

# **Belief Systems – Teaching Beyond Festivals and Celebrations**

Educate Together  
Ethical Education Seminar Series

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# Overview

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- Goal of education about religions and beliefs
- Multidenominational curricular content in the Irish context
- Feasts and festivals
- Moving forward







# Rethinking 'religion'

- religion as a category with fuzzy edges
- permeable boundaries and the nature of religious traditions can be contested
- religions as complex social realities
- central issues of human life
- inner diversity
- complexity of cultural expression

(Jackson, 2019)



# Education about religions and beliefs in multi-denominational contexts

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- Values education/democratic education/citizenship education
- Spiral/integrated/dialogical approach
  - encouraging self-reflection/critical thinking
- Neutrality/multi-perspectivity/equality
- Fostering dispositions/skills → empowering children
- Community





# Teaching ERB within the context of Ethical Education

## TOLEDO GUIDING PRINCIPLES ON TEACHING ABOUT RELIGIONS AND BELIEFS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

PREPARED BY THE ODIHR ADVISORY COUNCIL  
OF EXPERTS ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

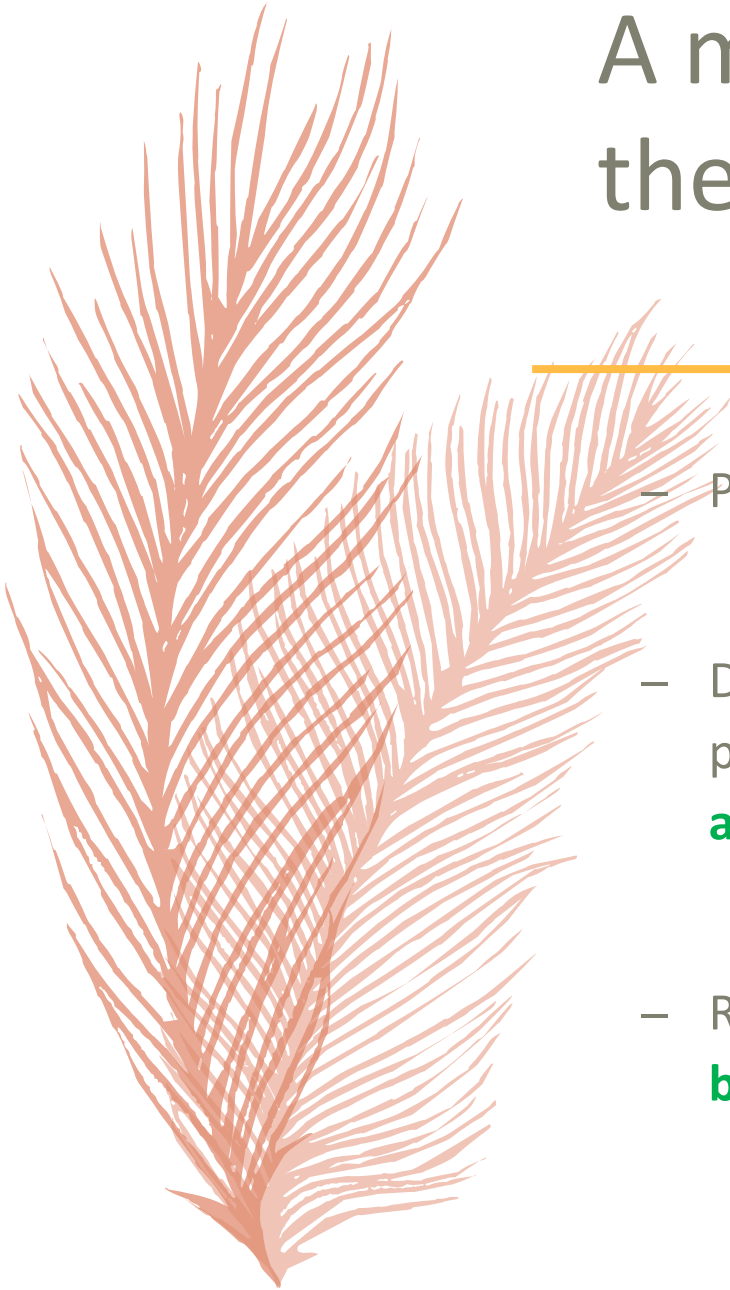
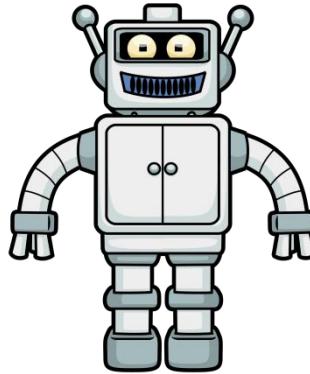


