



Teaching about Religions as Diversity Education

By **Brian Blackmore**

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Independent schools are increasingly taking diversity seriously; however, it is unclear how much schools are helping students understand religion as an important aspect of human identity and experience. A 2017 survey conducted by the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) reported that diversity work is in a period of robust growth, formalization, and professionalization. About one-third of diversity practitioners report they are the first or the second person to perform that role at their schools. Approximately 90% of diversity practitioners have some kind of formal training in their field, and 73% hold advanced degrees. It seems that more than ever before, schools are providing professional development about diversity and inclusion, improving hiring and admissions practices, incorporating new curriculum and assemblies devoted to diversity education, and supporting student affinity groups and diversity clubs. About half of the respondents to the 2017 NAIS survey reported that their school had a formal diversity strategic plan.¹ The work independent schools are doing around diversity and inclusion is important and praiseworthy, but I wonder if religion is being overlooked. Diversity and inclusion programs tend to (quite rightly) emphasize issues related to inclusion and

1. National Association of Independent Schools. 2017 *NAIS Diversity Practitioners Survey*. <https://www.nais.org/media/MemberDocuments/Research/2017-NAIS-Diversity-Practitioner-Survey.pdf>. Accessed August 2018.



bias based on race, gender, and sexual orientation, and yet religion is a crucial part of identity for many people. Religious identity is also the target for bias, hatred, and violence in our society. Learning about religion has an abundance of benefits for students. The study of religion helps improve intellectual understanding and critical thinking about social issues. There are spiritual practices from the world religions that can support the psychological and emotional well-being of a growing population of highly stressed and over-committed young people. Most of all, learning about religions is fundamental for helping young people become more ethically responsible citizens in a multi-religious world.

I teach about world religions full-time at Westtown School, a Quaker day and boarding school in West Chester, PA. I also serve as a consultant, on behalf of the Center for Spiritual and Ethical Education (CSEE), for schools that are interested in launching or enhancing world religions courses. Additionally, I lead the CSEE virtual department for religion teachers, a platform based on a series of conference calls intended to provide invaluable networking, resource sharing, and collegial support. In this short piece, I seek to address some of the common concerns which make schools apprehensive about offering world religions courses. I also seek to share what I believe are the most compelling reasons for why schools should be teaching about world religions.

Developing Intellectual Awareness

Many school administrations are leery about offering world religion courses because they do not understand the difference between an academic and a devotional approach to the study of religion. Religiously-affiliated and secular schools express some nervousness that world religions courses might press students to accept a particular religious worldview or denigrate others. Rather than imposing the *acceptance* or denial of any particular religious belief or practice, a well-trained religion teacher will seek to develop *awareness* of various religions. They will also help students develop critical thinking skills for interpreting sacred literature and understanding the role that religion plays in our world. When the study of religion is conducted with an academic rather than a devotional approach, world religion courses do not compete or interfere with a school's religious commitments, nor do they alienate students who come from non-religious backgrounds or profess a non-religious worldview. Indeed, religion should be studied with the same intellectual care and responsibility as any other academic subject.²

If the integrity of world religion courses is safeguarded by employing teachers who understand the value of using an academic approach to the study of religion, what might be some of the benefits of these

2. For more information about guidelines for ethically and intellectually responsible pedagogy for religious studies education, see: Charles C. Haynes and Oliver S. Thomas. *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Schools*. Nashville, TN: First Amendment Center, 2007; *American Academy of Religion Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States*. April, 2010; and Diane L. Moore. *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

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courses for students? As a baseline, world religions courses help students gain basic knowledge about the history, texts, beliefs, practices, and material manifestations of the world's largest religions. This is important given that most Americans are woefully uninformed about the world's great religious traditions. In 2010, the Pew Research Forum conducted an extensive study of knowledge about religions in the U.S. and the findings were disappointing. Less than half of Americans know that the Dalai Lama is Buddhist, the Jewish Sabbath begins on

Friday, and the four canonical gospels are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Fewer than four-in-ten (38%) correctly associate Vishnu and Shiva with Hinduism, and only about one-quarter of Americans are aware that most people in Indonesia, the country with the world's largest Muslim population, are Muslim.³ In a Supreme Court case which prohibited state-sponsored school prayer and Bible readings in public schools, Associate Justice Tom Clark wrote: "[I]t might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization."⁴ Because religion has played such a significant role in history, and it continues to shape culture and politics in powerful ways, omission of religion in the curriculum gives students the false impression that religion is somehow insignificant and unimportant for understanding the world around them.

