

Religious identity in 'superdiverse' societies

Wednesday, 8th February 2012

Duration 1:33:33

A level	
AQA	Religious Studies: AS Unit H, A2 Unit 3F
Edexcel	Religious Studies: Units 1-4
OCR	
WJEC	Religious Studies: RS 1/2 CS Religious Studies: RS 3 CS

This is a Faith debate featuring Charles Clarke, Linda Woodhead, Dominic Grieve, Kim Knott, Therese O'Toole and Trevor Phillips. It focuses on the issues surrounding religious identity in 'superdiverse' societies.

Students could be given the same issues as used in this debate and asked their opinion on them prior to watching the discussion, revisiting them later to see if any of the views expressed had caused them to change their minds. Extension work could be carried out in relation to sub-cultures.

This programme is suitable for use with A level students studying philosophy, ethics, religion and society, Christianity and Islam. However, the debate is quite long and it would probably be sufficient for one lesson to listen to the opening presentations. The Question & Answer section could be a useful second lesson or make worthwhile extension work.

Questions for debate

How do we live well together in an increasingly diverse society, and how does religion contribute for good or ill?

Conclusions from the debate

Since the 1970s the UK has been the most successful country in Europe at integrating an increasingly wide range of religious identities and allowing them agency in society. This achievement should be more widely recognised.

But the success means that religious identities are now so diverse that it is no longer as helpful to think of a small number of 'world faiths' which make people 'Hindu', 'Muslim', 'Christian' etc., and which must relate to one another in a 'multi-culture'. Many people are now religious 'in their own way', there are many varieties of Hindu, Muslim, and Christian, and religious identities are inflected by ethnicity, gender and so on. The concept of 'superdiversity' may now be more helpful than 'multiculturalism'.

Research Findings

Britain leads in Europe in successful multi-faith work and integration of religious groups; many such groups are now significant agents in civil society; New Labour achieved a great deal in supporting multi-faith and inter-faith work; the Coalition government is continuing this work with more confidence but less cash.

Religious diversity is no longer a matter of homogenous religious communities (Christian, Muslim, Hindu etc.) living side by side and together. Earlier talk of 'multiculture' can be unhelpful if it perpetuates this idea.

The decline of organised forms of religion has been accompanied by a multiplication of religious groups, more individualised religious identities, and multiple forms of belonging.

People do not have singular identities, but mixed ones (religious, gendered, ethnic and so on). It depends on context which aspect comes to the fore – often people ‘mobilise’ one aspect of their identity only when it is under threat.

Practical Suggestions

The UK should be more positive about how much has been achieved in terms of integrating a huge range of different identities, including religious ones – the bad news stories tend to eclipse the good news. Emphasis should continue to shift away from the state giving a small number of religious group identities what they ‘need’, to supporting freedom of conscience of individuals (liberty and toleration), and making sure that the life-chances of people are not limited by their identities (fairness and equality).

Insofar as there is a ‘host culture’ it is, and should remain, one which is hospitable to religious difference and freedom of conscience. This is the majority position, and whilst more exclusivist minorities retain their normal rights, they do so within this broader framework.

With ever-increasing diversity there will be more challenges. In order to meet these there needs to be:

- understanding of the civic ‘rules of engagement’ which make it possible to live peacefully together and to reach agreement
- creative partnerships with the state, including financial support for religious and other initiatives which encourage integration
- awareness of how policies (e.g. on counter-terrorism) can foster the misleading idea that there are homogenous religious identities which wholly define people (e.g. ‘Muslim’)
- better mechanisms, especially at local level, for dealing with religious disputes and reaching agreement.

After watching the discussion, it is worth returning to the students’ views to find out if and how their personal opinions have been influenced or changed by what they have heard.

After discussion, if there is time, it would then be worth watching the 20 minute summary to clarify and crystallize the thoughts and views expressed.

The presentations by Kim Knott and Therese O’Toole are available as pdfs on the website.