1. There is positive value in teaching that emphasizes **respect for everyone's right to freedom of religion or belief**
  2. Teaching *about* religions and beliefs can **reduce harmful misunderstandings and stereotypes** [Santoro, 2008, p. 83]
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- “objective, critical and pluralistic manner”  
(European Court of Human Rights, Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission)

# A multidenominational curriculum in the Irish context – thinking about risks?

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- Presenting religions as **stereotypical monolithic systems**
- Dubbed the **‘Robotic tendency’** by Berglund – a habit of reducing practitioners to robot-like beings that **uniformly perform identical actions** (Berglund, 2014, p.40)
- Religions/religious worldviews are **not internally homogeneous** and **not bounded systems** of belief (Jackson, 2019).







# Faith vs. FACT



## How do we fall into this trap?

- We use resources as though they are the **‘true version’** or a given religion
- **Whose interpretation** are we presenting to our class as ‘the truth’?

## What are the Consequences?

- Classroom presentations of religions or philosophies of life are often based on the beliefs and observances **of the most devout and involved practitioners** to the **neglect of internal variations** that invariably exist (Berglund, 2014).
- **Followers** of that particular religion **in the class** may believe themselves to be **poor followers** if they do not live up to the picture being presented by their teacher.





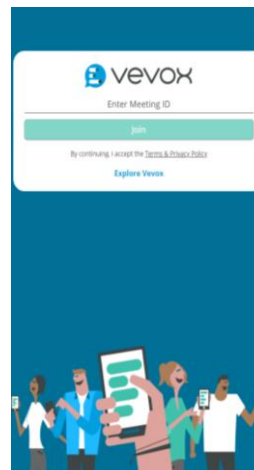
# Time to think...



