



Learning About World Religions in Public Schools

THE IMPACT ON STUDENT ATTITUDES
AND COMMUNITY ACCEPTANCE
IN MODESTO, CALIF.

PREPARED BY
Emile Lester
Patrick S. Roberts

FOREWORD BY
Charles C. Haynes

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Knowledge of the world's religions is essential for comprehending much of history, literature, art and contemporary events. Moreover, learning about religions promotes religious freedom and creates understanding across religious differences.

— CHARLES C. HAYNES
FIRST AMENDMENT CENTER

FOREWORD

Over the past two decades, coalitions of educational, religious, and civil liberties groups from across the ideological spectrum have repeatedly declared that study about world religions in public schools is both constitutional and necessary.

We appear to have broad consensus: Knowledge of the world's religions is essential for comprehending much of history, literature, art and contemporary events. Moreover, learning about religions promotes religious freedom and creates understanding across religious differences.¹

But in the trenches, many teachers, administrators and parents remain wary of in-depth study of world religions in the public school classroom. Despite years of agreement by national groups, questions abound: What would the impact be on students? How would it be received in our community? Can we do this without triggering a fight?

Until now, answers to these questions have been largely anecdotal based on positive stories of well-received electives in world religions and successful teachers who cover religion in history and literature courses — as well as negative accounts of fights over how religions are treated in textbooks and the occasional flare-up about how teachers are handling religion in classrooms.

With this study, we finally have empirical data about the educational effects of learning about religion in a public school setting. The authors of the study, Emile Lester and Patrick S. Roberts, focus on a world religions course required of all 9th grade students in the Modesto, Calif., city schools. Because the Modesto course goes beyond the inclusion of religion in subjects such as history or literature (where study of religion is typically found) — and because the course is required — the Modesto experiment is an important opportunity to consider the impact of deepening the study of religions in all public schools.

The findings are good news for the First Amendment and good news for education. According to the study, taking the world religions course increases student support for the rights of others. Moreover, students leave the course with a greater

Students leave the course with a greater understanding of the major world religions and a fuller appreciation of the moral values shared across differences.

understanding of the major world religions and a fuller appreciation of the moral values shared across differences. At the same time, learning about various religions does not encourage students to change their own religious convictions. Most remarkable of all, perhaps, the course has been widely supported in the community.

Of course, challenges remain. The study raises a caution flag about the need for adequate teacher preparation, the perennial challenge in all efforts to improve teaching about religion in public schools. And an experiment in one California community might not fare as well in other places with a different history or demographic.

Nevertheless, the study supports those who argue for more in-depth treatment of religion in public schools. Although there has been progress on several fronts in recent years (e.g., inclusion of religion in state social studies standards and more discussion of religion in textbooks), the modest changes that have been made do not add up to serious treatment of religion in the curriculum. The conventional wisdom in public schools continues to be that students can learn everything they need to know about all subjects without learning anything about religion — beyond brief discussion in history and sometimes literature classes.

Surely public schools can and should do better. Yes, the curriculum must be neutral concerning religion under the First Amendment. But it is hardly “neutral,” much less fair, to largely ignore religion and thus implicitly convey to students that religion is irrelevant in the search for truth. The Modesto experiment is one way to begin to address this problem by making more time in the curriculum for learning about religious ways of seeing the world while simultaneously deepening the commitment of students to religious freedom for all.

The First Amendment Center is pleased to publish and disseminate this important study. Over the past nine years, the center has been proud to work with Modesto city schools on the district’s “safe schools” policy, the development of the world religions course, and the First Amendment Schools project that includes a number of

Modesto schools. We applaud the courage and vision of Superintendent Jim Enochs, the school board, the faculty and staff as well as the parents and community leaders who have worked together to create the world religions course — and to uphold the First Amendment in the Modesto schools.

We are grateful to Professors Lester and Roberts for putting the national spotlight on Modesto’s bold and successful experiment in helping students learn how to live with our deepest differences in a nation committed to religious freedom for people of all faiths and none.

— CHARLES C. HAYNES
SENIOR SCHOLAR, FIRST AMENDMENT CENTER

Members of our society with firmly held and differing views on religion cannot hope to agree on all values. They can, however, agree to cultivate mutual respect.

Learning About World Religions in Public Schools

The impact on student attitudes and community
acceptance in Modesto, Calif.²

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In a Supreme Court decision written more than 40 years ago, Justice Tom Clark argued that “it might well be said that one’s education is not complete without a study of comparative religion and its relation to the advance of civilization.” Heeding Justice Clark’s observation to teach students about world religions is even more imperative today because the welfare of the United States increasingly depends on providing students with a greater understanding of world religions and respect for religious diversity. Recent waves of immigrants, many of whom come from religious traditions significantly different from Judaism and Christianity, and growing divides between orthodox and progressive believers pose new challenges for the United States’ commitment to freedom for religious speech and worship. Mainline Protestants have been increasingly at odds with evangelical Protestants and some Catholics over social policy. Many Americans take sides over political and cultural issues such as gender roles, abortion, homosexuality and home-schooling along religious lines. Abroad, interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 make it appear that the world is headed for a clash of civilizations. Without greater knowledge of major world religions, Americans cannot hope to foster the mutual respect essential for domestic democratic success and the understanding necessary for wise foreign policy.

Members of our society with firmly held and differing views on religion cannot hope to agree on all values. They can, however, agree to cultivate mutual respect. The American religious tradition requires that each citizen respect the rights of other citizens

to practice their religious faiths, at least until a believer's requirements violates other basic rights and freedoms. Full respect for the rights of believers requires at least a basic education in the complexity of a religious tradition. Increasing understanding through

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education is also the best practical means to increase mutual respect, as countless studies have shown. The public schools are the logical place for such education because attitudes about religious rights and liberties are formed early in life.

Despite substantial progress over the last 20 years in teaching about religion in the public school curriculum, news stories often give the opposite impression. Recent disputes over the teaching of evolution in Kansas and Pennsylvania, and over an elective Bible-studies course in Odessa, Texas, have made national headlines. These incidents seem to suggest that instead of providing greater protection for religious diversity, a robust discussion about world religions in the public school curriculum would divide many schools and communities on religious grounds to an even greater extent. In fact, concern about discussions of world religions in public schools is based on two distinct but related sets of doubts.

- ***Should robust discussions of world religions take place in public schools?*** Is it possible to construct a curriculum and teach about religion in public schools in an effective and neutral manner? Can world religions courses help students to be more respectful of religious liberty and diversity? Are curriculum administrators and teachers capable of putting aside their own religious views and discussing various religions in a fair and balanced way? Will teaching students about a variety of religions encourage religious and moral relativism?
- ***Can a robust teaching about world religions and for respect of religious diversity take place in religiously diverse and divided communities?*** Given disagreements about school curriculum and cultural issues in general, can groups on the right and left find common ground by recognizing the importance of teaching about world religions or will such teaching inevitably be viewed as too controversial and lead to increased disputes?

MODESTO'S WORLD RELIGIONS COURSE

Since 2000, the Modesto City school district in Modesto, Calif., has been engaged in one of the nation's most direct experiments in using the public school curriculum to promote respect for religious freedoms and diversity. While other school districts include discussions of world religions in subject matters such as history or English or provide independent elective courses on world religions, Modesto requires that all 9th grade students take an extended, independent course on world religions. Unlike many other school districts' treatments of world religions, the teaching of respect for religious freedom is an explicit and central purpose of Modesto's world religions course. Modesto's course is part of a "safe schools" policy intended to create a comfortable school environment for all students, and the first two weeks of the course deal with the United States' tradition of religious liberty.

While studying the educational effects of Modesto's course on students' views addresses the question of whether world religions courses *should* be implemented in public schools, an examination of Modesto's religious landscape yields valuable insight into the question of whether world religions courses *can* be implemented and in which communities. Modesto is home to a large evangelical Christian population, an active group of politically and culturally liberal residents, and adherents of a wide range of religions including Sikhs, Jews, Hindus, Muslims and animists. The Modesto community's reaction to the required world religions course not only provides evidence about the possibility of successfully implementing required world religions courses in communities around the nation, but allows us to assess whether our nation's ability to deal with the issue of teaching about religion in schools is as bleak as the Kansas, Dover and Odessa disputes seem to suggest.

The teaching of respect for religious freedom is an explicit and central purpose of Modesto's world religions course.

FINDINGS

Our research used written surveys of approximately 400 students over nine months — once before they took the course and twice after — and personal interviews with students to examine the educational effects of Modesto's course. We conducted extensive interviews with school administrators, teachers, school board members, and

Modesto's religious leaders to examine how the course was taught and prepared, and the level of acceptance of the course within Modesto's community. These are the major findings of our research:

■ ***Modesto's course had a positive impact on students' respect for religious liberty.*** After taking the course, students were more likely to express their support for the extension of basic religious liberties to all religious groups on surveys and in interviews. One student commented after taking the course, "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." Students expressed an increased willingness to take action when they witnessed one student insulting another student's religious beliefs, but the course did not increase their willingness to take political action to protect vulnerable religious groups in their communities.

After taking the course, students were more likely to express their support for the extension of basic religious liberties to all religious groups on surveys and in interviews.

■ ***Students emerged from the course more supportive of basic First Amendment and political rights in general.*** Following a long tradition of public opinion research, the pre-test found students alarmingly intolerant on questions dealing with respect for First Amendment rights. After the course, students were more willing to extend the rights to run for public office, teach in public schools, hold public rallies and make a public speech to their "least-liked group."

■ ***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% correct before taking the course to 66% correct after.*** 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. More students affirmed the importance of learning more about world religions and particularly learning more about Islam after taking the course.

- ***Students left the course with an increased appreciation for the similarities between major religions.*** Forty-five percent of students agreed with the statement that “all religions share the same basic moral values” before taking the course, while 63% agreed with the statement after taking the course. However, students’ increased acceptance of the common moral ground shared by religions did not contribute to religious relativism or 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.

Students’ increased acceptance of the common moral ground shared by religions did not contribute to religious relativism.

- ***Most students believed that their teachers presented the religions examined in the course in a fair and balanced manner.*** But there was room for improvement in this area. Several teachers displayed a tendency to promote what one Modesto religious leader described as a “warm and fuzzy” view of religion which did not adequately emphasize the important differences between religions and the less-attractive aspects of organized religion.
- ***Modesto’s world religion course has not stirred up any notable controversy in the community.*** The course was passed unanimously by a school board divided on other cultural issues, and accepted by an advisory council of Modesto’s religious leaders. Very few parents have chosen to opt their children out of the course, and the course has not sparked any legal challenges.

■ *Implementing world religions courses could play a significant role in many communities in converting public schools from a battlefield in the culture wars into common ground.*

Several Modesto community and religious leaders on the right and left agreed that the course was consistent with their vision of how to best treat religion in schools. Liberals applauded the course for its goal of promoting respect for religious diversity. Conservatives applauded the course for emphasizing to students the importance of religion in history and in contemporary American society.

The success of Modesto's course should not be exaggerated, nor does it mean that required world religions courses should or could be implemented in all school districts. As with any experiment, Modesto's experience yields advice about what should be replicated but also about what should be avoided or improved. The school district could have been more careful in constructing its teacher-training process, and helping teachers to avoid any bias. Several of the course's positive effects were relatively modest,

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including several of the course's effects on students' support for religious liberty, and might not be long-lasting. Although many community and religious leaders of all political backgrounds describe Modesto as belonging to the California "Bible Belt," these leaders also stressed that Modesto's evangelical Christian community is not extremist. Required world religions courses might not be appropriate or successful in communities with the presence or predominance of more-strident religious groups.

But our research does allow for cautious optimism that a required world religions course similar to Modesto's could be implemented in many, if not most, school districts with the careful planning and diligent cultivation of community support that went into implementing Modesto's course. Since communities vary widely, every school district must be allowed to decide for itself whether to engage in the

arduous yet potentially rewarding task of implementing required world religions courses. But if the United States is to live up to its First Amendment commitment to respect the religious liberties of all its members, public school boards, administrators and teachers around the nation ought to engage in serious debates about whether to follow Modesto's lead.

Congress shall make no law
respecting an establishment of
religion, or prohibiting the free
exercise thereof ...

— THE RELIGIOUS-LIBERTY CLAUSE OF THE
FIRST AMENDMENT TO THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

Findings

THE FRAGILITY OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY TODAY

The First Amendment religion clauses capture the Founders' insight that our success as a nation hinges upon establishing respect for the rights of all religious believers and non-believers. This respect is not only necessary for social peace, but is required by the ideals of freedom and equality upon which our nation is based. The Founders' insight that religious freedom is the bedrock of society is even more relevant today since we are an increasingly diverse nation in an increasingly interconnected world.

Recent waves of immigration are reshaping the religious landscape of American communities. Unlike previous waves of immigration, a large number of today's immigrants are from Asia and Africa and come from religious traditions significantly different from Judaism and Christianity.³ In a well-known 1960 essay, the sociologist of religion Will Herberg celebrated the respect that Protestants, Catholics and Jews show for each other's religious liberty.⁴ To a far greater extent than previous generations, our nation today faces the challenge of extending this respect to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and other religious groups.

