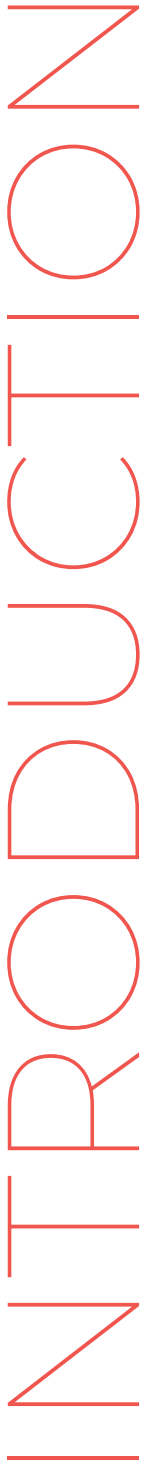

DEI and Religion: A Quick Reference Guide for Public Servants



**AMERICA
INDIVISIBLE**

February 2023



Since the 1960s, there have been increasing efforts by governments, businesses, and educational institutions to create and implement policies addressing bigotry and discrimination. These efforts have coalesced into Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. While attention to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation is often central to these initiatives, less focus is given to religion. Many DEI professionals lack the knowledge and expertise necessary to incorporate religion into their training and to develop workplace policies on religious diversity and inclusion.

Failure to include adequate attention to religious diversity in DEI frameworks can have unfortunate and unforeseen consequences. This was the case at Hamline University in 2022, when an adjunct professor came under fire for her decision to display a medieval Islamic painting of the Prophet Muhammad in a course on global art history. A Muslim student in her class saw the painting and complained to the administration, arguing that displaying this image violated her belief that Muslims were not allowed to view pictorial representations of the Prophet. She interpreted the professor's action as an attack on her faith and an act of bigotry.

The university's leadership, including its head DEI officer, sided with the student, calling the classroom exercise "undeniably Islamophobic" and announcing that the instructor's contract would not be renewed in light of the incident. This led to a national controversy in which Muslim organizations and various scholars criticized the university for misusing and misapplying the word "Islamophobic" and for failing to understand the internal diversity within Islam, including diverse Muslim perspectives on pictorial representations of the Prophet. It was clear in the media coverage and in public statements that the university's leadership jumped to conclusions about Islamophobia based on a major gap in its knowledge about religion in general and Islam in particular.

The negative publicity from the administration's handling of this incident placed DEI initiatives at universities in the spotlight, with critics raising concerns that these initiatives have unwittingly been used to stifle academic freedom and to erase diverse religious and cultural viewpoints. But the controversy affords a variety of institutions, including local and state governments, a vital opportunity to rethink their understanding of DEI and to incorporate education about religious diversity and literacy into their training programs.

FROM RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY TO RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Harvard University's [Pluralism Project](#) makes a vital distinction between religious diversity and religious pluralism. Religious diversity is simply the fact that people of different religious backgrounds and commitments live in the same community. Religious pluralism pertains to how we engage with and respond to this diversity. Religious pluralism focuses on understanding religious differences and cultivating communities in which diverse religious people interact with one another in ways that promote the larger civic good.

Public servants should make efforts not only to acknowledge religious diversity but to promote religious pluralism. To achieve this goal, it is important to sponsor DEI trainings that offer introductions to basic religious literacy and that generate ideas for how public servants can use their platforms to create more religiously inclusive communities.



RELIGIOUS LITERACY AND DEI

An essential component of DEI training on religion is religious literacy. Religious literacy is sometimes reduced to learning the basic “facts” about a religion, such as the seven sacraments in Roman Catholicism, the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, or the Five Pillars of Islam. While such knowledge is helpful in navigating a religiously diverse world, it is not feasible in most DEI training programs to sponsor a Religion 101 boot camp. Besides, public servants can often pick up this kind of knowledge “on the job” as they engage with diverse religious communities.

For DEI training, it’s best to prioritize an approach to religious literacy that focuses less on memorizing basic facts about religions and more on developing a framework that enables participants to recognize and appreciate the diversity within and across religions. According to [the American Academy of Religion](#), this kind of religious literacy includes the ability to:

- Identify credible sources of knowledge about diverse religions
- Understand how religions have shaped and been shaped by the histories and experiences of nations, communities, and individuals
- Distinguish descriptive statements about religion from theological assertions
- Recognize and be sensitive to internal diversity within religions

Individuals and organizations with education and expertise in the academic study of religion are best suited to conduct religious literacy training of this kind.

RELIGION AND DEI: SUGGESTIONS FOR PUBLIC SERVANTS

How public servants implement their understandings of and commitments to religious pluralism will depend on a variety of factors, including local and regional religious demographics, pre-existing levels of religious bigotry, and prior efforts at fostering religious pluralism. For many public servants, however, their experience with initiatives on religious pluralism is so new that they don't know where to start. What follows are some ideas for public servants to consider when taking initial steps in implementing a DEI strategy on religion.

Governors and State Legislatures



- Inviting representatives from diverse religious communities to offer opening prayers and invocations in state legislatures
- Sponsoring a state resolution against religious bigotries, such as Islamophobia and antisemitism
- Creating a task force to conduct research and offer recommendations on how to counter antisemitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of religious bigotry at the state level
- Rejecting anti-sharia bills and other legislation that targets minority religious communities
- Hosting minority religious communities on specially designated days in the state capitol, such as Muslim Day at the Capitol, or Sikh Awareness Day at the Capitol

Mayors and City Councils

- Sponsoring a city resolution against religious bigotries, such as Islamophobia and antisemitism
- Adopting a city resolution in recognition of holy days from diverse religions (e.g., Diwali, Ramadan, Vaisakhi, Yom Kippur)
- Supporting a city resolution in recognition of diverse religious communities, such as Muslim or Sikh Awareness and Appreciation Month
- Creating a Religious Pluralism Task Force for the purpose of:
 - Surveying local religious diversity and demographics
 - Identifying and tracking instances of religious bigotry and discrimination
 - Inviting representatives from diverse religious communities to participate in leadership positions in public municipal events
 - Partnering with religious communities to promote the larger civic good, from food pantries to public health programs

Superintendents and School Boards

- Observing diverse religious holidays in school calendars (e.g., Bodhi Day, Día de los Muertos, Eid al-Fitr, Rosh Hashanah)
- Sponsoring anti-bullying programs in school districts to support members of targeted religious communities
- Supporting policies that accommodate dietary needs for diverse religious communities along with providing space for students (other than school cafeterias) who are fasting in religious observance
- Accommodating students whose religious observance requires forms of dress that may not fully conform to the school or district dress code



Want to learn more or to invite America Indivisible to host a training session on DEI and Religion? Contact us at admin@americaindivisible.org

