

Sarah M. Bryant

Professor

World Religions

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World Religion Should Be Taught in United States (U.S.) Public Schools

It is imperative that children in the U.S. K-12 public school system be educated on world religion, permitting the entire student body exposure to broad, comprehensive, and unbiased views of world religions, especially as it relates to their cultures beliefs, principles and world ideologies. As a result, these young minds, many of whom are our future leaders in America, can better understand the world as a whole and choose the religious path that best suits their individual lifestyle and beliefs, even if those lifestyles and beliefs do not fall in line with those of their family or friends. Religious choices are characteristically indoctrinated by the societal affectations, standards, and family beliefs being dictated to these children; however, by offering a broad spectrum of World Religion classes, the public school is opening up these students' awareness and social consciousness far beyond merely world religions.

In order to look at why public schools should be teaching world religion to their students, it is important to review other school systems that have this curriculum in place. In a journal article written by Evans, she takes research on European public schools teaching their children about the different religions of the world to get a better understanding. Many parents, not educators, are against teaching world religions in public schools, but “parents do not, however, have a right to have schools created and funded that entirely comply with their educational or religious philosophies. Nor do parents have a ‘right that their child be kept ignorant about religion or philosophy in their education’”. (Evans, 457) Without having a right to choose what

their children are taught, this gives public schools the right to integrate world religions into the public school curriculum, thereby preparing children to comprehend their surroundings and current world events, such as the Paris bombing.

If we are to entrust our nation's future to our youth, it is every citizen's civic duty to provide the K-12 public school students in the United States with the best opportunities and education available, especially when it comes to the subject of world religions and their associated philosophies & cultures. As modeled by European educators, "Children need to be given the tools to understand the role of religion in their society and in the world, but they must be protected from indoctrination by their teachers or school officials." as stated in the International Human Rights Perspective (I.H.R.P.) by Evans. (Evans, 449) It is a widely held understanding in Europe that, "Some parents and educators believe that a curriculum that includes religious teachings is the only one that will produce morally fit students." (Evans, 450)

Also, in support of my thesis, is this compelling story of Modesto, California, which includes overwhelming data supporting the abundant community, local, and personal benefits experienced by teaching their town's public school students about world religions. Modesto, like so many American towns, has grown by leaps and bounds over many years and integrated numerous immigrant populations into its township. As is common with many recent American immigrants, they chose to settle into Modesto within individualized communities, often as solitary or dominant ethnic and religious sectors within their respective towns and cities. While Modesto grew, these various ethnic cultures and religious sectors students began to intermingle in local public schools. As a result, the public schools became a combat zone for disputes over social, ethnic and religious differences, but the most contentious issue became dealing with homosexuality. "Simmering tensions erupted into controversy in the late 1990s, when gay high

school students complained of discrimination and wanted to form a student club for support but were told they could not without parental approval.” (Lester, 188) These and other events prompted Modesto to take “a risk by forming a committee of community leaders to craft a solution to strife and misunderstandings caused by cultural differences”. After much debate, it was decided to begin integrating world religion courses into the high school curriculum. This decision presented many challenges, including coming to the realization that, “Since no other public school district in the USA requires a course on world religions, Modesto had to invent one.” (Lester, 189) After many meetings with the school board, parents, teachers, college professors, and local religious leaders, a world religion course was formed and began to be implemented into the Modesto public high schools.

After establishing the course on world religions, the Modesto School System created a tolerance survey questionnaire and presented it to the students having taken this course.

“Instituting a course on world religions helped to incorporate Modesto’s many immigrant and minority Modesto’s many immigrant and minority religious believers into the community, and the course also helped satisfy religious conservatives, who had long thought the school district was hostile to their beliefs” (Lester, 189) It was determined that by increasing the students’ knowledge of world religions, common grounds were developed and peace & tolerance was established within this student body.

Without the addition of world religions in public schools, there are many detriments, including, but not limited to, societal ignorance and intolerance, discrimination and misunderstanding of each other’s secular and non-secular communities. This negatively affects both the students and their families. Additionally, “If schools were not permitted to explore different religious traditions of the world, then children would likely develop their conception of

people of other religion from far less reliable sources.” (Evans, 458) As is the case in most religious American homes, the children primarily follow the lead of their parents and continue worshipping the established familial religion. With that being said, religious parents have strong viewpoints against having their children being taught about any other religions besides their current familial religion. “They see this as discriminatory and a limiting of the capacity of their children to live out their religion faithfully.” (Evans, 455) In the European case study, with the religious parents seeing this as discriminatory, they ask that the school board in their regions not include the class of World Religions in the curriculum for their children to study. Many parents do not want World Religions to be taught by any educator, in the public school system, because they believe that the material that will be used in class could be biased toward a religion that is not familial to their child and feel it would lead to confusing their student. “They see the inclusion of religious materials and viewpoints as foisting the religious beliefs of others on their children and fear the breakdown of secular and non-sectarian education which they consider an essential part of a secular, liberal society” (Evans, 455) Another reason “it would be inappropriate to exclude religious material is that one of the objectives of education, as it is envisaged in the international human rights treaties, is said to be the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin.” (Evans, 458) Truly, the evidence is overwhelmingly positive towards the inclusion of world religion courses being required in America’s public schools.

In summary, it is in the best interest of all Americans, including the teachers, students, townships, and cities to mandatorily educate all students about World Religions. It provides so many positive affectations throughout all of society, as proven in this document. “Despite the

concerns of some parents, teaching about religion is a legitimate topic for public schools in liberal democracies. The various international courts and committees have made it clear that schools need not exclude subject matter, including religious education, from the curriculum simply because some parents or students may have religious or philosophical objections to its inclusion” (Evans, 456) With the courts over ruling the parents, they will not have a choice in the matter for their children education in religion. As far as the concern of the curriculum being biased toward a particular religion, most schools will come up with a curriculum, such as reading a chapter out of the textbook and having an open discussion in class about the details of what they have read. They do not create any biased discussions, by using the textbook. Without world religions children may run into some sticky situations. This may include not understanding why someone of another religion is not providing eye contact when they are talking to them because they follow a different religion that the child never learned about. With children learning about the religions of the world they can understand the people around them better and create friendships that will be lasting because they are morally and socially understand of the religion that their friend claims to be. With the schools overriding the parents and the school board creating a solution to their conflict about the curriculum, they will not have a choice in the matter. Although the parents do not have a choice, the biggest reason to include World Religions in the public schools is that the children will grow up with an understanding of different religions and be able to make their own choice about which religion that they want to be a part of.

Works Cited

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