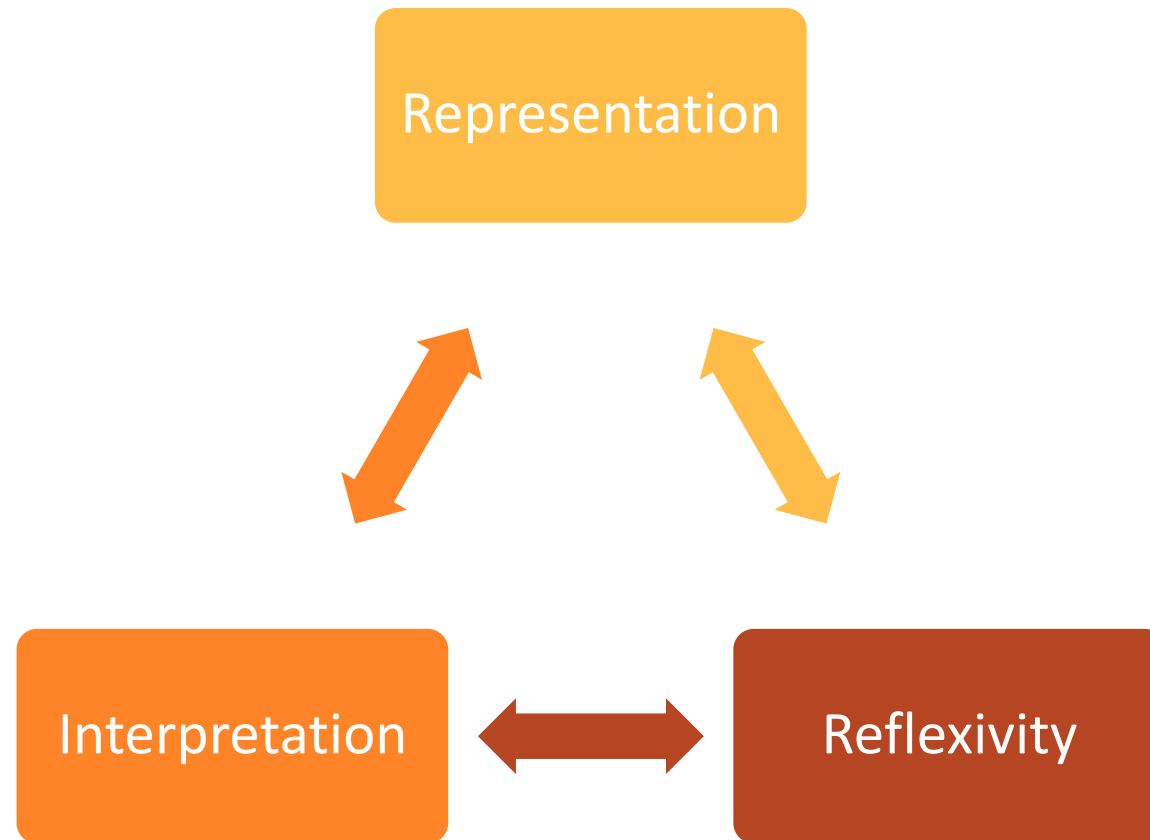
- Are we presenting religions in too monolithic a way? Are we giving sufficient attention to diversity within religions?
- How well are we portraying the way of life of those we are studying so that we avoid misrepresentation and stereotyping?

(Jackson, 2019)

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# The Interpretive Approach



(Jackson 2011; 2014; 2019)



# The Interpretive Approach : three inter-related concepts

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- **Representation**: reflect that religion is embedded in actions, life-world practice etc.
- **Interpretation**: comparing/contrasting as meaning-making process
- **Reflexivity**: impact of new learning on previous understandings and values



(Jackson 2011; 2019)

# Leading in to lessons



## From the student's experience

- What's your experience with naming ceremonies? Did you have one or have you ever been to one?
- Do you have special book? What makes it special? Is it special to anyone else?
- Do you have any rules you need to follow? Do you have different rules for different places? What do you like/dislike about them?

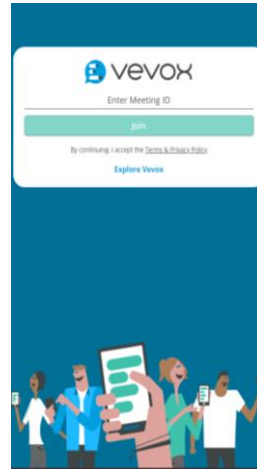
## Ask questions about concepts

- Why do people have naming ceremonies? What can happen at a naming ceremony? Why are naming ceremonies important to some people?
- Can any book be special? What makes a book special? Is a special book treated any differently to other books?
- What part(s) of society has rules? Are there different rules for different parts of our lives? Can people differ in how they follow/interpret the rules?

