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Towards ICCS 2025

“Diversity, Equity, Inclusion” and Social Cohesion

By Paul Hedges

SYNOPSIS

Globally, there has been some opposition to DEI, including from religious groups, arguing it is divisive. However, support for DEI strengthens social cohesion, while its foundations in social justice are taught in many ways in various religions.

COMMENTARY

As we moved through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, it may have seemed that there was an ineluctable journey of progress towards recognising the rights of minorities, at least in liberal, multicultural, democratic societies. However, not all members of society were on board with these moves.

In the United States, Trump's 2025 executive order against DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) has been seen as appealing strongly to his [white Christian nationalist](#) base. This perspective underscores the assumption that certain interpretations of Christianity support discrimination based on race, gender, or other markers.

This is not, of course, to suggest that only Christians, or religious people more generally, are opposed to progressive support for DEI agendas. Equally, much support for DEI has come from both [Christians](#) and other religious groups. There is much diversity within and between religions on such matters.

DEI and Social Cohesion

Some seemingly equate DEI with a “woke” agenda [threatening society](#), suggesting that by highlighting minority identity politics, groups become more polarised. But DEI is actually central to strong social cohesion. The US example shows us that anti-DEI

stances are often linked to political polarisation, where the demonisation of others occurs.

“Woke” was originally coined in Black American activism asking people to be aware and conscious of their very real oppression, but is [used as a pejorative](#) by some politicians. While an extreme “woke” agenda may bring to mind a polarising cancel culture, the concept of woke is also a foundational pillar for societal bonds and resilience if woke means being concerned with justice for the poor, the vulnerable, and the marginalised. Moreover, it is one of the core messages of Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, and many other religions, as well as Humanism. As an interfaith representative of the Baptist World Alliance, Professor Robert P. Sellers has said, “I want to be woke [like Jesus and the Buddha](#)”.

Anti-DEI agendas that favour only majoritarian interests or highlight only one group as the core of society, may strengthen in-group identification amongst one segment of society, but often at the expense of minorities. In Nazi Germany, many believed in Hitler’s vision of a white, Aryan nation that should exclude Jews, Romany people, and the disabled. Clearly, this vision did [not lead to a socially cohesive](#) society in any meaningful sense. Even the German Lutheran Church was then a supporter of persecution against Jewish people, looking back to Martin Luther’s [harsh polemic](#) against Jews.

Importantly, social cohesion as a national construct includes minorities and the recognition of their rights and aspirations. It needs the majority, and sectarian interest groups, to recognise the value of diversity and inclusion of all people within their society. Whichever group is excluded – whether this be women, a religious minority, a racial group, or others – means that the skills and talents of all of society are not utilised. Without DEI, we are the poorer for it.

Religion and DEI

Some religious groups have been known to oppose parts of DEI. In the USA, [white supremacy](#) has been linked to certain forms of Christianity for centuries. That said, there is also opposition to racism in Christianity. While the British populist politician Nigel Farage has said he no longer goes to church because of “woke” opposition to racism, the Bishop of Dover, Rose Hudson-Wilkin, has pointed to Christian opposition to discrimination, and “woke” as being a [liberatory term](#) in the Black experience.

We can also note the difference not just within but also between some religions, for instance, on matters of sexuality. In Singapore, the repeal of Article 377A of the penal code, which had criminalised male same-sex intercourse from 1938 to 2022, was opposed by a campaign organised primarily by Christian and Muslim civil society actors. In the Hindu traditions, [a third gender](#), the *hijra*, has long been recognised. The *hijra* community are given respect in the *Ramayana*, the great classic that extols duty and virtue. In other words, transgender people have a long and respected history in Asia and its religious traditions.

Again, [surveys in Singapore](#) show that Buddhists, Hindus, and Daoists hold far more inclusive views on questions such as homosexuality than many other groups. Moreover, many Christians inspired by Jesus’ example of inclusion of the

dispossessed and excluded, believe in [supporting all minorities](#). While some Christians seemingly make being anti-LGBTQI+ a core tenet, Jesus said nothing against it, and Paul spoke against the social oppression of older, usually high-class men using younger men or boys for sexual gratification. Neither ever condemned same-sex relationships.

If we look at other DEI markers such as gender, some people have sought to employ religious teachings to oppose equal rights for women, but this remains only one interpretation of these texts. In Islam, for instance, Mohamed's first wife was his boss and a successful business woman, while another wife led an army into battle. The Buddha, meanwhile, innovated in his context by founding an order for nuns, recognising that they could, like men, attain Nirvana.

Social Cohesion, DEI, and Religion

Embracing DEI is important for social cohesion. While DEI is sometimes seen as something which religion pushes back against, the situation is more complex in reality. All religious traditions can embrace DEI. Moreover, it is hard to see what some religious people are opposed to. Do they dislike diversity? Why? Do they dislike equity? Why? Do they dislike inclusion? Why?

Christians often speak about hating the sin but loving the sinner. In terms of social cohesion, it is not necessary that everybody believes in what others teach. Bahais do not need to accept Catholic teachings about Jesus to live alongside them, nor do Muslims need to believe in Krishna as an avatar of Vishnu to live peacefully alongside Hindus. DEI does not entail everyone believing the same or having identical values.

What is entailed in a properly “woke” DEI that supports social cohesion is believing that every person deserves justice and respect. It means valuing what other people can bring to society and recognising their worth as people, as human beings. DEI makes us strong together; we risk division and polarisation if we reject it. Religion must, and can be, part of that conversation and inclusion, and every religion holds the resources for a full embrace of DEI.

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