Combating Racism and Prejudice in Schools: Keynotes

Keynote 3
The Abrahamic Religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam

The following information is also relevant to Keynote 3:

The Introduction: Background information outlining the context and purpose of the project.

Keynote 1 – Violence and Conflict: Issues and Strategies for Schools: A theoretical background to understanding conflict and violence and how schools can address issues of intolerance.

Keynote 2 – A Whole-School Approach to Combating Racism and Prejudice: An audit strategy for schools to plan and monitor their approaches to combating racism. This is adapted from Racism No Way (www.racismnoway.com.au/strategies/framework/body-Schools.html); a web site aimed at teachers seeking to challenge and counter racism.

The following Keynotes cover the nine most significantly represented religions in Australia and include suggestions for classroom activities:

Keynote 3 – The Abrahamic Religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam
Keynote 4 – The Abrahamic Religions: Judaism
Keynote 5 - The Abrahamic Religions: Middle Eastern Christians
Keynote 6 – The Abrahamic Religions: Islam
Keynote 7 – Arabs and Muslims in Australia
Keynote 8 – Indian Religions: Hinduism
Keynote 9 – Indian Religions: Sikhism
Keynote 10 – Indian Religions: Buddhism
Keynote 11 – Bahá’í Faith

You can also download a full version of Combating Racism and Prejudice in Schools, which includes all of the Keynotes listed above. This full document, as well as all of the above sections can be downloaded from the Keynotes Explained (http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/programs/multicultural/tchkeynotes.htm) web page on the Multicultural Education http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/programs/multicultural/default.htm) site.
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Introduction

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are significant world religions. While Christianity has been the majority religion of Australia since the European displacement of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, there have also been significant Jewish and Muslim communities throughout Australia.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam have a common origin in what we now refer to as the Middle East and share geographical and historical roots. These three religions are sometimes referred to as Semitic religions.

The word Semitic describes the languages and cultures of the people who came from the Middle East. Although vastly different in many respects, the three religions share common elements. Not least among these are a belief in one God and life after death in some form; a shared belief in creation; a shared history through the early prophets; and a common source of sacred writings. All three are Prophetic religions that believe in divine guidance.

The ancient city of Jerusalem, in modern day Israel, is sacred to all three religions. Seventh century Islam recognised these common links by describing both Jews and Christians as ‘Peoples of the Book’ and allowing them freedom to worship under Islamic rule.

Over time, cultural, social and political changes contribute to shaping a religion and its practice. People of any faith would prefer their religion to be judged on the essence of their belief and their sacred texts rather than on the expression of particular individuals or groups considered representative of their religion. Christians would prefer not to be judged on the Spanish inquisition, the Crusades, the practices of early missionaries or on the bigotry and hatred of groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. Likewise many Muslims are concerned that they are being judged on the actions of the terrorists, Osama bin Laden and other fundamentalist extremists who use Holy Scriptures to justify atrocities.

Harassment and acts of prejudice directed at centres of worship, groups and individuals have occurred at various times in Australia’s history. The National Inquiry into Racist Violence identified young males of Anglo-Saxon background as the main perpetrators of prejudiced behaviour. Prejudiced behaviour is most often based on ignorance of the groups perpetrators profess to hate and their great fear of the threat of people they consider different.

International conflict, such as the terrorist activities in the USA and Europe, and the consequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, have resulted in an upsurge of religious prejudice directed towards groups considered to be connected with the conflict in some way.

The Bali bombings had a particular impact on race relations in Australia. Hence fire bombs, vandalism and graffiti have occurred at mosques, synagogues and public buildings, and harassment of individuals, particularly Muslim women identified by their Islamic dress. Even those who are not connected in any way to the conflicts can be caught up in aggressive acts of this kind. The Sikh community has been concerned that its members have been subjected to racist violence and abuse because of the turbans and head coverings they wear.
Lebanese Christians and other Arabic Christians have also been targets for racist attacks because they have been assumed to be Muslim.

As a matter of course, teachers should contribute some balance to media stories, which are often negative, and ensure that students apply skills of critical analysis to media reporting. It is important that students have accurate information so they are able to develop positive attitudes towards other groups.

The ways in which Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda have used Al Jazeera as a channel for propaganda makes an interesting counterbalance to the news coming from US media outlets. The appearance of derogatory and insensitive cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad appeared in some press of some countries is another example of the role the media can play in exacerbating and inflaming prejudiced attitudes. The Cronulla riots of 2006 provide another example of the impact of media coverage closer to home. The fallout from the riots is continuing, as can be seen in recent sanctions imposed on broadcaster Alan Jones for his comments at the time.

**Sacred scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam**

The following information about the common origins of people perceived as diametrically opposed and different is a small start in closing the information gap about religions originating in the Middle East.

Note: Date references used are CE (Common Era) and BCE (Before Common Era).

The Hebrew Bible of Judaism is significant in principle, and sacred to the followers of Islam, Judaism and Christianity. However, each religious community has additional sacred texts that are also accorded respect and reverence.

Many of these sacred texts are not well known outside the particular religious community. Often it is not appreciated that despite their differences, these religions do have some historical links.