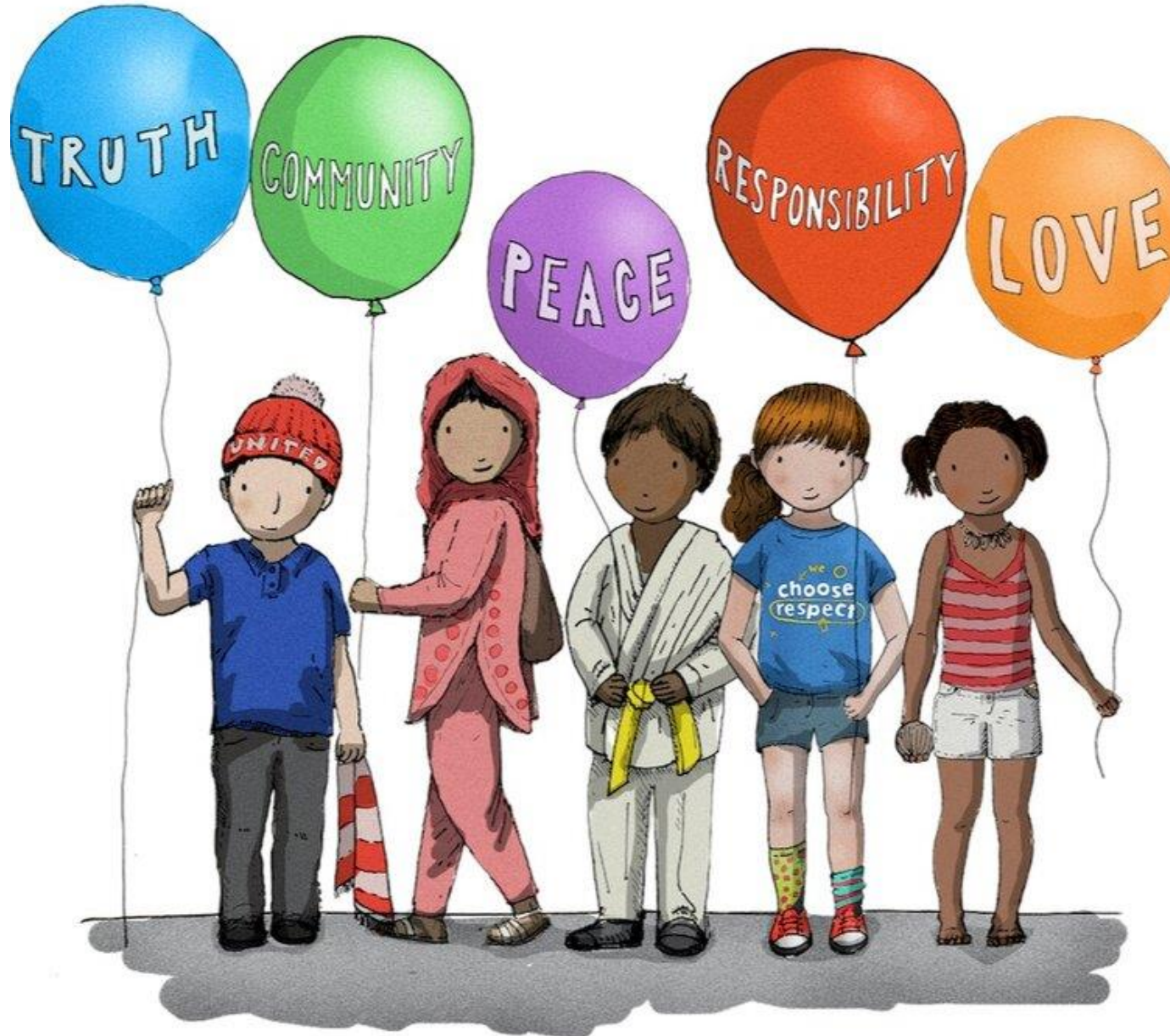
# Time to reflect on curriculum/pedagogy

- How well are we supporting students and to relate concepts and content to their own ideas and values?

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# In the classroom...

- Critical awareness and critical reflection (and teach critical thinking skills)
- Select reputable non-biased resources: Content should be based on reason, accurate, bias-free, up to date, and should not over-simplify complex issues (Toledo Guiding Principles, 2007, p.41).
- Centrality of concepts/experiences
- Create a safe space, e.g. agreed rules for discussion ('dignity safe' v 'intellectually safe')
- Emphasis on interpretation, meaning, understanding, dialogue & open critical engagement (teacher as facilitator)

thank you!



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