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Students in Catholic high school should be free to study more than one world religion.

“The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing horizon, for each day to have a new and different sun,” said Christopher McCandless. Submerged in the Catholic faith for over 15 years I was saturated in a particular belief system. In other words I became mentally, physically, and spiritually conditioned to see the world a certain way, to possess a very Catholic perspective. However, due to my experience learning about world religions as a senior at Saint Thomas Aquinas Catholic high school, I now understand that a change in perspective and belief systems is a good thing. Perhaps a change in curriculum at the high school level can positively change the look, the scenery, and perhaps even pave the way for a better understanding of religious coexistence. I believe that religious education should encourage the overall goal of creating a more diverse, open, and understanding society. For these reasons it is crucial to implement a curriculum that allows students in Catholic high school the freedom to study more than one religion. Before providing evidence to support my interpretation and develop my argument it is important to understand the empirical reality of Catholic education in the United States.

In the United States alone, there are over five thousand Catholic elementary schools, over one thousand Catholic secondary schools, and over two hundred Catholic colleges and universities. Such a large number of educational institutions is required by the Catholic faith that

worldwide numbers in the billions. Indeed, sixteen percent of the world's population practices the Catholic faith (Toro 1). With that said, sixty-eight percent of people raised Catholic remain Catholic. What happened to the other thirty-two percent? Fifteen percent converted to the Protestant faith, fourteen percent have become unaffiliated, and three percent are now of other faiths. The purpose of these statistics is to clarify that Catholicism is popular, but perhaps too enforced. For some reason Catholics continue to leave the church due to a constant change in society. Theologian Tom Beaudoin once said, "I think we are well past the day when the majority of American Christians have their religious identity formed in church" (Einstein 9). Could it be that some Catholics are not leaving because Catholic theology curriculum does not implement *Nostra Aetate*?

*Nostra Aetate*, enacted by Pope Paul VI in 1965, is the "Declaration of the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions" issued by the Second Vatican Council. This proclamation was one of the most intense reform efforts in the Roman Catholic Church; it granted Catholics freedom to interact with and gain wisdom from different religions. Declared by the Second Vatican Council, the turning point for the Catholic church in the 20th century, *Nostra Aetate* changed the Catholic Church and potentially unlocked its educational system. It altered the Church's attitude towards believers from multiple religions, as well as stated the unity of the human race. It also affirmed that all human beings are united because God created humankind in His image and likeness. With that said, there should not be discrimination between religions; all religions should coexist peacefully with one another. This belief emphasizes the need for understanding other religions, as well as one's own, which will hopefully lead to self-reflections in today's society.

What if students in Catholic high school had the opportunity to learn about other religions just as *Nostra Aetate* suggests? Would the freedom to explore other religions and ways of life deepen one's appreciation for the Catholic faith? Or is there a possibility for separation from the Catholic faith due to the amount of freedom received?

All of these questions are commonly asked and debated on. Both American and Biblical history offer evidentiary support that individuals should be free to study what they choose. Francis X. Clooney, American Jesuit Roman Catholic priest and author of *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders*, consciously recognized the invariably changing society of the world today. His in-depth study of comparative theology examines this change by acknowledging the continuation of studying various religions, whatever the religion may be. "Now it is true that a commitment to study religions may seem a less than urgent response to what is happening in our world today, a detour that distracts us from our own traditions, perhaps even speeding up the dissolution of particular commitments. But, in fact, the cultivation of a more interconnected sense of traditions, read together with sensitivity to both faith and reason, grounds a deeper validation and intensification of each tradition" (Clooney 6). Clooney validated his points with research and accumulated material on the importance of expanding one's religious knowledge in order to gain deeper admiration for original belief.

George Washington Carver formerly stated, "Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom." Becoming aware of other religions, beliefs, and practices can only be beneficial in educating society to openly accept people of diverse religious traditions. Since Catholic students are already in a curriculum aimed to study a set religion, there really is no harm in advancing their knowledge by granting the liberty to explore others. After all, the world

consists of over four thousand religions. Robert Pennington's research on liturgical laboratories, or spaces used for students to participate in experience-based forms of learning, discusses the fact that "religion and theological education practices would not only help students learn what beliefs are important to particular religions, but also, how religious worship practices inform and sustain beliefs" (Pennington 1). He continued with the assignment of a final paper that summarized the prior immersion-learning experiences. The majority of his students felt they received a lasting impression from the experiences of learning new world religions. One particular student concluded his paper by expressing his gratitude for his gained knowledge, as well as his appreciation for his original personal beliefs. "I not only have a new, more complete understanding of other religions, but I have a new, more fulfilling, more confident view of my own" (Pennington 7). Liturgical labs are being used as a teaching strategy that allow for exploration of other religions, which reiterate my debate on Catholic students needing the freedom to study more than one religion. The liberty to explore a variety of world religions evidently produces a deeper sense of appreciation for one's initial faith.

Raised as a Roman Catholic all my life, I have put in time, prayer, and my heart into my religion. I would not be who I am today without having learned some of the teachings I have, but those teachings are not what made me. I came in contact with the highest power when I was injured in a car accident in 2013 that changed my life forever. My only way to heal was by talking to God through prayer. He saved me, He healed me, and He opened up possibilities to me that I would have never imagined possible without Him. I believe that everything happens for a reason and part of our journey is to find that reason. Until I find mine, I am taking my accident as a planned blessing. "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts

of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end” (*The Holy Bible*, Jeremiah 29:11). If God did not want me to experience the meditation practices of Buddhism or the therapeutic yoga exercises of Hinduism, He would not have blessed me with the medical situation that I am in. I healed by experimenting with these practices, and to this day, I have incorporated them into my daily life.

With that said, I am proud to be a Catholic, but after exposure to other religions through my personal experience, I believe I should have had the option to study others all throughout my high school years. For example, senior year came around and I was still in physical therapy and still praying for patience and understanding. There were times when I was praying for a new light, a new sense of hope, and occasionally, a new sense of purpose. Thankfully, a new religion teacher, Robert Pennington, enabled me to do all that I wanted to in terms of exploring other religions. He opened my eyes to a variety of religions the world practices, which helped me recognize that many of the religions were quite similar, yet also vastly different. By detaching myself from the constant routine of Catholic dogma and encountering other religious practices I felt more cultured and became more aware of the divine in everyday life. I learned about Buddhism and the way meditation leads to a calmer self, which ultimately leads to acceptance. After practicing meditation for two years now, I accepted what happened to me. I learned that Hinduism’s practices of yoga are filled with essential physical healing properties, as well as provide an abundance of mental benefits. I am forever grateful for the independence to explore other religious practices. Without the knowledge I acquired over the years, I firmly believe I would not be as healed as I am now, both physically and spiritually.

In conclusion, I firmly believe students in Catholic high school should be free to study more than one world religion. It has been publicly proven that Catholicism is esteemed and practiced all over the world. However, by allowing students the opportunity to explore numerous world religions, they are not only affirming a sense of themselves but gaining a taste of other cultures. If learning about different religious practices helped me discover the necessities of healing properly and thoroughly, I am positive that there are plenty of other Catholic high school students who could benefit from the same grants as I did. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "A nation's culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people." I was fortunate enough to have been granted the allowance to expand my horizons and study other world religions. However, with all the freedom I received to explore other cultures, faiths, and practices, I never forgot my authentic roots. I simply experimented with all this beautiful world has to offer.

*"Believe Nothing, no matter where read it or who has said it, not even if I have said it, unless it agrees with your own reason and your own common sense."* - Buddha

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