important, not only, you know, the 'cultural' but the religious views as well, because that way we can see how it works together.*

**Female, Muslim**

But there are potential difficulties involved in opening such discussions. HEI leaders must consider how to allow individuals to express their convictions and explore the differences between faiths, whilst ensuring that such spaces establish boundaries to prevent personal attacks. In political discussions, such as those going on around the Israel-Palestine conflict or around 9/11, it is necessary to leave space for everyone to be able to speak, yet also to discourage offensive references.

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Again, this highlights the importance of setting religious debate in the wider context of freedom of speech on any contested or sensitive subject.

This raises questions—and may prompt anxieties—about when and where it is useful or appropriate to refer to religious traditions and beliefs in public. In these situations the temptation is to place questions of religious identity to one side, and to try to conduct discussions only in terms on which everyone can agree (as philosophers such as Rawls have recommended, arguing that, in general, references to 'comprehensive doctrines' should be avoided in public). However, there are arguments against this which ought to be considered. First, religious prejudices and trivialisation of belief can emerge even in discussions which are not about religious issues, particularly the Israel-Palestine conflict. In addition, what constitutes an offensive remark about a religious group is not always clear cut. For example, there have been tense academic debates (see Hirsh 2008; Shaw & Hirsh 2008) about whether or not advocacy of a boycott of Israeli goods and services is in effect anti-Semitic as such actions are likely to affect Jews disproportionately and threaten to exclude Israelis from university campuses.

Finally, one of the concerns raised by BIS under the Labour Government relates to campus religious societies that isolate themselves from wider university life. This was a concern also for a number of the VCs we spoke to and for some of the chaplains, who sometimes had uneasy relationships both with Christian and Islamic societies. The question for university leaders to consider is whether the ethos of their university is in keeping with the presence of such societies, or contributes to their isolation. More broadly, it is the extent to which the universities can—and should—be drivers of positive encounters between faith traditions, and beyond those traditions, inside and outside their gates.

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## Approaches to Religious Literacy

Religious literacy leadership in the UK's HE sector has to deal with two significant challenges, which stem from two sorts of diversity. Firstly, the UK is religiously diverse. A number of religious traditions are represented, with each having bewildering levels of internal diversity. One cannot easily make



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assumptions about a particular person or group based upon the fact that they claim to subscribe to a particular belief or belong to a particular denomination. Secondly, universities themselves are diverse, with different histories, resources, built environments, missions and priorities. For that reason, it is neither possible nor desirable to seek to develop a leadership model that fits all HEIs. Instead, this programme proposes a framework that helps university leaders and managers to make a conscious choice about their HEIs stance and develop a response to it.

The analysis presented here, and some primary research conducted alongside (see [www.religiousliteracyHE.org](http://www.religiousliteracyHE.org)), suggests a number of different responses universities might make to religious faith. We propose the following as indicative modes, though these are by no means put forward as an exhaustive typology; neither are they necessarily mutually exclusive:

**Soft Neutrality:** For some, religion is seen as a problem to be solved. Society is conceived of as secular and universities as secular spaces wherein, along with other public institutions, they remain as far as possible neutral and education avoids offering overt religious or anti-religious messages. Faith itself is seen as a largely private matter, spilling into the public domain only when it gives rise to problems, which are resolved on a case-by-case basis. This was a stance adopted by some of the VCs we spoke to, who saw their institutions as ideologically not relevant to the religious beliefs of their students and staff, and vice versa.

**Hard Neutrality:** A similar but harder line actively seeks the protection of public space from religious faith, asserting a duty to preserve public bodies as secular—and therefore neutral—and to reject religious discourse in all its forms. Religion is often considered not fully rational and is therefore seen as irrelevant and distracting, particularly to institutions of higher learning, which are rooted in enlightenment thinking and the scientific method. One VC we spoke to, for example, expressly described his institution (and similar others) as “secular and therefore needing to defend that”.

A key problem with the idea of neutrality is that it is a position in itself and can be experienced quite sharply. Far from preserving neutrality, the neutral institution may be asserting

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a very particular stance indeed. It may not be possible to claim to be above the fray.