Respect for the rights of various views on religion is equally necessary for an effective national political discourse. Different religious beliefs entail differences about the proper relationship of church and state, what overall social goals should be achieved, and the particular policies government should enact. Discussion of these differences has been at the center of recent national and state elections. The expression of these differences is indispensable for a successful democracy, but for our democracy to work these differences must be expressed in a civil and respectful manner.

Respect for religious liberty and understanding of religious diversity are not only crucial to peace within America, but for a stable international system. Our nation's

relationship with Muslims of the Middle East region has become the primary concern of our foreign policy in the wake of the events of 9/11. We are already involved in one large-scale military conflict in the region, and involvement in other conflicts is possible. By choosing action or inaction, intervention or non-intervention, today's citizens are playing a fundamental role in determining the future of the Middle East. Our choices have a profound effect on the way people around the world perceive our nation. The correct policy towards the Middle East is open to debate, but the need to ground our policy on an accurate understanding of Islam in general and the varieties of Islam in the Middle East is incontestable.

The spirit of the Founders' experiment in religious liberty is endangered by the increasingly bitter disputes and recriminations about political issues related to religion.

Unfortunately, recent evidence suggests that we are not responding as well as we could to the challenges of religious diversity. An ABC News poll found that from January 2002 to September 2003, the number of respondents that said Islam encourages violence rose from 14% to 34% while the number of respondents who have an unfavorable view of Islam rose from 24% to 34% during the same period.⁵ This shift in attitudes has had distressing behavioral consequences.⁶ The Council on American-Islamic Relations, an Islamic civil rights groups, released a finding in 2004 showing a 15% increase in incidents of violence, discrimination and harassment of Muslims in America since 2002.⁷ Many Muslims at home and abroad have questioned whether the harassment of some Muslims under the Patriot Act and the treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib have been incited at least in part by anti-Muslim bias.⁸

The spirit of the Founders' experiment in religious liberty is also endangered by the increasingly bitter disputes and recriminations about political issues related to religion. Whether the issue is homosexual marriage, abortion or Terri Schiavo's euthanasia, hysterical hyperbole too often trumps reasoned dialogue and civil discourse when the topic of religion is raised in the public square.⁹ Media focus on extreme partisans in the religious-conservative and secularist camps and polarizing controversies have fueled the perception that we are a nation essentially divided by views about religion. The atmosphere of mistrust generated by this perception obscures the substantial common ground that religious conservatives, religious liberals and secularists share. We may soon be at a point where the forces of civility can no longer control the forces of intolerance that imperil the Founders' experiment.

PUBLIC SCHOOLS' ROLE IN PROMOTING RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

Staying true to the course of upholding religious liberty requires several measures, but none more important than paying careful attention to civic education. Statistical studies have found a substantial relationship between increased respect for rights and education. These studies remind us that we are not born committed to liberty, but that our political culture and education play essential roles in helping us to become committed. Fulfilling the First Amendment's guarantee of religious liberty in practice requires that public schools provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary for understanding religious diversity and taking responsibility to guard the rights of others.

The last 20 years have witnessed substantial progress in teaching about religion in public schools.¹⁰ Too often, however, teaching about religion in the public school curriculum is not accompanied by a direct promotion of a commitment to religious

freedom. Since 2000, the Modesto City school district has been engaged in one of the nation's boldest and most direct experiments in using the public school curriculum to promote religious liberty by helping students to understand religious diversity. Modesto requires all students in the 9th grade to take a nine-week course on world religions.

While courses like the one in Modesto hold out the hope of creating a society more committed to religious liberty for all citizens, they are also the subject of legitimate concerns at all points on the political spectrum. Can we trust teachers to teach religion in a neutral and unbiased manner? Can a brief course actually improve students' understanding of such a complex topic? Are teachers capable of explaining effectively the beliefs and practices of religions to which they do not belong? Might such courses violate the rights of students from atheist and agnostic backgrounds? Will teaching students about a variety of religions encourage religious and moral relativism or abandonment of robust religious beliefs and traditions?

Providing reliable answers to questions about the costs and benefits of world religions courses requires moving beyond the theoretical arguments that normally dominate religion and education debates. These theoretical arguments often rest upon opinions that have not been tested by statistical or field research. This paper presents the results of extended research conducted on the effects of the Modesto course. This

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research is used to examine the merits and drawbacks of teaching about religion in public schools in general, and to determine if world religions courses should be adopted more widely. Statistical and field research alone cannot resolve all the disagreements about how to handle religion in schools, but they can reduce the extent of disagreement by providing hard evidence that cannot be ignored by any side in the religion and schools debate.

GOALS OF WORLD RELIGIONS COURSES

Before examining the results of the research, it is necessary to understand why administrators proposed a world religions course in the first place. The goals listed include those that Modesto administrators and board members intentionally set out to achieve as well as other benefits that world religions courses could produce.

- ***Safer and more inclusive schools and communities.*** As our society grows more religiously diverse, so do our schools. Modesto adopted the world religions course as part of its “safe schools” policy intended to cut down on fights and bullying. Teaching religious liberty and understanding of religious differences can discourage students from insulting each other on the basis of religion, and encourage them to take action when insults do occur. Increased knowledge about religion can also produce related but more subtle positive effects. If students know more about their fellow students’ religious beliefs, they will be able to avoid making inadvertently alienating comments and questions. Knowing about the reasons behind *halal* food laws, for instance, can prevent Muslim students from being singled out and asked why they refrain from eating certain foods. Positive discussions about their religions inside and outside of class can lead to a sense of recognition and inclusion in religious minorities. Not only will these students feel safer, but they will feel more open and comfortable in expressing their religious identities.

Openness in expressing religious identities can in turn enable students to realize more fully the diversity of beliefs present in their schools. According to Modesto’s school board president Gary Lopez, the course can teach that “[i]f you’re raised Catholic, not everyone thinks like a Catholic or if you’re

raised a conservative Christian not every one thinks like a conservative Christian.” An example from an interview with Rabbi Paul Gordon of

Congregation Beth Shalom in Modesto helps to clarify this point. Several of Modesto’s high schools have Christian clubs which occasionally throw pizza parties for their members during lunch hours or after school. Jewish students told Rabbi Gordon that their friends’ invitations to attend these parties made them face the difficult choice of not going to the parties and revealing their religious differences or attending the parties and betraying their faith. A more open expression of religious identity and consequent appreciation of the religious diversity in their schools might discourage students from placing their peers from religious minorities in awkward situations like these.

The respect for religious freedom that students learn in schools can enhance the way they treat religious minorities outside of school both during their high school years and as adults.

The respect for religious freedom that students learn in schools can enhance the way they treat religious minorities outside of school both during their high school years and as adults. Indeed, a strong argument can be made that knowledge of other religious beliefs and practices is an essential ingredient for democratic success in pluralist societies because it strengthens the bonds of social trust. In many instances, as in Modesto, religious differences reinforce differences of opinion over other policy issues including abortion, homosexuality, gender roles, and the teaching of evolution.¹¹ If all citizens, no matter how much they disagree with each other, can trust that the political system is fair and open to them and that they can exercise their fundamental rights by speaking freely, they will have reason to participate in politics. If citizens lack social trust, disaffected minorities might withdraw from the political system.¹²

- ***Enhance professional success.*** As workplaces grow more religiously diverse and our economy grows increasingly global, understanding a wide range of religious beliefs and practices is quickly becoming an essential tool for professional success. Gary Lopez stressed that an essential goal of Modesto’s course was to “prepare kids for the workplace.”
- ***More-informed political decisions.*** The more citizens know about religion, the better will be the quality of their political decisions on issues related to religion. A greater knowledge about religion can give students a greater understanding of the nuances of beliefs and practices within each tradition. In particular, awareness of Islam’s core beliefs and practices and the diversity of opinion in the Islamic world could enable citizens to arrive at more-informed decisions about how to respond properly to terrorist attacks committed by groups claiming to be inspired by Islam. Recognizing and understanding the differences between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims can help citizens to better evaluate our Iraq policy.

The course gives students a richer appreciation of the common ground shared by major world religions than students are likely to find on television or radio or in newspapers. The media’s concentration on extremist factions on the religious right and left exaggerates the cultural divide and heightens suspicion and mistrust between Americans who might, in fact, share common ground.¹³ Providing a more-accurate knowledge about religion need not eliminate healthy diversity, but should help to reduce exaggerated suspicions and misunderstandings on both sides of the cultural divide.

- ***More civil discussions about religion.*** Reducing misunderstanding about different beliefs is necessary but not sufficient for establishing a civil dialogue between religious groups. Establishing a civil discourse about religion in the public square requires knowledge of basic rules of civility for expressing and listening to the expression of religious beliefs. Religious minorities, in particular, must feel comfortable practicing their religion, as long as it does not infringe on the rights of others, and they must trust their fellow citizens to respect their conscience and to interact with them fairly. At the same time, religious believers of all stripes must tolerate a

degree of discomfort as their own views are examined by others.

World religions courses can play an essential role in this process by having teachers model civil discussions of religion for students, and initiating students into the habit of discussing religion in a civil manner. When Americans succumb to name-calling and hyperbole in discussions about religion in the public square, their deliberative failures likely stem at least in part from the previous failure of schools to provide students with accurate information about religion and the failure to model civil discussions about religion.

- ***Increased knowledge of world cultures and improved test scores.*** Writing for the majority in the Supreme Court's *Abington v. Schempp* opinion, which struck down devotional Bible reading but upheld "objective" teaching about religion as constitutional, Justice Tom Clark commented: "[I]t might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion and its relation to the advance of civilization."¹⁴ Describing the Modesto course's main goals, Modesto City superintendent James Enochs likewise stressed that knowledge of the major world religious traditions is necessary for a person "to be considered truly civilized." Although the discussion of world religions courses in this paper focuses on the way that knowledge learned in these courses can serve useful social purposes, this should not obscure that learning about religion's role in world history is a worthy end in itself. Improved knowledge about religion can also improve scores on standardized state and national social studies exams which address religion.
- ***Ensure neutrality and balance materialism.*** Several esteemed scholars have cogently argued that a curriculum largely free of the discussion of religion may bias students towards scientific and materialist ways of viewing the world and trivializes religious worldviews.¹⁵ Not only is this trivialization inconsistent with the goals of a liberal education, which is intended to provide students with a neutral and balanced treatment of different ways of viewing the world, but it may have negative practical and social consequences as well.

This is not to deny that materialism and competition are positive forces in American society. They drive our economy and physical welfare to continuously new heights. But the countless hours of corporate advertising to which children are exposed, and the tremendous emphasis that many schools place upon test scores, leave many students with the impression that competing for well-paying jobs and being able to afford valuable consumer goods is not only paramount, but should be the only important concern in their lives.¹⁶ Public schools should help students think critically about the messages students receive in the marketplace and expose them to the moral and spiritual goals that are important to millions of people. World religions courses could enhance the curriculum by balancing the prevalence of scientific and materialist viewpoints with teaching about the moral concerns at the heart of the world's major religions.

RESEARCH DESCRIPTION AND GOALS

Previous research on religion in schools has focused upon examining references to religion in textbooks.¹⁷ While this research is invaluable in helping us to understand what students are *supposed* to be learning, a more direct way of measuring what students are *actually* learning about religion from textbooks and the curriculum is to survey students themselves. To this end, approximately 400 Modesto students were surveyed three times in nine months — once before they took the world religions course and twice afterward.¹⁸ The survey consisted of 75 questions measuring the course's effects on (a) respect for rights in general, (b) respect for religious diversity, (c) students' level of relativism, and (d) students' views on materialism.¹⁹ This paper focuses mainly on the results of the surveys presented prior to the course — the pre-test — and the first survey presented after the students took the course — the post-test. Whenever the second post-test is mentioned, we will refer to this as the May post-test.

The surveys were accompanied by extended personal interviews with 23 students focusing upon the major issues examined in the surveys.²⁰ The more detailed answers in the interviews enable us to provide further confirmation of the survey results, gain insight into nuances of students' opinions the surveys were unable to identify, and better understand the reasons behind students' views and the shifts which took place in their views. Extensive interviews also were conducted with 11 teachers, Modesto school

administrators including the superintendent, school board members and religious and community leaders.

MODESTO: A COMMUNITY, LIKE THE NATION,
AT A RELIGIOUS CROSSROADS

Two major changes have taken place in the nation's religious landscape over the last 30 years that have relevance for the future of respect for religious freedom.²¹ One is the rise in the proportion of Americans who are neither Jewish nor Christian and the other is the increasing number of Americans who belong to conservative evangelical Protestant denominations.

The prominence of both these trends in Modesto makes it a microcosm of our nation as a whole. For this reason, understanding Modesto's religious landscape in detail not only provides evidence about the possibility of successfully implementing a world religions course in communities around the nation, but allows us to assess our nation's ability to rise above the tensions our changing religious landscape has introduced.

Modesto has a sizable evangelical Christian population which has increased in recent years. A city of approximately 200,000 people, Modesto is home to five evangelical Christian churches which claim at least 2,500 members. Modesto and its surrounding townships in California's Stanislaus County were routinely described to us by conservative and liberal members of the Modesto community as belonging to the "California Bible Belt." *Modesto Bee* religion reporter Amy White notes that evangelicals are "a very visible group and frequently participate in government and public service." Three of the current seven school board members ran on platforms sympathetic to conservative Christian concerns about public schools.