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Reducing Bias and Making Good Ethical Decisions

Teaching about religion is not merely about gaining knowledge. It is also about helping students make good ethical decisions. In 1984, the National Council for the Social Studies stated: "Knowledge about religions is not only a characteristic of an educated person but is absolutely necessary for under-

3. Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey. [Washington, D.C.]: Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2010.

4. Abington Township v. Schempp 374 U.S. 203 (1963).



standing and living in a world of diversity.”⁵ Modesto, California is the only public school district in the U.S. that requires high school students to take a world religions course. A research study of the district’s courses has shed some light on the intellectual and social benefits of teaching about religions. Researchers found that students were not only significantly more knowledgeable about world religions immediately after taking a world religions course, but this knowledge persisted several months after the course. Students also emerged from the course more supportive of basic First Amendment and political rights in general. A pre-test of students found that they were 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.” Another researcher from McGill University found that the Modesto program reduced religious-based bullying on school campuses.

The importance of these findings cannot be overstated. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), anti-Muslim hate groups have more than tripled in recent

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years. SPLC counted five anti-Muslim hate groups in 2010, 34 groups in 2015, and at least 114 anti-Muslim hate groups in 2017.⁶ Hate crime statistics gathered by the FBI in 2016 are even more disturbing. The FBI reported that the second most common motivator for hate crimes was bias against religion (the first most common motivator was bias against race, ethnicity, and/or ancestry). In 2016, 1,584 anti-religious hate crimes were reported, with Jews being the most targeted (more than half of the reported crimes). About one-fourth of victims were Muslims and less than six percent of victims were Christians.⁷ This data is disquieting, but intolerance of religious difference is not something new. In the colonial era pilgrims hanged Quakers; in the nineteenth century states declared war against Native Americans

5. Robert J. Dilzer. Including the Study About Religion in the Social Studies Curriculum: A Position Statement and Guidelines. [S.l: s.n.], 1984.

6. Southern Poverty Law Center. “Anti-Muslims.” <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/anti-muslim>. Accessed August 2018.

7. Federal Bureau of Investigation. “Hate Crime Statistics 2016.” <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2016>. Accessed August 2018.

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and Mormons; in the mid-twentieth century mobs attacked Jehovah's Witnesses and Catholics. Countless other examples could be identified, and yet religious intolerance is evidently growing in scope and influence. World religions courses may be one of the best ways that independent schools can perform their moral mandates to resist bigotry, discrimination, prejudice, and violence in our society.

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Learning Tools for Mindfulness

Another reason schools might choose to teach about world religions is to help students stay grounded and spiritually centered in a chaotic world. More than any other aspect of my teaching, students express appreciation for learning about mindfulness practices from Buddhism. The pres-

ures placed on young people today is like nothing we have ever seen before. High school courses are more complicated and challenging, the college acceptance process is more demanding, and our young people are confronted with daily choices about how much they consume and contribute to social media. Simple practices like conscious breathing, sitting meditation, and mindful walking help students build a capacity for serenity in the midst of their busy lives. I believe that one of the most important responsibilities I have as a religious studies teacher is to give my students tools, or what I call 'technologies,' from religious traditions that help them gain awareness of their thoughts and emotions as well as conjure a sense of peace when they are feeling anxious, angry, or depressed.

I initially pursued the study of religion because I was curious about what religion was, why people were drawn to it, and how religion has shaped American culture and politics. It began as an intellectual enterprise, a journey of the mind. I quickly discovered that learning about religion also required that I exercise my capacities for awareness and empathy. Studying about religions forces me to interrogate my assumptions and enlarge my respect and understanding of people that are different from me. This is what lies at the core of diversity education. Learning about other religions leads me to see value in things, places, and ideas that I had not considered before. It is my choice whether or not I personally adopt the val-



ues, teachings, and practices of other religions, but at least I can better grasp that my way of being in the world is merely one among many others.

I try to be transparent with my students about why I teach about world religions and why I feel so passionate about doing it. The most important thing I teach them, above everything else, is that learning about religions will help them, and all of us, become more aware, informed, and ethically responsible citizens in a complex and diverse world. ●

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