**Repositories and Resources:** On the other hand, many—including many policy-makers—see religious faith as a resource upon which society can draw. They understand it as offering possibilities and opportunities for encounter, enrichment and enjoyment, as well as financial, social and human capital. For them, keeping questions of religious faith to some sort of private sphere means missing opportunities and bracketing—even annihilating—potentially rich aspects of self and society. Instead of rejecting public faith, or reluctantly accommodating it piecemeal, advocates of this outlook tend to support engagement with religious faith as an opportunity for beneficial encounter and enrichment. A large number of the VCs we spoke to took this view, with many stressing the point that their campus is friendly to all religious traditions and comfortable with religious diversity.

**Formative-Collegial:** Such an outlook tends to be more sceptical of the claim that religion is necessarily irrational, instead regarding religious belief as relating to important—and maybe inescapable—dimensions of human experience whilst at the same time questioning the rationality of ‘rationalism’ itself in intellectually interesting ways. In a university context, this stance may translate into an approach to learning which aims to offer education ‘for the whole person’, in some cases incorporating a specifically spiritual dimension. In practice, this perspective is more common in universities which were founded as religious institutions, but it is not exclusive to them. At least two of the VCs we spoke to lead universities that take this sort of perspective without being religious foundations.

In general terms, these stances can be translated into different ways of looking at the role of HEIs, as suggested in the following table:

### Religious Literacy: the role of the university

Narrow	Broad
HE as a means to a qualification and employment	HE as a means of formation and personal development
Religion as irrelevant, a distraction or a problem	Religion as a possibility/ opportunity for enrichment and a high quality of discussion
Limited to a legal response	Expanded to a broadly embedded and exploratory response
A secular/neutral society	A post-secular/religiously diverse society
Private religious faith	Public religious faith
Accommodating for religious faith	Engaging with religious faith

But to say there are only two options for universities, or two models—one essentially ‘religious’ and the other essentially ‘secular’—would be simplistic. “Our world is not,” as David Ford (2004, p.22) comments, “simply religious or simply secular but complexly both”. These different outlooks can be construed in a variety of ways and VCs will be able to develop a number of leadership stances from the framework we have put forward. There may be at least five different leadership strategies which could be adopted in response, each one reflecting a different ethos and policy approach. They can be summarised as follows:

- Leading the secular or neutral university
- Leading for good practice in relation to faith
- Leadership for the religiously responsive university
- Leadership for engaging with faith broadly as a matter of social justice
- Leadership of the formative-collegial university recognising a role for religious identity.

In the following section we sketch out how these stances might play out in the concrete settings of HEIs in relation to the four

different policy areas identified. In doing so we draw on real examples from the research we conducted. In a set of case studies which accompany this publication, we have translated these stances into exemplar narratives which express them.

The *Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education Programme* invites VCs and other senior staff to engage with this analytical framework as a basis for actively responding to religious faith. We envisage that, whatever the outcome, the exercise will have been valuable in expressly articulating a stance and in sharing that process with other university leaders whose outlooks and experiences may differ.

### Leading the secular or neutral university

This university’s aim is to respond to the law, and to engage with students and staff without assuming anything about them on account of their religious backgrounds. There is an emphasis on understanding religious faith through the lens of equalities and diversity, and all departments of the university aspire to avoid discrimination by being impartial to the beliefs of staff and students. University policies relating to widening participation follow government advice on the topic, emphasising the need to create an educated workforce. The focus of student feedback is on material factors such as estates and buildings, contact hours with teaching staff, and the thoroughness of feedback on students’ written assignments. The main drivers of policy on fostering good campus relations are the Racial and Religious Hatred Act (2006) and the Terrorism Act (2006), which are implemented without consideration being given to the religious traditions involved. As far as is possible, this university is above the fray, refraining from religious debate, casting debate in terms of Enlightenment and liberal principles, such as freedom of speech, tolerance and respect. Religious faith can be tolerated and respected but has no special place and is largely regarded as irrelevant.

