



**Older People's Commissioner for Wales**  
**Comisiynydd Pobl Hŷn Cymru**

## **EQUALITY & RELIGION OR BELIEF (INCLUDING LACK OF BELIEF) FACTSHEET**

### **Introduction**

The Equality Act 2010 includes Religion or Belief as a 'protected characteristic'. This means any religious or philosophical belief, or lack of religion or belief, is covered by the law.

The 2011 census found that in Wales: 57 % of people report to be Christian; 33 % have no religion; 2% are Muslim; 1 % report their religion as other and 7% did not state a religion. In Wales the Buddhist, Jewish and Sikh population are all less than 1% and there has been an increase in the non-religious from 14.8% in the 2001 census to 25.1% in 2011.

### **The issues**

For many people with belief or faith it is an integral part of who they are; many would say that it defines who they are. Many older people with belief rely on it for personal support and also as a means of social connection. Many faith groups provide an opportunity for intergenerational relationships that is not provided in many other spheres of life.

It is important to realise that those who claim to have no religion may still hold to firm beliefs about life, for example, they may be humanists or atheists. It is also important to remember that there can be no 'one size fits all' approach to religion and belief and individuals must be supported to practise their faith and worship (or not) in their own way.

This is often an ignored aspect of residential care. For some older people the religious (or non- religious) ethos will influence the decision they make when choosing a residential care home. Many older people rapidly lose contact with their place of worship or faith group when they enter residential care if not supported to do so.

It is also important to note that older people still have the right and ability in later life to change to another way of thinking or belief.

Religion is perhaps one of the last social structures where being older can naturally achieve respect and status. In some cultures the use of the term 'elder' is used as it reflects the elevated status associated with being older. Some faith groups have specific expectations of how older people should be supported and the role of 'elders' within the community.

Several religions, or denominations within religions, have strict rules about things like food, clothing, and relationships. Those who provide services to older people need to be aware of what different religions believe and must listen to residents, families or friends when they explain what is important about the belief, for example, Jehovah's Witnesses will not usually celebrate birthdays or Christmas. Many older people will hold religious beliefs that clash with the popular belief of the day, for example, on sex outside of marriage. There is always a human rights balance to be struck between freedom of thought, conscience and religion and freedom of speech/expression.

## **Conclusion**

For many people their religion or belief (or lack of it) is a central component in the identity they take with them into later life. These beliefs can not only offer a source of comfort and structure to the ageing process but have a direct influence on the health, social care and end of life requirements of individuals.

These issues must be considered when delivering services to older people and we must ensure that both religious and non- religious beliefs are respected.

To see the evidence base for this factsheet and further resources visit [www.olderpeoplewales.com](http://www.olderpeoplewales.com)