

“Student Voices on Impact of Teaching about World Religions”

by

Dr. Emile Lester, University of Mary Washington

Dr. Patrick Roberts, Virginia Tech

In 2000, the Modesto, California school district became the first in the United States to require all students to take a course in world religions. The course begins with a two week discussion of religious liberty in U.S. history, and proceeds to treat 7 major religious traditions in each of its remaining seven weeks. Esteemed scholars such as Warren Nord (1995), Charles Haynes (Nord and Haynes 1998), and Stephen Prothero (2007) have provided eloquent and elegant philosophical arguments in favor of an expanded treatment of religion in the curriculum.

The aim of our research was to provide empirical confirmation of the benefits of this expanded treatment of religion. We surveyed approximately 350 students over a nine month period on three occasions to compare their attitudes before and after they took the course. We also conducted in-depth interviews with 23 students, and many teachers, administrators and religious and community leaders in Modesto.

While a growing literature examines the sources of intolerance of race, ethnicity and sexual orientation, studies of religious tolerance are rare (Sniderman and Piazza, 2002; Steiber 1980). Moreover, no previous large-n research has focused primarily on the attitude of teenagers in the United States towards religious tolerance. Our research is thus unique in that it provides a snapshot of what high school students think about religious tolerance as well as measuring how a dedicated public school course can influence their views.

The following highlights of our research suggest the impact of Modesto's courageous experiment in promoting religious freedom in the classroom and society at large.¹

Student Quotation #1: “I had a Hindu person living across the street and they'd be praying to a statue. I'd be all confused. I couldn't understand why they were doing it. I thought it was just plain dumb. But I notice now that they had a pretty good reason to.”

Significance: Respect for the religious views of others in a post-9/11 environment is not only necessary for the United States to stay true to its ideals, but for American citizens to understand the world around them in their voting and policymaking decisions. Therefore, the Modesto, California world religions course we studied was tailored for our time. The course's primary goal was to promote understanding for religions besides their own, and teachers insistently intoned to their students that “a right for one is a right for all.” Modesto Superintendent James Enochs stressed the intrinsic value of knowing about major world religions by noting this knowledge is necessary for “a person to be considered truly civilized. School board president Gary Lopez stressed the more practical goal of “prepar[ing] kids” to tolerate diversity in “the workplace.”

In the quotation above, as in many others from our interviews with students, the results of the course were quite dramatic. Intolerance among Modesto students had been rooted in ignorance. Information dispelled the ignorance and often the intolerance along

¹ Editor's Note: While Lester and Roberts use the voices of the students, as revealed through quotations, to discuss the impact in this article, readers are also invited to consult their longer article, “Learning about World Religions in Modesto, California: The Promise of Teaching Tolerance in Public Schools.” *Politics and Religion*, (2011), 4: 264-288 for details on the methodology and statistics.

with it. For instance, agreement with the statements that “*students of all religions should be able to wear religious symbols outside of their clothing in public schools*” and that “*people of all religions should be able to put religious displays outside of their homes as long as the displays are on their private property*” rose 5% and 8% respectively after the course (Lester and Roberts 2011, 271-273).

We also asked students four questions about their willingness to allow members of their least-liked group to run for public office, teach in public schools, make a public speech, or hold public rallies. The initial number of students expressing tolerant attitudes towards their least-liked group was surprisingly low, ranging from 15.2 percent to 49.6 percent on various questions. We did not expect the course to have a significant effect on students’ general attitude for the extension of civil liberties towards their least-liked groups. For all four of the questions, however, students were more likely to extend liberties to their least-liked group after taking the course. The increases were statistically significant and ranged from 4.4 percent to 10.3 percent (ibid, 274).

Student Quotation #2: “If a person took [an insult] the wrong way I would go say something. It’s not polite to talk about a person’s religion because that’s what they believe in.”

Significance: In a democracy where religiously intolerant acts occur, public schools should teach students to refrain from intolerant acts, but also to take actions to counter inevitable intolerance. Most previous research on tolerance has focused on what we describe as passive tolerance, the willingness to refrain from discriminatory behavior (Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1979, 2). Passive tolerance is a necessary virtue in a direct democracy, but not sufficient because it fails to reassure religious minorities of

their inclusion when discrimination takes place. By contrast, active tolerance can signal to religious minorities that the expression of their beliefs is welcome when hostile views are voiced in the public square. The recent dispute over the Islamic cultural center to be built near “Ground Zero” in New York City suggests the need for such active tolerance in the United States today.

The student’s quotation above, a consistent theme in our interviews, indicates that Modesto, California’s world religions course was able to inspire students to take action against intolerance. In our survey, the number of students likely to “*defend a student whose religious beliefs were insulted by another student*” increased from 55 percent before the course to 65 percent after (Lester and Roberts 2011, 275).

Student Quotation #3: “I didn’t know we had so many different religions in just this area.”

Student Quotation #4: “I’m smart because I know all these things I didn’t know before.”

Student Quotation #5: “After the course I totally [know] these people do this and this, and wear that and that. I walk up to one of my friends. I’ve known him for years. I had no idea he was a Sikh. When I see the bracelet, I say “Oh, you’re a Sikh.” I know that and things I can tell about people now that I couldn’t tell three months ago.”