Because the Quran is considered to be the most perfect use of Arabic and a sacred language for Muslims, it is universally respected throughout the Muslim world even though only 18 percent of the world’s Muslims speak Arabic as their first language. Even though Jewish tradition suggests that one should pray in whatever language you know, it is custom to read the Torah in Hebrew and then comment on it and translate it. In religious education, Jews and Muslims study Hebrew and Arabic respectively.
The Holy Books

The following is a very basic overview. For more information on these texts, see the relevant individual Keynote chapters and bibliographies.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AUTHORITY OF THE BOOK</td>
<td>The Hebrew Bible is the primary source of the Jewish religion</td>
<td>The four Gospels of the New Testament are acknowledged as preserving the teachings of Jesus, passed on to his companions</td>
<td>God’s last and complete message given to humanity through the Prophet Muhammad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LANGUAGE OF SCRIPTURES</td>
<td>Always read in Hebrew in the service</td>
<td>Read in translation in various languages</td>
<td>Always read in Arabic</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| SECTIONS OF SCRIPTURES | 24 Books in three sections:  
• Torah (Law)  
• Nevim (Prophets)  
• Ketuvim (Writings) | 66 Books in two sections:  
• Old Testament (39 Books). Contains the books of the Tanach.  
• New Testament (27 Books) – Gospels, Acts, Epistles, Revelations | 114 chapters (Suras), each organised and sequenced according to the direction of the Prophet. The Suras are not chronologically ordered (Sura 96 was the first revealed to Muhammad) |
| HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT | The Hebrew Bible is a library of ancient books that were written between 1000BCE and 200 BCE. It contains books of history, ritual ethics, law, poetry and philosophy | The Christian Old Testament is taken from the Hebrew Bible. The Gospels of the New Testament were mostly all written in the first century CE by followers associated with the Apostles of Jesus | During the 23 years of prophet-hood, the Prophet dictated the revelations to his disciples. The Gospels and the Hebrew Bible are respected in principle as part of God’s word, but Muslims believe they do not contain the truth of the message intact. |
## Significant festivals/observances

These festivals are not equivalent to each other, but are considered by many to be the most significant on the calendar to each religion. For more information on festivals, see individual Keynotes chapters.

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<th>Pesach (Passover)</th>
<th>Lent leading to Easter</th>
<th>Ramadan leading to Eid-ul-Fitr</th>
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| **Spiritual Significance** | Passover recalls the Exodus from Egypt (in the 13th Century BCE) and celebrates freedom | - Jesus fasted for 40 days in the desert to prepare for his Ministry.  
- Period of reflection on the life and sacrifice of Jesus at Easter | - Allah revealed the first part of the Quran to Muhammad  
- Period of reflection on the Quran |
| **Period of Time**    | Seven days beginning with Seder night                                             | Forty days (excluding Sundays in the west and including Sundays in the east)          | One month                                   |
| **Fasting and Abstinence** | Thorough cleaning of the house to remove all traces of old food precedes Pesach. Only unleavened bread (matzo/matzah) is eaten, symbolising the hastily baked bread of slavery | Traditionally Christians abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Abstinence and fasting is generally followed more strictly in Eastern Christianity | Abstain from all food, drink and sexual relations between dawn and sunset |
| **Celebrations and Observances associated with the Festival** | Commemorative and symbolic meal (Seder) is prepared and eaten on the eve of the festival. It includes the narration of the Exodus story, songs and debate about the meaning of the deliverance from slavery | - Midnight service to mark the Resurrection  
- Eggs exchanged as symbols of new life on Easter Sunday  
- Special meal with extended family (Eastern Church in particular) | - Prayers at the mosque  
- Children given sweets and gifts  
- Visits and special meals with extended family |
In the classroom

Discuss the importance of:

- places of worship
- religious leaders
- literacy
- education

in transmitting the sacred scriptures to communities in the past.

Discuss ways in which the sacred scriptures are transmitted in different religions. For example:

- singing
- chanting
- reading silently or aloud
- recitation
- acting.

Compare the role of the following in different religions:

- rabbi
- priest
- minister
- imam.

Investigate the location of scriptures in a sacred building and the rituals associated with their use, particularly when the scripture is to be read (ritual garments in Judaism, incense and use of the pulpit in Christianity, ritual washing in Islam).

Explore the languages and scripts of the scriptures today and in the past. The Hebrew Bible is only read in its original form (Hebrew and the Quran only in the original Arabic) although people may study them in translation to increase understanding. The Christian Bible is usually read in translation in the language of the community and may have particular authorised versions. Investigate the differences in versions of the Christian Bible.

Consider the various forms the scriptures are recorded on. For example: scrolls, and the materials they were originally recorded (for example, stone tablets, or parchment).

Study quotes from sacred texts of each religion. Ask students to predict the religion or the source and make comparisons between them.

Draw a timeline of the three religions. Include significant events such as:

- the birth and death of Abraham, Moses, Christ and Muhammad
- the beginning and spread of religions.

Other religions could be added to the timeline, including Aboriginal spirituality.
Do a jigsaw reading activity in which students read and present findings about points of similarity and differences with the three religions.

Discuss the significance of the major ceremonies, celebrations and festivals and consider the similarities.

Have students research the observance of each festival under particular headings with particular emphasis on the role of children.

Have students prepare written questions about a religion they have studied or presentation they have heard. Students invite a practising member or member of clergy from various faiths to speak about their beliefs and to answer the prepared questions which may be forwarded in advance. For further research and information see Racism. No Way! (http://www.racismnoway.com.au/).

Investigate the Really Big Beliefs Project website and text for ideas for further activities. (http://www.asiaeducation.edu.au/bigbeliefsbook/index.html)

Explore the Interfaith network. Consider an Interfaith forum.

Participate in Celebrate our Cultural Diversity Week and Cultural Diversity Quest activities (http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/events/questawards.htm).

NOTE: Any copies of sacred scriptures brought into the classroom should be treated with respect. Scriptures should not be studied or read as just another style of literature. The religious importance and cultural context should be explained.