Many community and religious leaders, however, stressed the essentially moderate and diverse nature of evangelical Christianity in Modesto. First Baptist Church associate pastor Paul Zeek confirmed the large evangelical Christian presence and its conservative outlook, but added that "if this conjures up images as the Bible Belt of the South it would be very inaccurate." Father Jon Magoulas of Modesto's Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation explained that Modesto's evangelicals were not "fundamentalists" of the type found in the southeastern Bible Belt. While stressing the evangelical presence in government positions and on the school board, reporter White underlined that the conservative Christian community is not interested in "telling other people what to do" and noted the "surprising racial and ethnic diversity" of Modesto's evangelical churches. Superintendent Enochs dismissed concerns about the evangelical

presence on the board as overblown and described the members as reasonable and willing to compromise. Complaints from the school board's conservative Christian members, according to Enochs, have been confined to objections about inappropriate treatments of sex in required reading for high school English classes.

A significant growth in Modesto's religious diversity has accompanied the growth in the evangelical Christian community. Modesto is home to a plethora of Christian denominations including a large Assyrian Orthodox population which arrived during the 1980s. Rabbi Gordon's Congregation Beth Shalom consists of 175 families and 500 members in the Modesto area. The growth in religious communities that are neither Jewish nor Christian is equally notable. Sikhs have more worship sites in Modesto than any non-Christian religion and claim 5,000 members in Modesto. According to Mohammad Said, imam of Modesto's Islamic center, 2,000 Muslims live in Modesto, 400 attend services regularly, and the center's Saturday school has 180 enrollees. University of California at Stanislaus State professor Ida Bowers estimates that there are 4,000 Southeast Asians in Stanislaus County including significant Cambodian and Laotian populations. Much of this population identifies itself as Buddhist, but the population also includes Hmong immigrants from Cambodia who practice a form of religious animism. Parmanand Tiwari, a leader of Modesto's Hindu community, estimates that 6,000 Hindus reside in Stanislaus County, and approximately 1,500 Hindus attend major religious holiday ceremonies at Modesto's Hindu temple.

A significant growth in Modesto's religious diversity has accompanied the growth in the evangelical Christian community. The growth in religious communities that are neither Jewish nor Christian is equally notable.

On the surface, the relationship between Modesto's religious groups has generally been peaceful. The Hindu temple has been the target of several vandalism incidents in recent years according to White, and the day we visited the temple a dead baby calf had been placed in front of the temple's gate accompanied by a derogatory message. Although every incident must be taken seriously, overt incidents like these have been rare. The relative absence of such incidents, however, should not be interpreted to mean that Modesto is as respectful of religious diversity as it could be. Subtle signs of intolerance have at times made religious minorities reluctant to express and celebrate their identity publicly. Speaking about Modesto's minority religious communities, Amy White observed that "[s]ince September 11

people are very cautious about being singled out” and these communities “may not want to advertise if they’re having a big event.” On the first anniversary of 9/11, Modesto city officials held a memorial. Geneva Presbyterian Church senior pastor Wendy Warner said that although officials “tried very hard to get Islamic and Hindu representation, [these groups] expressed fear about participating in that event.” University of California at Stanislaus State professor Sam Oppenheim likewise stressed that there is “not a lot of understanding in the community between the different groups and not a lot of situations where they can interact with each other easily.” Asked whether he considers Modesto a religiously tolerant community, Father Joseph Illo, pastor of St. Joseph’s Catholic Church, responded: “Well, yes, but that’s because there aren’t too many Muslims here yet.”

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Modesto’s religious diversity and the tensions it produced made it the type of community that could strongly benefit from students’ taking a world religions course, but ensured that successful implementation of the world religions course would be particularly challenging. School board member Cindy Marks explained that when the course was first raised to her she “was apprehensive about how the course was going to work because there are 50 languages spoken in Modesto and Modesto is in a pocket which is labeled as the Bible Belt.” To understand how these doubts were allayed, we must turn to a history of the course’s adoption.

A HISTORY OF THE COURSE’S ADOPTION

In 1997, Superintendent Jim Enochs responded to reports of harassment of gay and lesbian students by asking the school board to include “sexual orientation” in the district’s policy on safe schools, titled “Principles of Tolerance, Respect and Dignity to Ensure a Safe School Environment.” Many religious conservatives were concerned that use of the word “tolerance” suggested that the Modesto schools were endorsing homosexuality. After months of debate, a 115-member committee of community members and educators met with Charles C. Haynes of the First Amendment Center and found agreement on new wording for the policy that focused on the shared goal of ensuring a safe learning environment for all students.

The state of California does not have social studies requirements for the 9th grade, and local school districts are allowed to decide whether and what type of social studies courses to offer. Curriculum administrators and social studies teachers consulted and agreed that the time would be best spent by implementing a semester-long course divided equally between a treatment of world geography and world religions. The 115-member committee agreed that teaching about world religions would be one of several new initiatives designed to further the “safe schools” mission.

The approach to religion taken in the course would be descriptive rather than comparative to ensure neutrality and avoid controversy. Discussion would focus on the historical development and major contemporary beliefs and practices of each religion.

To ensure that students understood the course’s relationship to the safe-school policy, the course would begin with a two-week discussion of the U.S. tradition of religious liberty. The remaining seven weeks of the course would focus primarily on seven major world religions in the following order based on each religion’s appearance in history: Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Sikhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Due to time constraints, the course would not discuss the differences between denominations within religious traditions in detail. The approach to religion taken in the course would be descriptive rather than comparative to ensure neutrality and avoid controversy. Discussion would focus on the historical development and major contemporary beliefs and practices of each religion.

After the basics of the course had been designed and a textbook selected, the district sent letters to religious leaders in the Modesto community to request their participation in an advisory council to review the course. The board was composed of representatives from the Protestant, Catholic, Islamic, Sikh, Jewish and Greek Orthodox communities. Members of other religious communities were solicited but did not respond to the district’s offer to participate. Father Magoulias, who participated on the council, reports that there were spirited discussions about how much time should be allotted to each religion, and the characterization of certain religious events such as the split between Orthodox and Catholic churches in 1054, but described the meetings as “generally amicable.”

Only approval by the school board remained. Since, according to Gary Lopez, “there’s a strong conservative faction in Modesto, and we have a few board members who pretty much are aligned with that faction in town,” there was initially “some concern” about the course expressed by these members. Lopez continues, however, that these members “didn’t oppose [the course] once it was explained what the course was trying to do” and that all the school board members in time became “very excited” about the course. The school board’s seven members unanimously voted in favor of implementing the course.

The rights of religious groups are particularly vulnerable to attacks during times like our own when world events breed insecurity. When a climate of intolerance leads to the vulnerability of religious groups, a democracy needs a significant number of its citizens to protest this intolerance.

Research Results

TWO TYPES OF RESPECT FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

A democracy aiming to make a variety of religious groups feel included and comfortable must cultivate two types of respect for religious freedom: general and active. A person is generally respectful of religious liberty when she refrains from overtly discriminatory behavior. Schools cultivate general respect when they discourage students from supporting discriminatory public policies targeted at religious groups, from making insulting comments about members of other religious groups, and from engaging in other behaviors that discriminate against groups based on their religion.

Despite its best efforts, however, a democratic society is highly unlikely to be able to eradicate all instances of overt discrimination and slurs. The rights of religious groups are particularly vulnerable to attacks during times like our own when world events breed insecurity. When a climate of intolerance leads to the vulnerability of religious groups, a democracy needs a significant number of its citizens to protest this intolerance. Furthermore, even the absence of overt slurs and discriminatory policies does not itself ensure that religious minorities feel included. Subtle signs of intolerance or the failure to acknowledge the presence of religious minorities may lead these groups to feel reluctant about celebrating or even expressing their religious identities in public. Securing inclusion of all religions requires that citizens not only avoid sins of commission but sins of omission by taking positive action to protect imperiled religious minority groups or making these groups feel welcome. Our democracy not only needs citizens, for instance, to refrain from preventing Muslim groups from holding rallies in public parks, but for a significant number of citizens to actively protest if their local government enacted such a ban. Citizens who take such actions demonstrate active respect.

Given widespread apathy among Americans in general about participating in politics, expecting a majority of citizens to engage in strenuous political action to protect religious minorities is unrealistic. But smaller gestures such as neighborly acknowledgement and interaction with members of religious minorities citizens come into contact with in their communities can also promote a sense of inclusion.²² Even if many citizens are too preoccupied with family and work responsibilities to engage in significant public action, all citizens are capable of performing these smaller gestures.

One more distinction is essential before proceeding. Public schools in a democracy ought to increase *civil respect for the rights of religious believers*. Civil respect not only includes acceptance and appreciation of the religious and political rights of religious groups, but refraining from making excessively disparaging and insulting comments that intimidate and alienate religious minorities and discourage them from expressing their religious identities in the public sphere. However, the public schools' mission does not involve the teaching of *religious respect* — the respect that students have for the *truth* of religions besides their own. An essential part of religious liberty involves the ability not only to disagree with and criticize religious perspectives besides one's own in private, but to express these criticisms in public as long as they are expressed in a reasonable way and do not lead to violence or persecution. Promoting religious respect also conflicts with the views of some religious believers — including a significant number of conservative Christians — that the truths of different religions are mutually exclusive. The two types of respect discussed in this section are forms of civil respect, not religious respect.

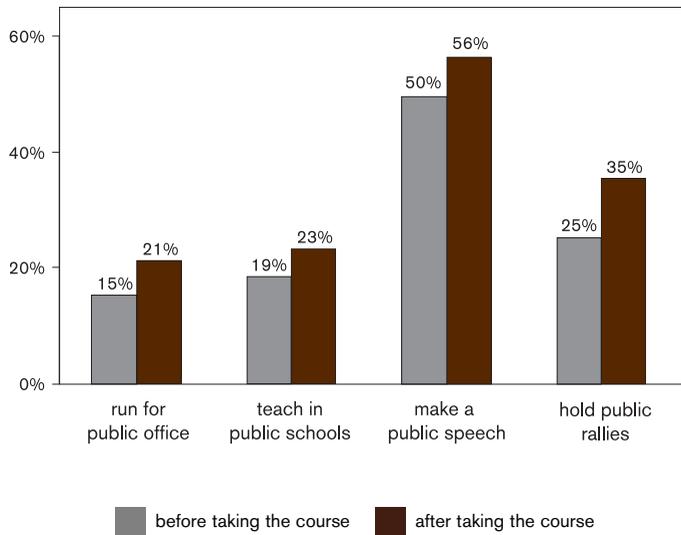
General respect

The surveys asked students about their general respect for First Amendment and political rights overall and their general respect for the rights of religious liberty. We expected that the course would increase respect for the latter, but would not have a significant impact on the former. In fact, the course had a significant effect on both forms of respect.

Following a long tradition of public opinion research, the pre-test found students alarmingly intolerant on questions dealing with general respect for First Amendment rights.²³ The survey gauged students' willingness to extend four basic First Amendment and political rights to their least-liked group including the right to run for public office, teach in public schools, hold public rallies and make a public speech. Prior to taking the course, a sizable number of students were unwilling to extend *any* of these rights to these groups. Graph 1 indicates that taking the course had a significant positive

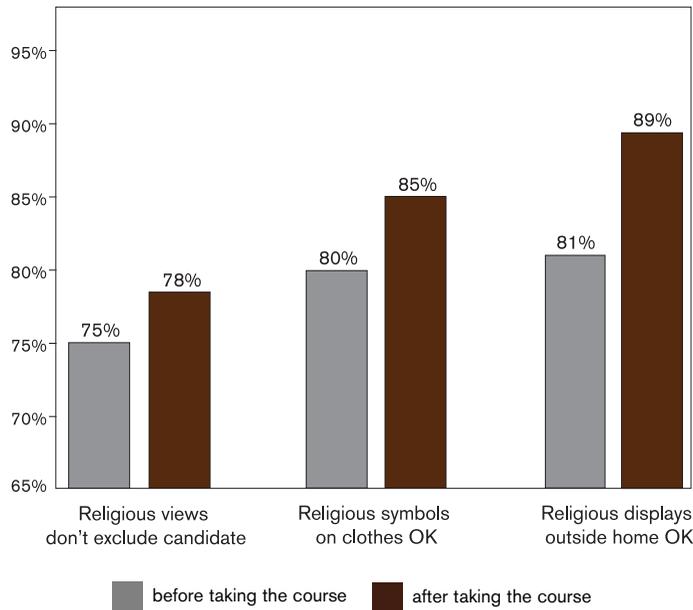
impact on students' willingness to extend some or all of these rights to their least-liked groups.