Significance: Knowledge of world religions is, of course, valuable in and of itself. As Modesto’s public schools superintendent put it to us, such knowledge is necessary to truly appreciate and understand the development of civilizations around the world.

But Modesto administrators also realized that this knowledge could be put to the service of increasing tolerance particularly in one's own community. The media portrayal of religious conflicts and vulnerable religious minorities is a major contributor to inflaming conflicts over religion and culture in the U.S. Driven too often by a mercenary "it bleeds, it leads" mentality, the mainstream media often concentrates, for instance, on unrepresentative Muslim extremists and exaggerates differences between secularists and religious conservatives on hot-button social issues like abortion and gay marriage (Hunter and Wolfe 2006). Teaching students to become acquainted with those belonging to other religions in their community or simply that other religions are present in their communities can help correct these stereotypes.

Our surveys and interviews indicate that students emerged from Modesto's course with a much greater knowledge about the religions they studied. The survey asked students six questions testing their basic knowledge of Eastern and Western religions and their understanding of the Bill of Rights. Average scores on this test increased from 37 percent correct before taking the course to 66 percent correct after (Lester and Roberts 2011, 270). Not only were students significantly more knowledgeable about world religions immediately after taking the course, but this knowledge persisted several months after students had taken the course. Our interviews suggested several examples of students using their knowledge about religion to realize hitherto unacknowledged religious diversity in their communities. Previously anonymous buildings, for instance, were identified as mandirs and synagogues, and students took pride in their new knowledge.

Student Quotation #6: “As I’ve been in this class I’ve noticed how all these religions tie in some way, but I try not to convert to anything because I strongly believe in my religion.”

Student Quotation #7: “It helps to know about other people’s religion when you talk to them because you don’t want to say something bad about their religion that affects them. Even if you don’t wish to accept or believe all religions, you should have knowledge about them.”

Student Quotation #8: “I do try to step up for classmates whose religion has been insulted because I believe in my own religion a lot, and I know what that feels like.”

Significance: Public schools err when they ignore the teaching of religious intolerance, but they can err as well when they teach tolerance too forcefully. The right to disagree with the religious views of others as long as one respects the civil rights of other believers is itself a fundamental part of religious freedom. Many conservative, orthodox, or fundamentalist believers hold the validity of their views to be mutually exclusive with the validity of competing religious views, and that accepting the validity of competing views would involve a betrayal of their own views. The paradox of religious freedom is that religiously *intolerant* beliefs—as opposed, for instance, to racially intolerant beliefs—are entitled to scrupulous protection. Religious freedom limits the extent to which government-run schools can promote students’ sympathetic imagination for other religions. A public school course preaching that many religions are equally true would violate religious freedom as surely as a course that taught that only one is true.

Modesto administrators and teachers were sensitive to this delicate balance. Their aim was to describe each religion to students and emphasize the importance of

teaching rights rather than to preach that all religions are equally true and meaningful. Modesto intended to teach that a “right for one is a right for all”, but not that a “belief for one is a belief for all.” Forty-five percent of students agreed with the statement that “all religions share the same basic moral values,” before taking the course while 63 percent agreed with the statement after taking the course (Lester and Roberts 2011, 276). But students’ increased acceptance of the common ground on morality shared by religions did not contribute to religious relativism or illegitimately encourage students to change their religious beliefs. Students who held firm views about their religion prior to the course maintained their views about the rightness of their religious tradition compared to others after taking the course. Asked if they agreed with the statement “I believe that one religion is definitely right, and all others are wrong,” students’ views *did not change significantly* after they had taken the course. Twenty-one percent of students agreed with this statement before they took the course, and 23% agreed with this statement after students took the course (ibid. 278).

Along with our survey results, the quotations above suggest that this message was received by students. Modesto’s high school students were intellectually and emotionally mature enough to understand that tolerance does not presuppose agreement, but disagreement. Indeed, quotation #8 involves a student understanding that holding strong religious beliefs is a reason to be not less, but more tolerant of others’ beliefs.

Student Quotation #9: “Some of the stuff I didn’t know about my religion and my parents didn’t know either because they weren’t from India, they’re from Fiji so it’s completely different from our religion and they didn’t know everything from the past.”

Significance: Many religious conservatives are understandably concerned that a world religions course in public schools might weaken students' faith in their own religion. Our research suggests that this concern, although not without foundation, should not be exaggerated. Five of the 23 students we interviewed said that the course actually strengthened their belief in their own religion (Lester and Roberts 2011, 279). The only students who said the course encouraged to seek a new religious path admitted that their faith prior to the course had been non-existent or weak. The quotation above suggests how the course taught students new information, and encouraged them to seek greater information about their own religion. Several students also told us that studying other religions enabled a greater appreciation of what was special and distinctive about their own religion.

Put differently, the results of our research suggest that even first year students in high school are able to appreciate the difference between being encouraged to learn about and study about other religions, and being encouraged to adopt the beliefs of other religions. Modesto's students were eager to learn more about other religions after taking the course. For instance, 42% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "it is very important that Americans today try to learn more about the Muslim religion," before the course and 50% agreed or strongly agreed after (Lester 2011, 124). Still, this eagerness to learn more did not lead students to substantially change their religious beliefs.

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