

# Religious Diversity's Hot Words: Neutrality, Tolerance, Equality & Accommodations Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom & Australia

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## The Religion and Diversity Project

The Religion and Diversity Project is a 7 year Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded Major Collaborative Research Initiative (MCRI), hosted at the University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario. This project brings together 36 team members from 24 universities, with Lori G. Beaman, University of Ottawa, as the Project Director on this research initiative.

The aim of this project is to address the following question: **What are the contours of religious diversity in Canada and how can we best respond to the opportunities and challenges presented by religious diversity in ways that promote a just and peaceful society?**

Specifically, the proposed project investigates the following questions:

1. How are religious identities socially constructed?
2. How is religious expression defined and delimited in law and public policy?
3. How and why do gender and sexuality act as flashpoints in debates on religious freedom?
4. What are the alternative strategies for managing religious diversity?

(<http://www.religionanddiversity.ca>)

## Critical Thinkers

The Religion and Diversity involves a broad spectrum of experiences which develops the skills sets of its members. The Critical Thinkers in Religion, Law and Social Theory lecture series is one such example. It is organized by the central hub at the University of Ottawa.

There is much event organization and behind the scenes assistance that happens collaboratively to ensure that the multiple events go off seamlessly. These events also introduce new academic frameworks. At the same time, it provides a networking niche where a range of scholars are accessible.

The Canada Research Chair in the Contextualization of Religion in a Diverse Canada  
La Chaire de recherche du Canada sur la contextualisation de la religion dans un Canada pluriel  
and/or  
The Faculty of Law (Civil Law Section) / La Faculté de droit (Section de droit civil)  
Present / Présentent

**Critical Thinkers in Religion, Law and Social Theory**  
Lectures critiques sur la religion, le droit, et la théorie en sciences sociales

**Kim Knott**  
*Spaces of religious diversity and encounter: research, agenda-setting and policy intervention*

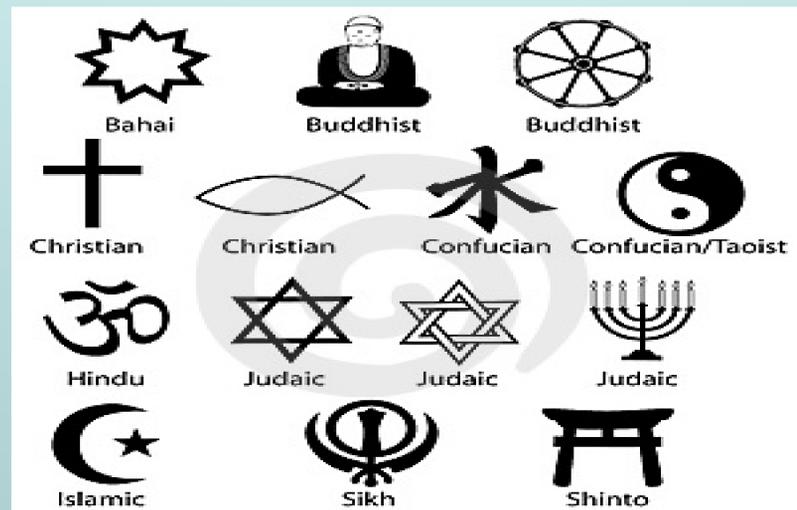
Friday, February 11 | vendredi, le 11 février 2011  
Simard Hall, Room 129 | pavillon Simard, salle 129 60 Université  
Public Lecture | Conférence publique 16:00 uOttawa

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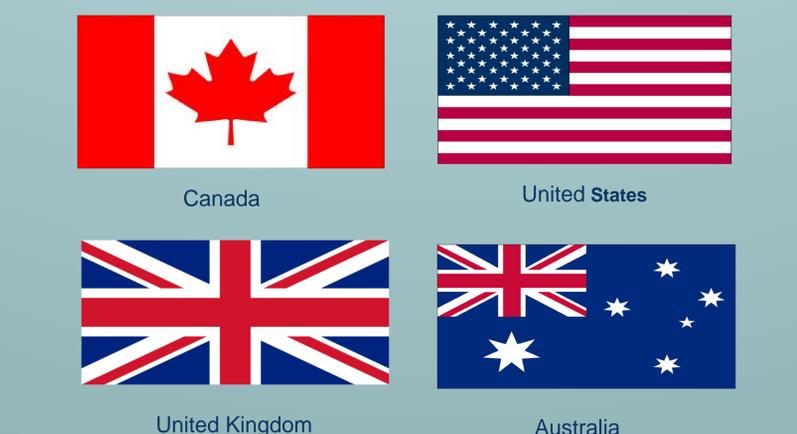
**Jeff Spinner-Halev**  
*Religiously Justified Discrimination*

Friday, March 4 | vendredi, le 4 mars 2011  
Simard Hall, Room 129 | pavillon Simard, salle 129 60 Université  
Public Lecture | Conférence publique 16:00 uOttawa



## Comparative Project Objectives

This specific project employs comparative data gathering. It places Canada in the context of other western democracies, specifically the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. In doing thus, we hope to unearth patterns in responses to religious diversity.



## The Hot Words

### Neutrality? Equality? Tolerance? Accommodations?

These terms are tools of legislation. The words neutrality, equality, tolerance and accommodations are the key words that echo and reoccur in legal and political discourse. In fact, these notions are articulated and reproduced as “cultural ideals” through institutionalized discourse. Through these terms, legislation seemingly perpetuates democratic benevolence.

Interestingly, the term “neutrality” seems to be the prevailing cultural ideal in the United States. The high frequency of this term in case law, in comparison to the other listed terms, indeed provokes further analysis.

It is the interest of The Religion and Diversity Project to identify the normative discourse surrounding religious diversity in the specific countries of focus. It will be interesting to discover both similarities and differences in the discourse, and then propose explanations for why the reality is so.

However, the fact remains that these notions have been entrenched in legislation and thus, to some extent, meaningful. These terms provide simplistic and convenient means for people to interpret and influence social relations.

## Methodology

Methods involve gathering together legal decisions from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Research will be conducted through the head office of the project.

Relevant and recent legal decisions (ie. ten years maximum) are found through legal information institute databases. Relevance is determined by the frequency of the following key terms: neutrality, equality, tolerance and ultimately the umbrella concept of accommodations. Cases are coded according to the themes mentioned (ie. If the prevailing language of the case favours one specific term, that case is filed away under the title of this term).

Summaries of the cases, including background information and the stages through which the final legal decision is made is provided. Provoking excerpts with the key terms are coded for later consultation and analysis.

This project will become a larger database available to The Religion and Diversity Project team, who will analyze and make comparisons between these countries regarding the overlap of these concepts with legislation.

## Results

There are no conclusive results at this point in research. This project is still an ongoing production, one which requires continuous update.

## Analysis

This comparative project will provide important insight into the ways in which diversity is responded to and managed across comparator countries. It will also bring together themes of The Religion and Diversity Project, as well as the existing databases of research available to the team as a while.

## Future Goals

The goal of this project is to ultimately build a database of case law regarding religious diversity in western democracies. This research is meant to reveal data regarding religious diversity in legislative discourse. “This research program aims to present diversity not as a problem but as a resource and to propose strategies for equality that will advance knowledge and enhance policy decision-making” (<http://www.religionanddiversity.ca>)



## Acknowledgements

Thank you Lori Beaman, Morgan Hunter, and Heather Shipley for this opportunity and the encouragement you gave to me.