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## Leading for good practice in relation to faith

This university's aim is to mainstream policy guidelines on religion and belief from a wider range of sources than equalities and diversity, though including those too. Well-publicised policies on religion and belief are developed by the university which inform staff of what they must do to comply with the Employment Equality (Religion and Belief) Regulations (2003) and the related Acts. Student feedback is geared to take into account the different activities in which students are interested, with sports, leisure, social activities and use of places of worship all being included. In addition to outlawing religious hatred the university puts in place policies to ensure checks are made of external speakers, and helps to set up help-lines and networks of religious advisers and chaplains to assist students who may be vulnerable. The university sees religious faith as one among many potentially contributing aspects of university life and respects and supports a role for it, as for any other, engaging with any support structures and resources which assist in this.

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## Leadership for the religiously responsive university

This university places emphasis on responding to the increasing diversity of students, including faith diversity. It creates spaces for worship and prayer that go some way beyond what is required by law, with a room, even a whole building, being set aside as a site for religious observance. It sets up outreach programmes with the purpose of making different cultural and faith groups aware of the option of university education. It also makes efforts to recognise the ways religious background impacts upon students' experiences of university life, with particular emphasis being placed upon understanding the experiences of those from cultural/faith backgrounds who may have different interests and needs. To foster good campus relations, the university takes steps to set up opportunities for interfaith and intercultural dialogue and multifaith interaction, supporting activities which cross faith and cultural boundaries, and integrating the multifaith chaplaincy into the mainstream life and learning of the university.

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## Leadership for social justice

This university recognises a need to strategise for faith as a matter of social justice, promoting the interests of minority ethnic and religious groups who are over-represented in the indices of deprivation. Equalities and diversity legislation is regarded as one part of a broader drive to reduce the barriers to participation in HE. Policy on widening participation is driven by a concern for social mobility and participation in HE, with emphasis placed upon equality of access and active efforts made to draw in 'harder to reach' groups. Particular efforts are made by university management to monitor how students from particular class, ethnic or faith backgrounds use facilities, with faith being looked at as part of the university's aim of ensuring that a person's background does not leave them feeling excluded from any aspect of campus life. Its strategy for fostering good campus relations is to bring the issue of religious extremism out into the open through debate, with the university bringing students together and giving them the opportunity to explore the political issues which have given rise to religious extremism in different contexts. Questions of power and distribution of wealth are related to academic inquiry and the participation of students and staff in the life of the university.

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## Leadership of the formative-collegial university

This university takes into account the widest experience of its students and staff, seeing their learning and work in terms of their overall human growth and development. This might include recognising religious dimensions of human life. Faith is not seen simply in terms of requirements or needs which some students have and others do not. Rather, all people's worldviews, both religious and secular, are taken as essential aspects of identity and culture and as potentially enriching dimensions of learning and growth. Its strategy for widening participation emphasises the personal and intellectual benefits of obtaining a university education alongside people from different traditions and none, in addition to the economic and material benefits. The student experience is not seen as a process of knowledge transfer in pursuit of a 'bankable' academic qualification, but is taken to be a significant

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component of a broader life-project. Good campus relations are ensured by trying actively to create an environment in which faith is 'at home' on campus, with religious events and forms of expression enjoyed alongside others, and religiously orientated questions and legacies being on the academic agenda in curricula, teaching and learning. There is outreach to surrounding communities, including faith communities, which are seen as enriching the university experience within and beyond the campus walls.

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## Conclusions

The framework outlined here connects to fundamental questions about society, the place of religious faith and the role of universities. Religion, perhaps more than any other topic of debate, provokes public anxiety, and is often viewed with suspicion or distaste. While there is widespread public awareness of faith there is a limited public vocabulary to deal with the questions it raises, which is, as Grace Davie notes, "one reason for the lamentable standard of public debate in this field" (Davie quoted in Woodhead 2009, p.27). The central question that the *Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education Programme* seeks to raise is what universities can do to foster better understanding of faith and a higher quality of discussion of religion in the UK.