GRAPH 1: Course's effect on general respect for First Amendment and political rights
Percentage of students who would permit their "least-liked" group to do the following:



These results were consistent with a corresponding increase in students' general respect for religious liberty. Students were significantly more likely to agree 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" after taking the course than before. Graph 2 indicates the positive effect that the course had upon students' general respect for religious liberty. The survey provides evidence of an increased atmosphere of respect within the school by using two measures, first through students' decreased willingness to express disrespectful opinions and second through students' greater comfort with their religious identity. The survey asked students about the frequency with which "you were made to feel uncomfortable because of your religious beliefs," and on average students reported that they were slightly less uncomfortable after taking the course. The survey does not enable us to draw

GRAPH 2: Course's effect on general respect for religious rights and liberties
Percentage of students agreeing with "basic respect" for religious rights and liberties:

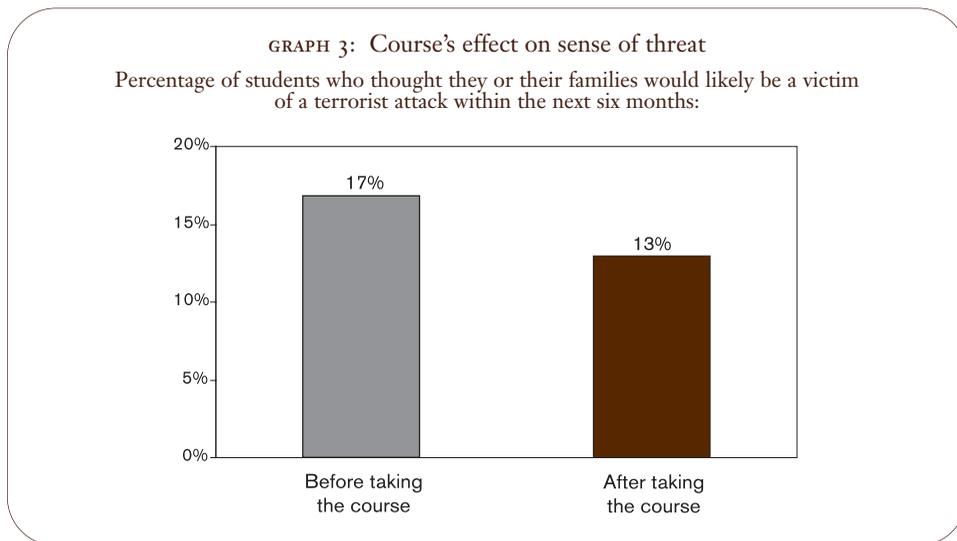


conclusions about whether incidents of disrespect actually declined, but the fact that students *felt* less discomfort concerning their religious identity is significant.

In addition to asking students about their respect for the religious liberty of all groups, the surveys asked students about their respect for the rights of Muslims in particular. The survey provides some evidence of an increase in respect for Muslims. When asked whether "it is very important that Americans today try to learn more about the Muslim religion," 42% of students agreed or strongly agreed with this statement *before* taking the course while 50% of students agreed or strongly agreed with this statement *after* taking the course.²⁴ It is possible that students' increased interest in learning about Islam could be based on an increased fear of Islam. However, given that the other survey results indicate students' overall increase in respect for religious liberty, it is more reasonable to conclude that the results suggest that students are more likely to uphold religious freedom for Muslims.

The survey results suggest three likely explanations for these increases in respect.²⁵ An increase in students' knowledge about religions besides their own, and about First Amendment provisions regarding religious liberty may contribute to the increased respect for religious liberty. The increase in students' knowledge was positively correlated with increases in respect for religious liberty. The most viable explanation for the increase in students' respect for First Amendment and political rights in general is that the discussion of and consequent increase in respect for the rights of religious groups encouraged students to take rights in general more seriously.²⁶

In addition, students may have felt less threatened by other religions after taking the course and therefore been willing to grant them greater respect. Numerous studies on respect suggest that one of the factors most strongly related to intolerant beliefs is the perception of threat from an outside group.²⁷ Insecurity breeds intolerance. Our survey asked students: "How likely do you think it is that you or a member of your family will be a victim of a terrorist attack in the next six months?" Graph 3 shows that the percentage of students who felt threatened declined after students took the course. Furthermore, the survey's results provide modest evidence that, on average, students who believed that they were likely to be victims of a terrorist attack were less respectful of basic civil rights and liberties.



It is significant to note in this context that many teachers made points that could have led to a decline in students' sense of threat. Almost all the teachers we interviewed stressed to their students that the terrorists who carried out the 9/11 attacks were extremists who did not represent the opinions or behaviors of Muslims in general. To illustrate this point, Modesto High School's Jonathan Couchman asked his students whether the terrorists represented the majority of Muslims to a greater extent than David Koresh and the Branch Davidians represented the majority of Christians. These lessons may not only have enhanced students' understanding about the nature of Islam, but decreased students' fear about the extent of the terrorist threat to the United States.

The third possible explanation of increased respect for religious liberty is students' increased understanding of and appreciation for the similarities among religions. This explanation is discussed in a separate section.

The course's positive effect on general respect also was apparent in the interviews, which provided additional insight into why the course might make students more respectful. When asked whether the course had made them more respectful of religious liberty, none of the students disagreed with this statement. Many students testified to the connection between their greater understanding of the beliefs and practices of other religions and the reasons for these practices, and increased respect for the rights of their believers. The following quotes from four different students are representative, and all indicate the relationship between increased knowledge of religious beliefs and practices and their justifications, and increased respect for religious liberty.

INTERVIEWER: Has the course changed your respect for other religions?

STUDENT: It has changed me. ... 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.

INTERVIEWER: Did you become more interested in other religions as a result of taking the course?

STUDENT: [I] really want to learn about other religions than my own; [it] really will help my career. There are certain things that they may not agree with and in your own religion it's not really that bad. So it helps you treat them with the respect that they want and that they deserve.

INTERVIEWER: Have you become more interested in learning about other religions?

STUDENT: 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.

INTERVIEWER: Is that something you've learned more about through the course?

STUDENT 1: Yeah, I've learned a lot about other religions.

STUDENT 2: I think [it helps] when you see things and you don't understand why they do this. You understand they have certain reasons why they perform these rituals.

INTERVIEWER: Any examples?

STUDENT 2: Maybe like when they wear certain things and you don't know why, you may look at them. People make fun of them and they don't realize why they do it, [but] it's part of their religion.

While the surveys suggest that the course contributes to increased respect for religious liberty, the interview results present a more complex portrait of the course's effect on respect for religious liberty. Several of our interviewees said that students occasionally expressed disrespectful views that alienated members of religious minorities. While discussing Sikhism with his students, one teacher mentioned that the Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib, is treated with a great deal of respect and often given its own bedroom and bed in a Sikh temple. One student asked whether it also had its own bathroom. The teacher chastised the student and lectured him after class about making disrespectful comments. Rabbi Gordon reported that several students in his congregation told him they experienced greater alienation from their fellow students as a result of taking the course. According to these students, the course encouraged students to reveal their religious identities to each other outside of class. When Jewish students revealed their religious identity to their friends and acquaintances, this occasionally increased the sense of distance between them. A student told us that her classmates occasionally made jokes about the religious minority groups being studied in the course.

INTERVIEWER: Have you witnessed insults based on religion in your class or in school?

STUDENT: I know that they weren't directly insulting that person about religion, but they made a little wisecrack about the video we were watching about a certain religion, and Mrs. Taylor said you shouldn't be doing that, and they just shut up. Just little wisecracks here and there; that's what I've noticed.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember which religion?

STUDENT: I think it was Islam, and I think they did it another time about Judaism.

These incidents are highly regrettable and were undoubtedly a source of pain for their targets. Schools considering implementing a world religions course must take into account that such a course might provide a forum for insults and the harm these insults cause. But providing a classroom forum where occasional insults concerning religion take place also can serve the useful purpose of bringing out into the open prejudices that might otherwise have remained hidden. Expressions of prejudice remind students of the existence of such prejudice and the fragility of religious liberty. They also provide teachers with opportunities to counter these insults and reinforce religious liberty. Beyer High School's Connie Hernandez related that during her class's discussion of the origins of Christianity several students mentioned the recent movie *The Passion of the Christ* and asked whether the Bible really said that Jews are responsible for Jesus' execution. Hernandez responded that the Romans and Pontius Pilate bore more responsibility for the execution than the movie depicted, and that Christians believe Jesus' death was part of the fulfillment of "Christian prophecy" and necessary for the salvation of Christians.

Furthermore, the students from minority religious backgrounds we interviewed — including Hindu, Sikh, Jewish, Wiccan and atheist students — all viewed the course as a mostly positive experience. One Hindu student, who was asked by her teacher to bring in objects related to her religion if she felt comfortable doing so, took pride in sharing information about her religion with her classmates:

It was me and a girl ... and we brought stuff in, and she asked us questions about how to pronounce words and stuff, and she said that it was good to have us there because we told her stuff that she didn't know.

Another student reacted positively to discovering that long-time friends or acquaintances belonged to minority religious groups, and prided himself on his increased knowledge about their religions.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think having taken this course you're a little bit more aware of other religions?

STUDENT: Yeah, I think I am because I didn't really know the signs of a person's religion, but 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.

To summarize, the survey and interview results warrant an important conclusion about the need for and effectiveness of world religions courses. The pre-test results suggest that students in Modesto enter high school with a low level of appreciation for the basic rights of minorities and unpopular groups. Given that a long tradition in survey research finds a similar lack of respect for basic rights and liberties among the general public, there is no reason to believe that Modesto students are unrepresentative in this respect. It is reasonable to conclude that this is a genuine problem for other school districts as well. The post-test results and interviews suggest that the implementation of a world religions curriculum can provide a solution to this problem by supplying students with a greater appreciation for religious liberty and for First Amendment and political rights in general.

Active respect

Active respect involves taking action to defend vulnerable religious groups against insult and discrimination. It can range from small tokens such as words spoken to a friend or engaging in political behavior to protect a vulnerable or victimized group. The course’s designers did not intend to promote active respect — improving understanding and respect for basic rights and liberties, they thought, was a worthy goal. But after nine weeks of investigation into the practices of major religions and the rights and responsibilities of American citizenship, students might be prone to actively defend rights of conscience and speech more vigorously.

Table 1 indicates that the survey questions intended to measure changes in active respect yielded mixed results. When students were asked what they would likely do “if one student insults another student’s religious beliefs,” 56% of students were willing to take action by informing school authorities or confronting the insulter *before* taking the course while 65% were willing to take action *after* taking the course. But on questions asking whether they would take political actions such as signing a petition or writing a letter to protest disrespect of a small religious group, students’ views did not noticeably change after taking the course.

TABLE 1: Course’s effect on active respect for religious liberty

Does the course increase the likelihood that a student would:

- defend a student whose religious beliefs were insulted by another student
- oppose a member of Congress who insulted a religious group
- defend a maligned religious group when talking to friends
- sign a petition supporting a small religious group suffering discrimination
- write a letter to a newspaper defending a maligned religious group

Students' unwillingness to take political action to protect vulnerable religious minorities is not particularly surprising. Numerous studies on civic education show that today's youth, not unlike today's adults, are often politically apathetic and unwilling to take *any* political action.²⁸ Students' continued unwillingness after the course to take political actions to protest intolerance against religious groups in their community may not be a reflection of the course's effectiveness as much as it is a reflection of students' political apathy. Students who have no experience of civic participation may have difficulty envisioning themselves taking political action such as writing a letter to a newspaper, or organizing a civic association. By contrast, the question about insults in school placed active respect in a context which students were familiar with, and in which they could envision taking action. The course worked best when it addressed situations that are familiar to students.

The interview results were consistent with the survey's findings on students' willingness to respond to incidents of religious intolerance in school. Although several students stressed their unwillingness to stand out from their peers, almost all responded that the course strengthened their willingness to take action either by standing up to the insulter or comforting the victim. The following excerpts from three different students are representative:

INTERVIEWER: What if you witnessed an insult at school?

STUDENT 1: If a person took it 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, and you have your religion and other people have theirs so there's no reason to insult their religion.

INTERVIEWER: Would you say something directly to the person making the insult?

STUDENT 2: If the person who was being insulted took it the wrong way and was assertive about it, I would probably stay out of it. But if the person was really upset but wasn't brave enough to tell someone about it, I would probably tell them off, "Hey, that's what he believes in, and what he believes in is none of your business."

INTERVIEWER: What if you witnessed an insult?

STUDENT 3: I've tried to defend. I don't want to get too much mixed up in it because I know if I do a lot of things can happen. But I do try to step up for that person because I believe in my own religion a lot, and I know what that feels like.

Attention should be paid to the logic used by the student in the last excerpt. Several other students also stressed that their willingness to act on behalf of insulted minorities was inspired by associating the pain students from other religions experienced from insults with the pain that they would experience from a religious insult. The concluding section of this paper discusses the usefulness of this logic for promoting respect for religious liberty.