This demands critical thinking about the public role faith has in what is widely and often simplistically assumed to be a secular society. Policy and political exigencies reflect an increasing preoccupation with faith as a public category, and universities have an opportunity as places of knowledge, deliberation and critique to engage with this and shape how faith and public life will relate in the future. This is, however, a challenge as they are steeped in the traditions of scientific method and rationalism, traditions that at times have portrayed religion as an outdated way of thinking that is best left in the past. Thinking about religion's public role may therefore demand nothing less than a philosophical shift regarding the status, role and value of religious faith, not just as a public category but as an intellectual one too. The public re-emergence of religion could be experienced as a challenge to the intellectual settlement of the last century, or it may be seen as a re-visiting of a broader canvas of concerns. Many of the dominant traditions in the social sciences, cultural studies, philosophy and some natural

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sciences reflect an understanding of the world as, at least in part, socially constructed and not something that is fixed and that humans can objectively represent. This opens and reopens areas of debate about ways of understanding religious life, and has the potential to enrich public discussion of religious belief, avoiding unhelpful arguments and conversation-stopping certainty.

This leads also to a reconsideration of the very purpose of universities. Is it their role to produce economically and socially active citizens who can respond to the cultural and policy calls of the day? Or do they also offer a space for the broadest realisation of students and staff in terms of their human growth and development and that of the societies in which they live—including in religious and spiritual terms? Are these aims compatible, complementary or competing? Do universities have a responsibility to foster amicable relations between different faith traditions by educating people about different worldviews, including religious ones, and if so how should that be done?

The stances taken by Vice-Chancellors on these questions will play a major part in determining the status, role and shape of faith in the UK's public debates and institutions as the issue develops under the future leadership of today's graduates and staff. For that reason, their guidance to the universities they lead is of fundamental significance.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Vice-Chancellors' Views on Religious Literacy

A primary resource for developing the framework for the Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education Programme has been what leaders (VCs) told us themselves. We reproduce a summary of those findings here by way of 'rooting' the programme in the concerns of university leaders, alongside the literature and policy review we have conducted.

In our interviews with VCs, we had two aims:

1 to explore their experiences and understandings of, and attitudes to, religion and faith in their campuses

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2 to test out and consult on effective models for developing religious literacy leadership

What they told us reflects the breadth of the range of engagements with religious faith, and attitudes to it, which are indicated in the wider literature too:

- The programme is seen as a very ambitious project which gets close to some fundamental questions about what universities are for.
- These issues are often dealt with under the diversity and equalities strand though VCs can see a rationale for taking it wider.
- Some courses are required to engage with the values of the university including religion and spirituality.
- Though it might be reasonable to expect resistance to religion on campuses there has been very little in the group of VCs we interviewed, despite a range of personal perspectives on faith (including atheism) and a diversity of foundations.
- Where there is very little religious diversity in the surrounding area this can be reflected in the university. This applies particularly to commuter (local) universities. In other cases, the university can be one of the most diverse places in the locality and this can be an opportunity (or a threat).
- Many universities graduate their students in religious buildings and/or in quasi-religious ceremonies. This can generate debate. One university has a graduation hymn, in the Christian tradition.
- Having a religious foundation to start with can diffuse controversy as it tends to settle debate rather than generate it.
- At the same time, there has been debate about the application of genuine occupational requirements in senior appointments and appointments to chaplaincies.
- There have been debates too about how the physical environment reflects or even privileges religious traditions, or not. Many institutions have Christian chapel buildings on their campuses, for example, many of which are in use. This sometimes leads to calls for provision of spaces for other traditions.
- Religious expressions in art, and sometimes in other visual forms (such as crosses), are also contested in some cases and can be lightning rods for debate.
- In some cases research interests (for example in Paganism in one instance) generate debate about the legitimacy of faith in university life, even when it is a scholarly interest.