SIMILARITY OF RELIGIONS AND RELATIVISM: A CAREFUL BALANCE

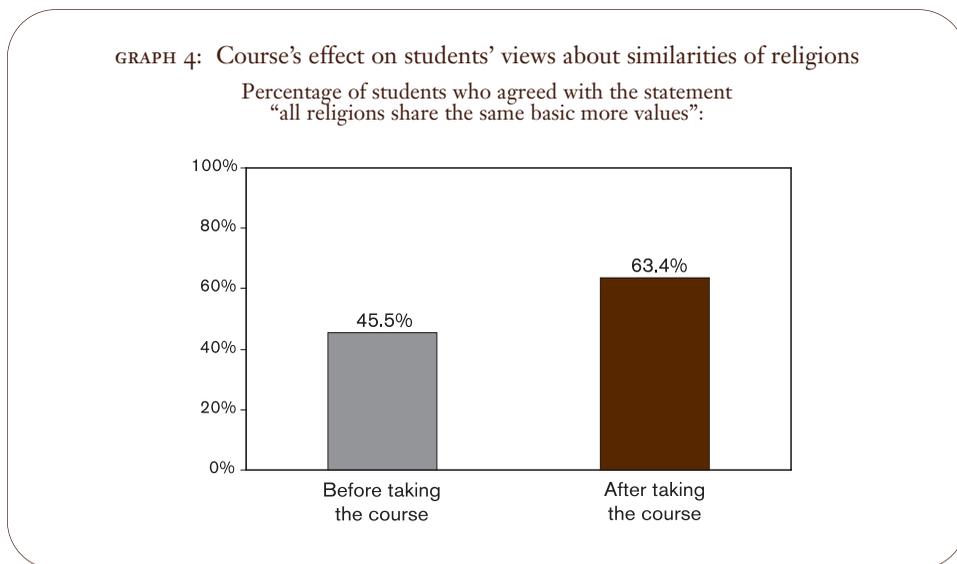
Another important way of promoting increased respect for religious liberty is to emphasize the similar concerns shared by different religious traditions. A greater appreciation of the common ground between religions may encourage students to identify more with the adherents of other religions and develop a greater commitment to their political and civil rights. Stressing that Islam shares several central moral concerns with Judaism and Christianity, for instance, can help to balance the perception that students have received about Islam from world events that do not represent the beliefs and practices of many Muslims.

However, teachers must be careful when discussing the similarity of moral concerns in all religious traditions lest they neglect discussion of the very real differences between beliefs, practices and moral concerns of religious traditions. A significant part of the strength and meaning of religion derives from religion's ability to provide people with a distinct sense of identity that distinguishes them from others. Some religious believers including many evangelical and fundamentalist Christians believe that compromising or agreeing with other belief systems would involve betraying their beliefs.²⁹ Promoting respect for religious liberty through excessive emphasis on the similarities between religions might dilute the strength of students from more conservative backgrounds, or even lead students away from religion altogether by

promoting a relativistic outlook. A distinct but related point is that schools ought to stress similarities among the moral concerns of different religions when these are present, but should avoid emphasizing theological similarities among different religions. A world religions course must couple its emphasis on respect for religious freedom with an acknowledgement that religious disagreement can be legitimate if expressed in a reasonable way and if it does not lead to violence or persecution.

The survey results indicate that the Modesto course appeared to achieve this delicate balance successfully. Graph 4 shows that the number of students who agreed with the statement “all religions share the same basic moral values” was markedly higher after taking the course. Increased belief in the similarity between religions about moral concerns is a third likely explanation of students’ increased respect for religious liberty.

But when asked whether 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 on either the January or the May post-test.³⁰ This question measures a belief we term “relativism.” We do not take a position on whether this view is good or bad, correct or incorrect. Rather, students’ position on this question should stem from serious personal reflection and the teaching of one’s parents and religious or spiritual tradition. The world religions course is not intended to advance a position on this question, and many parents and religious communities would be concerned if a great number of students shifted from one position to another as a result of the course.



Students seem to maintain their same views about the rightness of their religious tradition compared to others after taking the course. The survey results suggest that students were able to recognize the similarities of religions on moral issues without concluding that religions are the same in all essential respects or that similarities between the moral visions of different religions means that the choice of any particular religion does not matter.

The interviews not only generally confirmed the survey results, but also detected several trends that were absent from the survey results. Most of the interviewees, like the following student, opined that religions were more similar than they were different.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you feel that it was good to learn about other religious traditions?

STUDENT: Because all my life I've been a Christian and that's really the only religion I know about. So when I take this class I see there are other religions out there and they kind of believe in the same thing I do.

Like most of the interviewees, the following student acknowledged his increased belief in the similarity of religions, but did not draw a relativistic conclusion.

INTERVIEWER: Are you interested in learning about other religions?

STUDENT: It's interesting for me to see how they believe in things. As I've been in this geography class I've noticed how all these religions tie in in some way. But I try not to convert to anything because I strongly believe in my religion.

In fact, five of the 23 students we interviewed said that the course had made them more interested in their religion and reinvigorated their faith. The following exchanges are representative.

- INTERVIEWER: Has the course encouraged you to learn more about religion?
- STUDENT 1: Yeah, 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.
- INTERVIEWER: What kind of discussions have you had about religion with your parents?
- STUDENT 2: Especially about my religion — Christianity. If I had a question about something in here or I was concerned about a certain element we learned about, my parents may be able to expand on it and give me a little more detail about it. I got some clarification on my own religion and learned a little bit more about it.
- INTERVIEWER: Has taking the course made you more or less attached to your religion?
- STUDENT 3: More attached.
- INTERVIEWER: Why?
- STUDENT: When I studied the other ones, it just made me feel that I wanted to stay with mine.³¹

Teachers occasionally played an important role in providing students greater knowledge of and interest about their own faith. A Jewish student who had just completed fasting for Yom Kippur mentioned to Connie Hernandez that she was “feeling down about her religion” because she did not understand the reason for the fast. Hernandez described the importance of the ritual to Judaism, and explained how days of fasting in Judaism and other religions were intended for spiritual purification. According to Hernandez, the student walked away with a more positive attitude about her faith, and

thanked her for the conversation. Pastor Zeek acknowledged that the students in his congregation who had taken the course “have a clearer understanding of the distinctives” about religion and Christianity. Zeek continued: “Would all of the distinctives that we as followers of Christ would want pointed out get pointed out? No, but that’s not the main purpose of the course.”

Although none of the students said they had changed their beliefs as a result of taking the course, three students did testify that they were more likely to change their

Although none of the students said they had changed their beliefs as a result of taking the course, three students did testify that they were more likely to change their beliefs sometime in the future after taking the course.

beliefs sometime in the future after taking the course. One student told us: “I might as well learn about [other religions]. See if I like one of them better than mine, and I can convert and follow that one.” The three students who expressed this sentiment, however, said they had not held strong religious beliefs before taking the course. According to one student: “It’s kind of interesting because I really don’t have religion so I like learning about the other ones and seeing what kinds are appealing to me, and maybe when I grow older I might try one of them.”

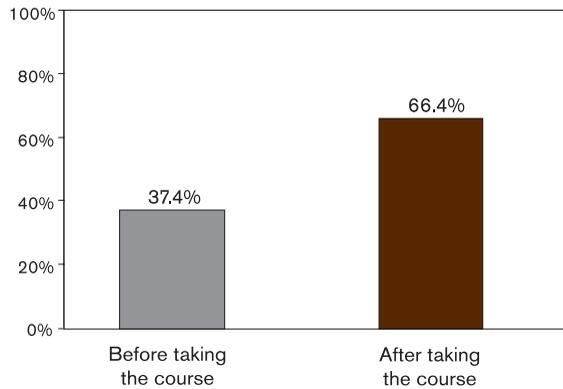
The interviews thus provide evidence that the course may encourage a stronger disposition to change beliefs in those students who are already predisposed to change their beliefs prior to taking the course. This form of development in beliefs does not offend democratic requirements of neutrality.

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

The survey asked students six questions testing their basic knowledge of Eastern and Western religions, and their understanding of the Bill of Rights. Graph 5 indicates the sizable increase in students’ knowledge produced by the course. Students also demonstrated a tendency to retain this knowledge even after the course’s completion.

Four months after taking the course their knowledge scores were lower but still much higher than their original pre-test scores.

GRAPH 5: Course's effect on students' knowledge about religion
Score on religious knowledge test:



The interviews with students and teachers indicate that students were able to use what they learned about other religions in the classroom to gain awareness and appreciation of the religions practiced in their communities. Almost all the teachers we interviewed told us that several students every semester boasted to them about their newfound ability to recognize religious symbols and buildings associated with religious minorities in the Modesto community. The exchange below is representative of other students' opinions from the interviews.

INTERVIEWER: Has this made you aware of the presence of other religions in Modesto?

STUDENT: Yeah, because there's another church — it's not Christian, it's Hinduism over on Claus Road and I never knew what it was. I knew it was another religion; I never knew what it was. And Mrs. Taylor informed us on what it was, and I didn't know we had so many different religions in just this area.

Like the following student, a number of students reported feeling proud about their increased understanding of religions besides their own in the Modesto community.

INTERVIEWER: Are there many different religions in your community?

STUDENT: Yeah, [the course] opened my eyes to see a whole bunch of different [things.] I can see a certain temple or building and say, “Oh, that’s a synagogue. Oh, that’s a mandir.”

INTERVIEWER: How does that make you feel?

STUDENT: I feel kind of proud because, “Oh, I’m smart because I know all these things I didn’t know before.”

STUDENT INTEREST

The survey not only measured whether students knew more as a result of taking the course, but whether students took interest in what they were learning. Determining the legitimacy of a school course must at least take into account whether students find the course interesting. Measuring students’ interest also has an important relationship to several other concerns discussed in this paper. The more students express an interest in learning about religion, the more likely they are to retain knowledge about the material and lessons for respect taught by the course. Students’ interest in the course may even inspire a desire for new knowledge about religions in the future which will in turn contribute to greater respect for other religious traditions.

The survey results generally, but not uniformly, confirmed students’ interest in the course material. Asked after the course’s completion whether they found it interesting, 47% of students found the course interesting and an additional 26% found the course very interesting. The survey also asked: “If you had the power to decide if this course should be taught next year, would you recommend that this course be taught?” Fifty-three percent of students said “definitely yes,” and an additional 21% said “maybe yes.” As discussed previously, students expressed a greater belief in the importance of learning more about Muslims after taking the course.

Examining whether the course led to an increased frequency of discussion about religion outside of the classroom is another way to gauge students' interest in the course. Were students more engaged with religious issues after taking the course? Although the results indicate no increase in the frequency of students' discussions about religion with parents, students reported engaging in a slightly greater number of discussions about religion with their friends after taking the course.

The interviews provided additional confirmation of students' interest in the course. A large majority of the students we interviewed found the course significantly more interesting than their other courses although many compared it to what they considered to be the uninspiring world geography material learned prior to the world religion course. One student noted the increased discussion about religion with her father resulting from the course.

INTERVIEWER: Have you discussed the class with your friends or parents?

STUDENT: Sometimes when I have trouble with [assignments] I usually go to my Dad because he knows everything. He really knows about Confucianism. ... [I] didn't talk to Dad about religion before the course because I didn't ask about it.

Like the three students below, a majority of students volunteered that they thought the course should be longer when asked what changes could be made to the course.

INTERVIEWER: What improvements would you recommend for the course?

STUDENT 1: I think religion should be a two-semester class so that we could learn more.

STUDENT 2: I agree with her because we have to split the time with geography.

STUDENT 3: We didn't have much time because I didn't grab the idea that much because we had a short period. I might forget in the future some things I learned this way.

Another student told us that the course motivated her to do outside reading about religion.

INTERVIEWER: How has the course affected your interest in religion?

STUDENT: I really liked studying religion. I went to the bookstore, and got books on all the religions because I really liked studying about religion to learn about different things. ... I still want to learn more about them because there's a lot to know about the religions. I'm going to continue reading about religions and learning their ways.

Despite the last student's sincere statement, there is reason to doubt the likelihood of students in general acting upon their intention to continue learning more about religion after the course. None of the other students we interviewed who expressed an intention to learn more about religion specified reading that they had done or would do. Modesto High School's Jonathan Couchman used a grant he received from the state of California to purchase books related to the world religions studied in the course, but said that none of the students in his four world religions sections had asked to borrow the books.

MATERIALISM

Although the surveys and interviews provide some evidence that the course encouraged students to talk and think more about religion, neither provided significant evidence that the course played a role in shaping students' values or views on

materialism. Using a materialism scale borrowed from the work of political scientist Ronald Inglehart, we found students' views did not change significantly after they had taken the course.³² The survey also asked students "how often, if ever, do you think about the meaning and purpose of life," and whether they agreed with the statement that "if a person wants to live a happy life, the most important thing they can do is to make a lot of money." The course had no effect on students' answers to either question. None of the students we interviewed equated a greater interest in religion with a greater interest in spiritual and moral rather than materialist and competitive goals.

These results are not especially surprising given how strongly the emphasis upon material consumption is entrenched in American culture. Christian Smith and Melissa Denton's nationwide survey of teenagers' views about religion found that teenagers' beliefs are not an exception to this rule.³³ Teachers

stressed that Modesto students are as preoccupied with going to the mall and buying cellphones and designer clothes as typical teenagers. Given the strong signals students receive from advertising, and American culture in general stressing material achievement, encouraging students to strike a greater balance between material goals and moral and spiritual goals would require an intentional, strenuous and concerted effort.

The Modesto course did not involve such an effort. Although teachers made occasional points urging students to reflect upon their possible excessive commitment to material goals, encouraging students to strike a greater balance between material goals and moral and spiritual goals was not an objective of the course's planners and was not a significant theme in teachers' lesson plans.³⁴ While Modesto's course neither had the tempering effect on materialism nor the effect of shaping students' characters for the better that some scholars supporting increased discussion of religion in schools have hoped for, it is possible that world religion courses of longer duration and specifically intended to achieve these goals might be more successful.

None of the students we interviewed equated a greater interest in religion with a greater interest in spiritual and moral rather than materialist and competitive goals.

The course was, and continues to
be, a truly organic experience.