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- There is strong feeling that instrumental responses by VCs to policy demands must be rooted in a consideration of the intellectual issues first. Religious literacy is widely viewed by this group as a potential part of that consideration.
  - Religious debates are seen as fairly simple to resolve in theoretical terms but much more difficult when they play out in reality. There is an appetite for being prepared.
  - In many cases chaplaincies are part funded by the university and local dioceses. This tends to mean that the established and well-resourced traditions (Catholics, Anglicans, sometimes Methodists), which are usually Christian, are the chaplaincy partners.
  - In many cases Muslim chaplains are volunteers. Other traditions also tend to be represented by volunteers. Many chaplaincies are wide-reaching nevertheless in terms of having people from a range of traditions in their teams.
  - Chaplaincies of whatever tradition almost always minister to all students regardless of their religious beliefs (and non-belief).
  - In some cases religious societies—especially some evangelical Christian Unions—do not recognise or work with chaplaincies and this is perceived as a challenge.
  - The presence of international students has, in many cases, generated important demands in terms of religious traditions for many years. These have been well responded to in terms of provision of religious spaces, especially where international students have been present for the longest.
  - Where Middle Eastern links are strong there is an emphasis on meeting the worshipping needs of Muslims through provision of spaces.
  - One interviewee referred to the attendance of 500 worshippers at the campus mosque on Fridays, observing that this both reflects the wider demography, and attracts new Middle Eastern students to the university, who expect a Muslim-friendly environment. There is a concern to get the message across that this is a reflection of friendliness to all religious traditions: this is not a 'Muslim campus'.
  - One VC referred to his institution's 'buddy system' for international students and reflected upon the way in which this has often exposed students from very different cultures and traditions to each other in a helpful way.
  - Some VCs see religious diversity among British students as a potential springboard for internationalising their student bodies.

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- In many cases VCs are moving away from secular assumptions about the role of their institutions and engaging with religion as an increasingly recognised marker of identity.
  - Some talked about this as a matter of social justice, rooted in intellectual themes in economics, globalisation, security, peace studies, social and public policy and international relations.
  - Some universities expressly regard themselves as educating for the whole person and in some cases this takes a specifically spiritual character. This is particularly, but not exclusively, the case in universities which were founded as religious institutions. At least two universities in this group take a 'whole person' perspective without being religious foundations, however.
  - Others think of themselves as neutral with regards to religion and see it as an issue for equalities and diversity officers where problems arise. For many of these, the aim is compliance with law.
  - Some VCs say that they do not perceive their institutions as having a problem but that they would like to keep it that way!
  - Others are keen to promote their institutions as 'faith friendly' as part of increasing their permeability in terms of the policy agenda for social mobility.
  - There is recognition that universities are places where young people in particular come together to explore new ideas and to grow personally. For many this will be a positive experience but it may also make some young people vulnerable, especially in freshers' week and in that first term, when identities and personalities are enormously challenged, socially and intellectually.
  - A key challenge identified repeatedly is the balancing of academic freedom and freedom of speech with equalities protections for religion and belief, and vice versa.
  - Some VCs recognise that it is easy to be superficial about religious literacy, providing for issues such as faith spaces and dietary requirements. They referred to 'deep' understanding which embeds religious literacy in the intellectual questions it raises about the role and legitimacy of religion in universities at all, and how leadership shapes how students (and staff) experience themselves within the university's walls.
  - One VC talked about religious literacy, not as a tool for building tolerance or respect, but for managing difference.
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What VCs said about Models for Developing Religious Literacy Leadership:

- Many VCs feel that it will be key to provide opportunities for sharing experiences and thinking about them rather than attempting didactic input or 'answers'.
  - These VCs often felt that they had been developing policy about religion in isolation and welcome the possibility of a network of champions and a process of development.
  - Many of these VCs talked about the value of being in a network of other senior leaders in HE, in order to consider and take forward religious literacy strategies.
  - Some observed that 'championing' is not a claim to expertise so much as a commitment to leading and shaping religious literacy in universities.
  - In many cases VCs say that they are increasingly aware of religion and faith as public categories and that a religious literacy programme is timely for helping them take their thinking forward.
  - Some suggest that it will be crucial for HE leaders to work with their students' unions to embed religious literacy strategies.
  - In practice, many VCs suggest that they act as champions but by delegating PVCs and deputies to the participatory tasks.
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