— MODESTO'S SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM COORDINATOR

How Modesto's World Religions Course Was Prepared and Taught

Our research focused primarily on the effectiveness of the world religions course by determining the course's effects upon students' views. But examining how the course was prepared and taught is an invaluable supplement and occasional corrective to these results. Our interviews with teachers and administrators and examination of the course materials provide insight into how the positive results identified by the student surveys and interviews were achieved. Conversely, examining how the course was prepared and taught provides insight into problems that the student surveys and interviews did not detect. Thus, the teacher and administrator interviews provide positive guidance to other school districts about practices that are worthy of imitation while the inadequacies in the teaching and organization of Modesto's course provide advice about what other districts should avoid.

Before proceeding, we feel compelled to mention that we developed great respect for Modesto's administrators and teachers during our research. They have displayed exceptional dedication to and effort in organizing and implementing this important experiment. Administrators and teachers faced particular challenges because they had no model to work from. As Modesto's social studies curriculum coordinator Jennie Sweeney told us, "The course was, and continues to be, a truly organic experience." Much of the time, this dedication and effort had positive results. Our goal in identifying the occasional shortcomings in Modesto's course design and teaching is not to criticize administrators and teachers but rather to inform other school districts about the challenges encountered in teaching world religions courses.

TEACHER TRAINING

Much of the apprehension about implementing courses on religion in public schools is based on a concern about teachers' qualifications. The best way to allay these concerns is to implement a carefully constructed teacher-training program, and requirements and incentives to ensure that teachers take this process seriously. An examination of Modesto's teacher-training process for the world religions course yields valuable advice about the challenges of constructing a long-term teacher-training program for similar courses.

Modesto requires teachers to participate in 30 hours of in-service training in preparation for teaching the world religions course. The teachers who taught the course when it was first implemented fulfilled this requirement by participating in sessions with faculty members of the departments of history and religion at California State University at Stanislaus, meetings with local religious leaders and visits to local religious institutions and training sessions on how to teach major themes of religious liberty with First Amendment Center consultant Marcia Beauchamp.

The teachers who participated in this original training process were generally satisfied with the process. At the same time, several teachers mentioned that the session introducing teachers to Islam was taught by a professor who spent much of the session

Much of the apprehension about implementing courses on religion in public schools is based on a concern about teachers' qualifications.

discussing topics unrelated to the basic beliefs and practices of Islam. Professor Sam Oppenheim said that some of the teachers who participated in his training sessions on Judaism could have been more diligent. Although he provided teachers with a four-hour video to supplement his session and urged teachers to contact him, he never received any questions or feedback about the video's contents.

In contrast to the course's original teachers, new teachers have met the training requirement by receiving credit for college courses they took relevant to world religions, and by being provided with videos including lectures by college professors related to the religions the course considered. New teachers are also required to read Huston Smith's *World Religions*, and to meet with Jennie Sweeney to discuss the importance of First Amendment concerns to the course. In the fall of 2005, all world religions teachers were required to attend a one-day workshop given by Kimberly Plummer, a board member of California's Three Rs Project.

One new teacher complained of the lack of adequate in-service training and said that the training consisted of “pretty much only videos.” The teachers who participated in the original training and those who did not displayed different attitudes regarding the course’s promotion of religious freedom. The new teachers were not particularly aware that the promotion of religious freedom was an essential purpose of the course. The course’s original teachers who we interviewed spent the recommended amount of time — two weeks — discussing religious-freedom principles and America’s heritage of religious freedom. One new teacher spent less than one week discussing religious freedom, and found the material the district gave him on religious freedom unhelpful.

Religion is a complex and abstract subject, and enabling students to understand the material requires innovative and creative teaching approaches.

One other important criticism of Modesto’s teacher training is worth mentioning. Rabbi Gordon expressed concern that the teacher training did not prepare teachers to adequately convey to students what it meant to actually and practically participate in faith traditions different than their own. While the training focused on conveying to teachers the beliefs of the various religions taught, Rabbi Gordon stressed that the experience of being a part of a religion involves more than adherence to its beliefs.

TEACHING GUIDELINES AND STRATEGIES

Establishing guidelines for teaching about religion in public schools is especially problematic. Religion is a complex and abstract subject, and enabling students to understand the material requires innovative and creative teaching approaches.³⁵ But religion is also a highly contentious subject matter, and allowing teachers too much discretion in teaching about it may lead to controversy. Modesto administrators chose to adopt a cautious approach by applying stricter teaching guidelines for the world religions course than other history and social studies courses. The main purpose of these strict guidelines according to administrators was to prevent teachers’ biases from influencing their teaching. These guidelines, for instance, required that teachers follow the sequence of teaching religions determined by the district.³⁶ Teachers also were instructed to avoid the discussion of overly controversial subjects in class, and comments that would give students the message that one religious tradition is superior to another.

Despite the encouragement to avoid controversial subjects, the teachers we interviewed managed to find thought-provoking and balanced ways to address religion and religion issues in the news. A majority of teachers said they had extended participatory discussions with their students about the recent Pledge of Allegiance case argued before the Supreme Court, and a recent news story concerning the right of Sikh students to wear ceremonial daggers in public schools. When asked how he handled delicate issues in the classroom, Jonathan Couchman recounted his discussion of arranged marriage in Indian society with his students. Upon his first asking his students whether they would want to have arranged marriages, almost all objected to this practice. Couchman responded that over half of marriages in the United States end in divorce as a way of encouraging his students to understand why members of Indian society might object to a conception of marriage founded primarily on romantic love. The district's guidelines about avoiding controversial matters did seem to have a chilling impact upon a teacher in his first year. Understandably more concerned about job stability than teachers with greater seniority, this teacher told us that the guidelines prevented him from making thought-provoking comments that his students or their parents might deem too controversial.

An important theme that emerged from the interviews is that there are two main ways to achieve balanced treatment of religions in the classroom. One way is to avoid discussion of controversial issues that may touch on the legitimacy of religious practices. The other model is to include such discussions at least occasionally but make sure they are presented in a balanced manner such as the discussion of arranged marriage. Both strategies have considerable advantages and risks. Teachers acknowledged that the district's avoidance policy would prevent students from getting the impression that any one religion or religious practice is superior to another. However, several teachers told us that neglecting critical discussion of religious practices or of controversial issues *altogether* would defeat the purpose of a world religions course. Inclusive discussions of different religious practices sharpen students' critical-thinking skills and allowing for greater student participation enhances students' interest in the course. These discussions also enable students to develop skills of respectful deliberation in practice and allow teachers to model these virtues.³⁷ At the same time, teachers must scrutinize their own statements and views carefully before engaging in these conversations, and should take particular care not to single out the practices of religious minorities to avoid stigmatizing students from these groups.

Teachers also testified to the effectiveness of including concrete real-life examples and stories into their discussion of religion. Many teachers drew upon their experience with other religious traditions such as attendance at weddings. According to

Connie Hernandez, the students “latched on to the stories that she told,” and several students we interviewed confirmed this impression. Similarly, several teachers made use of the presence of students from religious minorities to give other students a more concrete understanding of these faiths. They asked students to bring in items associated with their religions and to discuss them in class if they felt comfortable. While enhancing students’ appreciation of religious traditions they do not belong to, the presentations in several cases enhanced the self-esteem of the presenters.³⁸ The value of emphasizing concrete examples and narratives is attested to by previous civic education research.³⁹

Several teachers made use of the presence of students from religious minorities to give other students a more concrete understanding of these faiths.

TEXTBOOK

The same cautiousness that guided the establishment of teaching guidelines guided textbook selection for Modesto’s world religions course. Modesto administrators chose *The Usborne Book of World Religions*, which runs 60 pages and is at a 6th grade reading level.⁴⁰ The text was selected primarily because it has many visual images that help make each religion more accessible to students, and it provides each major Eastern and Western religious tradition with equal treatment.⁴¹ Jennie Sweeney told us that the book was chosen primarily because the “page number is fair and it was very positive about all faiths.” Administrators stressed that the textbook’s emphasis upon visual images and religious practices rather than theological ideas was important for teaching students how each faith is lived.

All of the teachers we interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with the textbook. The main objection was that the text failed to provide students with an extensive enough introduction to each faith tradition. Several teachers supplemented the book with additional readings. The textbook would be inadequate for longer courses or for world religions courses taught to sophomores, juniors and seniors. Modesto administrators responsible for the text selection admitted that they also were not completely satisfied with the text but according to Jennie Sweeney, it was “very difficult finding a text; there wasn’t a text out there.” Administrators hoped that a more widespread adoption of world religions courses as electives or requirements would produce a greater demand for and ultimately greater selection of high-quality texts from textbook companies.

WAS THERE ANY TEACHER BIAS?

An even greater concern than whether teachers can be competently prepared to teach world religions courses is whether teachers can avoid intentionally or unintentionally passing their religious views on to their students. Due to the sensitivity of religious beliefs, public school courses about religion deserve to be and will inevitably be scrutinized by parents and communities for bias to a greater extent than other public school courses. Administrators and teachers must strive particularly hard to prevent bias and the perception of bias.⁴²

Although there is significant room for improvement, the survey and interview results suggest that Modesto teachers were successful most of the time in presenting each religion in a balanced manner. When asked whether they felt “each religion has been treated fairly in the world religion course,” 61% of students strongly or moderately agreed, while 28% strongly or moderately disagreed.⁴³ The interviewees, who included students from a variety of religious backgrounds, were asked a similar question without their teacher present, and none of the students complained of teacher bias. Pastor Zeek said that teacher bias was generally not a problem among the students he talked with about the course, but that one year “a couple of students said they felt their teacher was presenting the material when it came to Christianity quite cynically.”

But privileging one or several religions over others is not the only form of bias that world religions courses must avoid. Modesto teachers were less successful in avoiding what Rabbi Gordon described as a “warm and fuzzy” approach to religion. One reflection of this “warm and fuzzy” bias was the excessive emphasis which several teachers placed upon the similarity of religious traditions. Many teachers gave their students hand-out sheets with statements from the sacred texts of seven religions intended to demonstrate that these traditions shared a belief in the golden rule. One teacher reported that at the end of each semester, several students inevitably came up to her and said that the more they studied world religions, the more they realized how they were like each other. The teacher would congratulate these students and respond: “That is exactly the point. That’s what you were supposed to get from the course.” In our interviews with several teachers, the discussion of their emphasis upon similarity was not accompanied by a discussion of the ways they emphasized the differences between religious traditions.

The “warm and fuzzy” impression provided about religion was reinforced by the absence of discussion of the unsavory aspects of organized religion. Teachers do not discuss, for instance, the historical use of religion to punish heresy, to justify war or to suppress scientific inquiry. When we asked one teacher whether she discussed

less-attractive aspects of religion, she responded that she did not believe that several religions including Buddhism had any negative attributes. Many teachers addressed student questions about terrorist acts by Muslim groups by reminding students of dangerous extremists who had claimed to act in the name of Christianity. While this response helps to counter negative stereotypes about Islam, it ignores the position of many atheists and humanists who argue that organized religion has an inherent tendency to produce extremist behavior. The course's textbook provides almost no discussion of the unsavory aspects of religion. Only three paragraphs are devoted to the use of religion to justify war, persecution and the oppression of women.

The course's textbook provides almost no discussion of the unsavory aspects of religion.

Modesto's director of curricular and staff development, Linda Erickson, defended this "non-critical" approach to religion as being consistent with the course's purpose. The goal of the course, according to Erickson, is to convey facts about religion, and not to have students engage in a critical evaluation of particular religions or religion in general. To be fair to administrators and teachers, achieving a fully neutral discussion of religion is exceedingly difficult. It could be argued that Modesto has chosen the lesser of two evils by choosing an approach protective of all religions rather than opening the door for critical discussions of religion which would inevitably single out minority religions.

Still, the negative consequences of a "warm and fuzzy" approach should not be ignored. We have already identified the serious problems with overemphasizing the similarities of religions in a previous section, but the omission of the darker side of religion is an equal cause for concern. Neutrality requires that public schools neither encourage nor discourage the holding of religious beliefs. Decisions about students' religious beliefs must be left up to parents, religious communities and students themselves. Omitting the darker side of religion may illegitimately encourage students to adopt or deepen their religious beliefs. It alienates non-religious students and parents by failing to recognize their concerns and perspectives on organized religion.⁴⁴

The Modesto City school district took a substantial risk by implementing an innovative required course focusing exclusively on world religions and explicitly linked learning about these religions to respect for religious freedom.

Conclusion

AN EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS STORY

Since its inception, the United States has prided itself on its diligent commitment to protect the fundamental rights of all its citizens and particularly the right to religious freedom. This commitment has become even more imperative in recent years with burgeoning religious diversity. Parents, civic associations, and religious communities do and should play a profoundly important role in the political and moral education of young people. But our research's finding that many students lack a strong commitment to First Amendment rights prior to taking the course suggests that these influences alone are not sufficient, and that public schools need to further cultivate students' general and active respect for religious rights and liberties.

The Modesto City school district took a substantial risk by implementing an innovative required course focusing exclusively on world religions and explicitly linked learning about these religions to respect for religious freedom. Our research suggests many school districts reject inserting a robust discussion of religion into classrooms because of concern about practical problems such as teacher bias and fear of legal controversy. Our research suggests that Modesto's bold approach to teaching respect for religious diversity by requiring all students to take a course on world religions was worth the risk. The course had a positive impact not only on students' respect for the rights of other religions and their willingness to act on behalf of vulnerable religious minorities, but on students' respect for First Amendment and political rights in general. Students' knowledge about the religious traditions of their fellow students and citizens increased significantly; most students found the course material interesting; and many students expressed a desire to learn even more about world religions. The increase in students' willingness to take action to protest insults based on religion at school and the lessening of discomfort experienced by students provide evidence that the course has made Modesto schools safer and more comfortable for members of all religions. The

improvements in students' knowledge about religions and religious liberty, and their increased willingness to learn more about Muslims suggest the positive civic effects of Modesto's course.

Modesto's course was able to accomplish these goals without causing the problems feared by those who object to extended discussion of religion in schools. Most

The success of Modesto's world religions course is an important conclusion. But the larger question is whether Modesto's experiment should and can be replicated elsewhere.

notably, the course did not encourage students who were not already predisposed to change their religious beliefs or abandon religion altogether. Students increased their appreciation for the similarity of the moral foundations of the major world religions without concluding that the differences between religions are negligible or that choices about religion are arbitrary whims. Indeed, the interviews provide more examples of students' faith being reinvigorated by taking the course than of the enervation or abandonment of faith. The avoidance of relativistic conclusions is probably attributable in large part to the course's historical rather than comparative approach to world religions.

Although there is room for improvement regarding the neutral treatment of the course's different religions, most students did not complain about biased treatment of religion by their teachers.

The success of Modesto's world religions course is an important conclusion. But the larger question this paper is intended to address is whether Modesto's experiment should and can be replicated elsewhere. The survey research addresses the question of whether the course *should* be implemented elsewhere, but to answer the question of whether the course *can* be implemented elsewhere we must return to a discussion of Modesto's cultural landscape and the course's success in this landscape.

A COMMUNITY SUCCESS STORY

The conventional wisdom among many pundits on the left and right is that our nation is in the throes of a culture war over religion, and that public schools are often battlefields in this war. As with all conventional wisdom, there is a good deal of truth in these claims. Sincere, deep and occasionally irreconcilable differences about the proper place of religion in public institutions exist between different segments of American

society. The conventional wisdom obscures, however, the potential for establishing common ground that lies dormant in many communities waiting to be awakened by the right type of conversation about religion. Concentration on conflicts and clashes feeds suspicions and misunderstanding on both sides of the cultural divide. The resulting lack of communication prevents both sides from realizing that despite their deep differences, they share at least some common ground.

On the surface, Modesto seems an unlikely locale for a successful experiment in teaching religious diversity. All the ingredients of the culture war — a large evangelical Christian population, an active group of politically and culturally liberal residents and adherents of a wide range of religions — are present. Less than two years prior to the world religions course's adoption, a debate over the teaching of respect for homosexual students revealed the significant rifts between the liberal and conservative communities in Modesto.

Yet five years into its existence, Modesto's world religions course has not stirred up any notable controversy. The course was passed unanimously by a school board divided on other cultural issues, and accepted by an advisory council of Modesto's religious leaders. The course has not sparked any legal or constitutional complaints. Parents have the right to opt their children out of the course, but according to Linda Erickson, an average of only two or three out of 3,000 students annually make use of this option.⁴⁵ At the least, all segments of Modesto's community have come to tolerate and accept the course's existence.

But an even more encouraging theme emerged from our interviews with many of Modesto's civic and religious leaders. Several leaders on the right and left agreed that the course was consistent with their vision of how to best treat religion in schools. The course's focus on religious liberty and the establishment of safe schools made the course appealing to liberal members of Modesto's community as well as its religious minorities. Russ Matteson, co-pastor of Modesto's Church of the Brethren, said that several students in his "liberal" congregation "had uncomfortable or bad interactions with students from evangelical denominations ... who believe that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and that Jesus' truth is unique." These students' experience with the course, according to Matteson, was far more positive. Students tended to find the course "fascinating" and "used the course to incorporate different religions into their perspectives." Matteson valued the way the course "would enable students to realize that God is present in other places around the world."

The course also responds to religious-conservative concerns about the treatment of religion in the public schools. Many religious conservatives have

complained in recent years that the lack of attention given to religion in the public school curriculum trivializes religion's importance.⁴⁶ Several religious leaders we talked with in Modesto were pleased about the way the world religions course addressed this perceived trivialization. One official of an evangelical megachurch told us that he was "very happy that his teenage daughter would be taking the world religions course" because it would enable her to learn about other religious traditions and "would reinforce the importance of religion" to her. Father Joseph Illo recalled that when the course was introduced to the advisory council "all [the members] congratulated the schools on actually talking about religion because that's usually a pariah in schools and academia. ... But it makes sense because you just can't pretend that religion hasn't had an effect on world culture."

The reaction to the world religions course by Modesto's community suggests that despite rifts driven by suspicion and misunderstanding, compromise between the sides in our cultural conflict is often possible. Implementing world religions courses could play an important role in converting public schools from a battlefield in the culture war into common ground. To be sure, a world religions course might not be possible to implement in every American community. But Modesto's reaction to the course does suggest that a similar course could be implemented in many communities around the nation.

Communities interested in following Modesto's lead must keep in mind that support for the course in Modesto was neither automatic nor spontaneous, but the product of careful cultivation by Modesto administrators. Religious leaders, school board members, and teachers all stressed that extensive consultation with community members prior to the course's implementation was essential to the acceptance of Modesto's course and would be essential for world religions courses in other communities. In the words of school board president Gary Lopez, the school district ought to "bring all the stakeholders to the table at first; you can defuse a lot of the controversy about what it is and what it's not, and what you're trying to accomplish. ... If you give [community members] ownership in it, you have a better chance to mitigate a lot of the controversy."

Administrators and teachers cited the mediation of the controversy over sexual orientation and the "safe schools" policy by Charles Haynes of the First Amendment Center as indispensable in laying the groundwork for the course's eventual acceptance. The creation of an advisory council of religious leaders was equally vital in clearing away misconceptions about the course and pre-empting criticism. Several religious leaders and school board members attributed the course's acceptance in part to the stature of superintendent Enochs. In his 18 years as superintendent, Enochs has developed a

reputation as an effective and impartial administrator. Pastor Zeek stressed that Enochs has been “very available” to all of Modesto’s religious communities, and has “proactively sought out” input from religious communities on policies relevant to these communities. Linda Erickson cautioned, however, that the emphasis on consultation should not be taken too far. Stressing that the consultation process with the community and advisory panel only worked well because the district presented them with a well-structured model of the course, she warned that an approach which allowed the community or an advisory panel of religious leaders to determine the basic framework and content of the course would be too contentious.

The content of the school district’s justification of the course was as crucial as the consultation process. Connecting the course with the district’s “safe schools” policy and the promotion of religious liberty and respect for all groups convinced the community of the course’s important purpose. Despite theological disagreements with more liberal communities, Pastor Zeek stressed that “we could find common ground [because] we all want kids to be safe.” Emphasizing that the course would use a historical and descriptive approach towards religion rather than a comparative approach quelled concerns about the course being used for the purpose of proselytizing.

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WHAT DID NOT SUCCEED? A LOOK TO THE FUTURE

The success of Modesto’s course was not unqualified. Like any experiment, Modesto’s experience yields advice about what should be replicated, but also about what should be avoided or improved. Reflecting on the shortcomings of Modesto’s course helps to clarify the central recommendation made in this paper. *While we conclude that Modesto’s experience suggests that world religions courses can be successfully implemented in public schools, we are not contending that all school districts should copy the specific course Modesto implemented.* Modesto’s course offers one viable option for school districts interested in implementing a world religions course. But the limits of Modesto’s approach and the

While we conclude that Modesto's experience suggests that world religions courses can be successfully implemented in public schools, we are not contending that all school districts should copy the specific course Modesto implemented.

distinctive curricular and communal circumstances of each school district indicate that districts must carefully consider what form of world religions course is appropriate for them. Rather than copying the letter of Modesto's experiment, school districts should be guided by the experimental spirit Modesto demonstrated. Indeed, Modesto's course itself is a work in progress as teachers meet each year to discuss content and organization and, according to Jennie Sweeney, are "constantly sharing to improve the course." Increased experimentation in different districts would initiate a dialogue and enrich understanding about what type of world religions course

works best. The following four items constitute a substantial, but not exhaustive, list of how Modesto's model could be improved upon, and food for thought about alternative ways of teaching world religions.

More careful teacher training

Modesto administrators took significant care in constructing the original training program to ensure that teachers were adequately prepared to teach its world religions course. But they could have been more careful in selecting presenters about the various religions, and in monitoring teacher attendance. More important, the teacher training since the course's implementation could have been more robust, especially with regards to informing new teachers about the main purposes of the course. Modesto could have made better use of the wide variety of resources — college professors, local religious leaders, and religious liberty consultants — available to the district. Many of the original teachers stressed the contribution to the course's initial success made by Marcia Beauchamp's workshop on religious liberty, but the district has not invited a consultant on religious liberty to speak to teachers since the course's inception. The district similarly did not act on offers from local college professors to provide lectures on world religions to new teachers and continuing education to other teachers. Rabbi Gordon usefully suggested that teachers make more frequent visits to local religious institutions. Although Modesto teachers on the whole have done a satisfactory job of treating the religions they teach in a neutral fashion, there is room for improvement.

Longer and more extensive teacher training can further prevent bias by providing teachers with more extensive information about each religion, and solidifying their grasp on the distinctive aspects of religions besides their own. A greater acquaintance with world religions would also enhance teachers' ability to relate the lived experience of each religion to students rather than concentrate on the factual content of each religion. More careful teacher training would enable school districts to trust teachers to engage in thought-provoking discussion of controversial issues concerning religion and religious liberty in the news in a fair and balanced manner.

Two strategies for promoting respect for religious liberty

Our research indicates that students' increased appreciation of the similarity of different religions' moral values is a possible explanation for the increase in students' respect for religious liberty. Other school districts should take account of this insight. But at least several of Modesto's teachers demonstrated a tendency to place a particularly strong emphasis upon the similarities of religions while neglecting to balance this truth with an equal emphasis upon the essential and often irreconcilable differences that set religions apart. This partiality did not have the immediate effect of promoting religious relativism in Modesto, but it might have had this effect if the course had been longer. Excessive emphasis on similarities provides an inaccurate portrait of religion in general, and is inconsistent with the preferences of parents interested in insuring their children recognize the unique attributes of their own faith. School districts ought to continue to include substantial discussion of the similarities between faiths, but they must instruct teachers to avoid placing an excessive emphasis upon these similarities.

Fortunately, there is an alternative strategy for promoting respect that avoids the problems of excessive emphasis on similarity. By trying to bring religious traditions closer to each other, the similarity approach attempts to promote respect by encouraging students to identify their religions with *other beliefs*. But students could also be taught to see that other religious believers hold their beliefs about religion as strongly as they do theirs. Students who identify with *the feelings of other religious believers* are likely to have greater sympathy for and willingness to defend these believers when they are persecuted on the basis of their religion. Several Modesto teachers stressed this connection and several students we interviewed took it to heart. One student, for instance, explained his willingness to defend other groups in the following terms: "I do try to step up for that person [being insulted] because I believe in my own religion a lot, and I know what that feels like." Since it does not encourage students to change their beliefs about the

truth of other religions, this approach to encouraging respect does not have a significant downside.

Should world religion courses be longer?

The effects of Modesto's course are heartening given the course's nine-week length, but the modest nature of the effects and the course's brevity indicate that the effects of the course might not be lasting.

Several important scholars have argued that schools should eventually aspire to implementing world religions courses that would last for an entire semester or longer.⁴⁷ In addition to deepening students' long-term respect for religious liberty, a longer course would enable students to learn about the denominational differences within religions, and would provide them with a better grasp of the lived experience of each religion. A large number of the students we interviewed supported a longer course for the last two reasons.

Increased risks, however, accompany the potential advantages of lengthening world religions courses. Besides the difficulty of accommodating larger courses in an already crowded curriculum, more discussion of religion would allow greater room for teacher bias. More in-depth examination of how each religion is experienced and practiced might provide greater encouragement for students to change their religion. These risks are not prohibitive, but they do suggest that administrators should use special caution in implementing longer courses. Longer courses would require, for instance, more extensive teacher training than the training provided by Modesto.

Promoting active and concrete respect for religious diversity

Modesto's course had a stronger impact on students' general respect for religious liberty than students' active respect. For world religions courses to live up to their potential of promoting religious liberty, school districts implementing them must consider several strategies for encouraging active respect that Modesto did not use.

Perhaps the least controversial step schools could take to directly encourage active respect is to include a robust discussion of discrimination, persecution and intolerance aimed at religious groups. This discussion could focus on historical examples of religious persecution such as the Holocaust and the European religious wars of the 17th century as well as examples of religious persecution in the United States and the

world today. Such a discussion would help students to realize that religious persecution is not just an abstract threat but a real danger. Students seem to be motivated to take action against persecution when they are confronted with the real possibility of injustice. Schools must be careful, however, not to focus on examples of persecution committed by one religion alone. If examples are given of Christian nations or groups responsible for persecution, these must be balanced by discussions, for instance, of the persecution of Christianity in China today or in the former communist regimes of Eastern Europe.

A motivation to protest injustice, however, is not sufficient for active respect of religious freedom. For religious groups and particularly religious minorities to feel respected, citizens must also know what practices these groups most want accommodated. Although Modesto's course focuses on religious practices rather than theology, Pastor Matteson suggested that world religions courses could provide a more comprehensive discussion of how to practically accommodate members of other faiths in their private and public actions. As an example of this concrete application of the principles of respect, Matteson mentioned that in his previous career as a store manager he was highly conscious of tailoring work schedules of his employees in order to provide Muslim workers with adequate time on Friday to participate in prayer services. Matteson's example helpfully suggests how a more concrete understanding of how to accommodate religions can better prepare students for religiously diverse workplaces.

Both motivation to respect religions and practical and concrete understanding of religion could be furthered by having speakers from various religions visit classes. Several religious leaders in Modesto embraced the idea while several students we talked with thought that speakers would enhance their knowledge of how other religions are lived and practiced in a way that teachers could not. Rabbi Gordon, for instance, suggested to school administrators that they invite a Holocaust survivor who is a member of his congregation to speak to the world religions courses.

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If schools invite speakers in required courses, however, they must do so in an equitable manner consistent with legal and constitutional requirements to avoid parental and community complaints.

If schools invite speakers in required courses, however, they must do so in an equitable manner consistent with legal and constitutional requirements to avoid parental and community complaints. A school allowing any visits must extend invitations to members of every major religious tradition the course examines as well as to religions students belong to which are not studied in the course. This means that inviting speakers is only feasible in a semester-long course. Speakers must be provided with strict guidelines ensuring that they focus on describing and explaining their religion's central beliefs and practices rather than proselytizing. They must be strongly discouraged from making critical comments about other religious traditions or denominations within their own faith. Given the duration of world religions courses and the diversity of views and denominations within each religious tradition, it is unrealistic to have schools invite speakers who represent all these views and denominations. But schools should avoid choosing speakers who belong to extreme versions of a religion or hold highly unrepresentative views. The acceptability of each speaker should be ascertained by consulting with leaders of local congregations of the religion to which the speaker belongs. An alternative and perhaps less controversial way to enhance students' knowledge of each religion is to have school districts invite local college professors who have a more in-depth knowledge of the religions being taught than the course's teachers to provide guest lectures.⁴⁸

ENDNOTES

- ¹ See, for example, "Religion and the Public School Curriculum: Questions and Answers," a statement issued in 1988 that was endorsed by 17 major educational and religious groups including the National Association of Evangelicals, the American Jewish Congress, the National School Boards Association and the National Education Association.
- ² We would like to acknowledge the generous financial support provided by The Charles Center at the College of William and Mary which made our research possible. We are also extremely grateful for the exceptional cooperation that Modesto's teachers and administrators provided in helping us to administer the survey.
- ³ Robert Wuthnow, "Presidential address 2003: the challenge of diversity," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43 (2) (2004):159-170; Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America* (San Francisco: Harper, 2002).
- ⁴ Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, and Jew: An Essay in Religious Sociology* (New York: Anchor Books, 1960).
- ⁵ ABC News Poll, Sept. 4-7, 2003. (N=1,004, MoE ± 3).
- ⁶ Philip Jenkins's recent work on increasingly hostile attitudes towards Catholics is a reminder that increases in bias have not been confined to non-Christian groups. See Philip Jenkins, *The New Anti-Catholicism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- ⁷ Council on American-Islamic Relations, *The Status of Muslim Civil Rights in the United States: Guilt by Association 2003* (Washington: Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2004).
- ⁸ See, for instance, Fatima Abdrabboh, "Veiled Praise," *New York Times*, 24 June 2005, A31; see also Joseph Lelyveld, "The Strange Case of Chaplain Yee," *New York Review of Books*, 15 December 2005, 8.
- ⁹ *The Christian Right in American Politics*, eds. John Clifford Green, Mark J. Rozell, Clyde Wilcox (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003); David E. Campbell "Acts of Faith: Churches and Civic Engagement" *Political Behavior* 26:2 (June 2004) 155-180.
- ¹⁰ See Jay Wexler, "Preparing for the Clothed Public Square: Teaching about Religion, Civic Education, and the Constitution," *William and Mary Law Review*, 43 (February 2002): 1159-1264; Susan Douglass, *Teaching About Religion in National and State Standards*, Council on Islamic Education and the First Amendment Center, 2000.
- ¹¹ James Q. Wilson, "Religion and Polarization" Tanner Lectures, Harvard University, November 4, 2005; James Q. Wilson, "Politics and Polarization," Tanner Lectures, Harvard University, November 3, 2005.
- ¹² The empirical literature supports the link between knowledge, trust, and participation. Ronald Inglehart finds that citizens of countries that have cultural resources sustaining democracy also report high levels of interpersonal trust and general life satisfaction. Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997).
- ¹³ For instance, Christian Smith's national survey of evangelical Christians found that the views of extremist evangelicals featured in newspaper, radio and television journalism were not representative of the views and goals of the majority of evangelical Christians, who held more moderate beliefs about social and educational policies. Christian Smith, *Christian America: What Evangelicals Really Want* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
- ¹⁴ *Abington v. Schempp*. 1963. 374 U.S. 203, 225.
- ¹⁵ See Warren Nord, *Religion and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief* (Basic Books: New York, 1993); Alan Freeman and Betty Mensch, "Religion as Science/Science as Religion: Constitutional Law and the Fundamentalist Challenge," *Tikkun*, 2 (1987): 64.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Christian Smith and Melissa Denton, *Soul Searching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 176-179.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Paul Vitz, "Traditional Values in Public School Textbooks," *Public Interest* 84 (1986): 79-98.

¹⁸ The first survey prior to the course took place in October 2004, and the two surveys after the course took place in January and May 2005. In addition we surveyed students who had completed the course in May 2004 in order to test and refine our questions and the survey procedure. We surveyed 426 students in October, 392 in January, and 308 in May. These were many but not all of the freshman students taking the required world religions course at the five major Modesto high schools.

¹⁹ The major justification for focusing upon Modesto students is that the Modesto course was required for all students. Had we interviewed students taking elective world religions courses, the results would not have been widely applicable because students signing up for these courses are likely to be more religiously curious to begin with and more easily influenced to respect religious diversity than other students. By contrast, our research provides information on the effects of a world religions course on a wide range of students. Approximately 70% of the total students enrolled in the classes surveyed participated in both the pre-test and the post-test. Polls for political races are considered valid when they have between a 20 and 40% response rate. Scott Keeter et al., "Consequences of Reducing Nonresponse in a Large National Telephone Survey," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64 (2000): 125-48; Claudia Deane, "About *Washington Post* Response Rates," *Washington Post*, 7 July 2003.

The validity of our survey is further enhanced by the serious manner in which students approached the survey. Unlike most surveys of adults, the students had authority figures — teachers — who repeatedly stressed the survey's importance.

²⁰ Although school regulations required that an administrator be present for the interviews, the students' teachers were not present. The selection of students was made by teachers. We instructed teachers not to select the students with the highest grades or the greatest interest in the course material, but a representative sampling of their overall classes.

²¹ Eck, 2002.

²² In a recent op-ed letter to the *New York Times*, Fatima Abdrabboh, a Muslim-American student at Harvard's Kennedy School, begins by discussing the increasing alienation she has felt as a result of the U.S. government's recent treatment of Muslims at home and abroad, and the hostile stares her headdress has drawn. A recent experience at a local gym, however, brightened her outlook. While exercising on the treadmill, she inadvertently dropped her keys. When she looked up, her keys were thoughtfully handed to her by former Vice President Al Gore, who happened to be exercising in the same gym. She concludes:

It was nothing more than a kind gesture, but at that moment Mr. Gore's act represented all that I yearned for — acceptance and acknowledgement. There in front of me, he stood for a part of America that has not made itself well known to 10 million Arab and Muslim-Americans, many of whom are becoming increasingly withdrawn and reclusive because of the everyday hostility they feel.

²³ Samuel Stouffer, *Communism, Conformities, and Civil Liberties* (New York: Doubleday, 1955); James L. Gibson, "Enigmas of Intolerance," working paper, February 26, 2004.

²⁴ Question: It is very important that Americans today try to learn more about the Muslim religion. A. strongly agree B. agree C. disagree D. strongly disagree. A and B coded as 1, C and D coded as 0. N=345; pre-test mean=0.426; post-test mean=0.507; $P > |t| = 0.002$.

²⁵ We survey enough students to uncover statistically significant differences between the pre- and post-tests but so far not enough to build a complex model of the forces that shape student attitudes. We have valid answers for between 340 and 365 students for each question in the survey for both tests. Our results so far suggest the need for further research.

²⁶ In the questions asking whether students would extend basic rights and liberties to their "least-liked" groups, it is also possible that many students selected religious groups as the ones they liked the least. After taking the course, some students were more willing to extend First Amendment rights to these groups.

²⁷ See George E. Marcus, *With Malice Toward Some: How People Make Civil Liberties Judgments*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); John Duckitt and K. Fisher, "The Impact of Social Threat on Worldview and Ideological Attitudes" *Political Psychology* 24 (2003):199-222; Paul M. Sniderman, Richard A. Brody, and Philip Tetlock, *Reasoning and Choice: Explorations in Political Psychology* (Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

²⁸ Pamela Johnston Conover and Donald Searing, "A Political Socialization Perspective." *In Rediscovering the Democratic Purposes of Education* edited by Lorraine McDonnell et al. (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2000), 103.

²⁹ See Nomia Maya Stolzenberg, 'He Drew a Circle that Shut Me Out': Assimilation, Indoctrination and the Paradox of Liberal Education, *Harvard Law Review* 106, (1993): 581-667, 594.

³⁰ In fact, the number of students who agreed or strongly agreed with this statement in May (27%) was slightly higher than the percentage who agreed or strongly agreed with it in January (23%).

³¹ The following exchange was also illustrative:

Interviewer: You learned things that you weren't aware about previously.

Student: I learned more. I go to church before school. I have a thing where high school students go. I think we learn some similar things to what we learn here so it was kind of cool to see and get a better understanding. Even if you know, it helps you learn more about it or learn it again you get a better understanding each time you go over it.

³² Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies*.

³³ See footnote 16.

³⁴ One teacher suggested the possible materialistic bias in American society by asking students to compare how often they went to the mall with how often they attended religious services. Another teacher mentioned to students that wealthier, industrialized societies tended to be less religious than less industrialized societies as a gentle way of provoking students to think about the possible drawbacks of excessive materialism.

³⁵ See Ronald Goldman, *Readiness for Religion: A Basis for Developmental Religious Education* (London: Routledge, Kegan, and Paul, 1965); Nel Noddings, *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).

³⁶ The district determined that the most neutral way to teach the sequence of religions was to begin with the most ancient religions and end with the most recent religions.

³⁷ Civic education research performed by Pamela Johnston Conover and Donald Searing supports the merits of the inclusive approach: "We are suggesting that social interaction is essential to developing democratic character and learning the basic skills of citizenship. Tolerance is learned by having to interact and get along with people with whom we disagree; confidence in our political preferences is generated when we successfully defend our positions; understanding of issues is enhanced through discussion; and shared citizen identities are nurtured by working together toward common goals." Conover and Searing, 119.

³⁸ See the quote from the Hindu student on p. 32 above. However, school districts ought to keep in mind the limits of student presentations. Although asking students to bring in items associated with their religion as Modesto's teachers did is unproblematic, teachers should not rely on students to provide comprehensive discussions of their religious traditions because students' understanding of their own traditions is often limited.

³⁹ According to Conover and Searing: "Our study suggests the importance of narratives in helping students to translate shared understandings about citizenship into concrete terms they can relate to their own lives. Many students mention English classes as having influenced their understanding of citizenship, because it is in those classes that they read narratives in which fictional characters confront real-life dilemmas." *Ibid.*, 119.

⁴⁰ Susan Meredith, *The Usborne Book of World Religions* (London: Usborne Publishing, 1995).

⁴¹ Administrators also chose a less challenging book because the 9th grade social studies courses in Modesto are not tracked, and the course material must be accessible to students of a wide range of abilities including many students from homes where English is not the primary language.

⁴² The religious backgrounds of the teachers we interviewed were varied. Three teachers identified themselves as Protestants, one as Catholic, one as Greek Orthodox, and three others as atheists. All the teachers professed to aim at teaching the course in an impartial manner although several acknowledged that despite their best efforts their own beliefs would at least unconsciously affect their lessons.

⁴³ California state educational regulations prevented us from asking about students' religious identities in the surveys. Thus, we were not able to determine whether students from minority religions felt differently about the fairness of the course than students in general.

⁴⁴ The first section of the course on religious liberty does stress to students the need to respect the non-religious as well as members of other religions.

⁴⁵ According to Erickson, the small number of parents who have opted out of the course are equally divided between atheists and "hard-core Christian fundamentalists."

⁴⁶ Carter, 1993.

⁴⁷ See, for instance, Warren Nord and Charles Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum*, (Nashville: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1988), 177.

⁴⁸ Irvine, Calif., public high school teacher James Antenore regularly invites religious leaders to speak to the elective world religions course he has taught for 20 years. Antenore reports that these speakers have enhanced students' understanding and that the invitations have not provoked any problems or criticisms from parents or students.

The First Amendment Center works to preserve and protect First Amendment freedoms through information and education. The center serves as a forum for the study and exploration of free-expression issues, including freedom of speech, of the press and of religion, and the rights to assemble and to petition the government.

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