

Talking about God in Modesto

Emile Lester & Patrick S. Roberts

The vital-center, Cold War-era American politics of the 1950s nurtured social consensus in part by endorsing a bland civic religion constructed out of an amalgam of lowest-common-denominator Christianity and patriotic symbols. The satirists of that day lampooned that civic religion as evasive and boring, but there is something to be said for boredom when the alternatives become sufficiently unsettling. Those who cannot remember that era are hard-pressed today even to imagine it in the face of the freewheeling discussions we have now over the religious sources of political differences—abortion, gay marriage, genetic engineering, dealing with Islamist terrorism, and the list goes on. Whatever else we may be these days, we are not bored.

At best, however, our current theology-charged discourse distracts us from public policy issues we might actually be able to solve. It tends to polarize politics and erode social trust. At worst, it raises the question of whether we are really one nation after all, particularly at a time when significant numbers of immigrants from non-Western, non-Christian lands are compelling once-religiously homogeneous communi-

ties to confront new perspectives. While Americans express tolerant attitudes in general, many find tolerance difficult to practice when faced with people whose beliefs and ways of life differ fundamentally from their own.

This is nothing new in American history, of course, and public schools have long been a major battleground in these culture wars. We had deep disagreements in the 19th century over the place of Protestant religion in public schools, anti-Catholic prejudice and, consequentially, how schools were funded. In a different way, schools remain such battlegrounds today: Fights over teaching intelligent design in Pennsylvania and Kansas, and allowing elective Bible classes in Texas and Michigan, are recent cases in point.

In the past, American society aimed to mend the rifts of intolerance in part by teaching civics in a way that stressed America's most benign inheritance: the tradition of religious freedom. Fearing controversy and lawsuits, many public schools today instead tend to shy away altogether from teaching about religion. When religion is discussed in the curriculum, schools feel safer treating religion at a distance: Students learn more about how faith shaped past history and literature than about how to interact with adherents of the many faiths in their own communities. This is understandable, but it robs children of a complete education: We cannot prepare young Americans for responsible citizenship by ignoring religion as a factor in American and global political life, anymore than we can do so by declining to teach civics in a way that binds young Americans to the commonweal.

Fortunately, an increasing number of schol-

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ars and education leaders from different political perspectives have come to agree that religion deserves more extended discussion in the curriculum than it usually receives.¹ But this consensus is neither comprehensive nor seamless. Members of non-Christian religious minorities, atheists and agnostics fear that teaching religion will be biased in favor of religion in general and more populous religions in particular. Many evangelical Christians worry that teaching about non-Western religions might weaken their children's faith and turn them into relativists. Even those who agree about the importance of teaching about religion cannot agree how best to do it.

Nevertheless, requiring all public school students to take an extended, independent course in world religions and the American tradition of religious liberty is a promising remedy for negotiating religious differences. A pioneering Modesto, California school district developed such a course, and it works.²

An Experiment

At first glance, Modesto appears to be an unlikely candidate for a novel course on world religions and the American tradition of religious liberty. The city lies only two hours east of San Francisco but sits in California's "Bible Belt." It also is home to waves of recent immigrants from non-Christian countries. Overt religious discrimination in Modesto has been rare, but religious minorities have not always felt comfortable expressing their religious identities in public. According to Presbyterian pastor Wendy Warner, Muslims and Hindus "expressed fear about participating" and ultimately turned down invitations to join in a public memorial to September 11 victims.

The stimulus for the creation of Modesto's experiment in teaching about religion, however, was not an obvious case of religious discrimination. A decade ago, gay and lesbian high school students in Modesto complained of discrimination and wanted to form a support club. Some community members suspicious of homosexuality insisted that students receive parental permission before joining the club, and school officials initially agreed with them. That led some

students to transfer to other schools, but one victim of anti-gay taunts, Tina Ransom, went to her school counselor for help instead. According to a report in the *Modesto Bee*, the counselor told Ransom she might not always be gay and should accept Jesus into her life. This and other incidents led James Enochs, the superintendent of Modesto public schools, to charge a group of parents, teachers, students and religious leaders with the task of crafting a policy to protect all students from being harassed on the basis of race, religion, class, gender or sexual orientation. The centerpiece of the policy the group came up with was the creation of a required course on world religions and religious liberty for all ninth-grade students.

Since no other public school district in the United States requires a course on world religions and religious liberty, Modesto had to invent one. Administrators worked with teachers and college professors to design an age-appropriate nine-week course. After the group designed the basics, the district asked an advisory council composed of local religious leaders (Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Sikh, Jewish and Greek Orthodox) to review the proposed curriculum. After a vigorous debate about historical events and more besides, all members universally endorsed the basic idea behind the course.

Teachers spent weeks preparing for the class, attending special training seminars with local college professors and religious leaders, and reading texts related to the religions they were to teach. The course began with a discussion of the American tradition of religious liberty, including the Founding and the Constitution. "We tell the students over and over that a right for one is a right for all", said social studies teacher Yvonne Taylor. The remaining seven weeks focused on six major world religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Course materials ranged from geographic

¹See Warren A. Nord and Charles C. Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum* (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998).

²See our study, *Learning About World Religions in Public Schools* (First Amendment Center, Vanderbilt University and the Freedom Forum, June 2006), for more details.

roots to historical and contemporary practices. Uncomfortable discussions of religious violence, or of discriminatory practices toward women, were left for history classes.

We carefully studied the Modesto course's effect, and this, essentially, is what we found. Our surveys showed that Modesto students were supportive of basic rights and liberties in the abstract even before taking the course. More than three quarters of the students we surveyed agreed that people should be able to have religious displays outside of their homes and wear religious symbols in school. Even so, a long tradition of survey research finds Americans far more reluctant to extend rights to unpopular groups. In a pioneering study of political tolerance in 1954, for example, only one quarter of the population was prepared to allow a communist to take a job as a store clerk.

Modesto students were no exception to this rule. We asked students four questions about their willingness to allow members of the group they like the least—whether communists, gays, feminists, Christians, Muslims or some other group—to run for public office, teach in public schools, make a public speech or hold public rallies. The initial proportion of students expressing tolerant attitudes was surprisingly low, ranging from 15.2 percent to 49.6 percent on various questions. For all four of the questions, however, students were more likely to extend liberties to their least-liked group after taking the course, and the differences achieved appropriate levels of statistical significance.

We also measured for increases in "active tolerance", the willingness of citizens to move when necessary from "putting up" with difference to actively defending the civil rights of those with whom they disagree. We did this by asking five questions about students' willingness to take action in defense of religious freedom. The standard questions about political action and voting found in tolerance surveys did not produce statistically significant results among the 14-year olds in our survey. But when students were asked a question that related to their own experience, the results were different. We asked whether students would "defend a student whose religious beliefs were insulted by another student." In response 65.1 percent of students answered in the affirmative after

taking the course, compared to 55.6 percent before. The course's effects on tolerance are modest, but hardly insignificant in the world of practice. Even policy interventions that are regarded as successful, such as Head Start, rarely produce consistent, large effects.

Beyond quantitative measures are qualitative ones. Modesto's course set a foundation for thinking about respect for rights by explaining the American tradition of religious liberty and the fundamental nature of the rights of conscience. Such an education used to be conducted in high school civics classes, which have largely been replaced by amorphous social studies courses. These are not sufficient: 30 percent of the students we surveyed spoke a language other than English at home, so one must wonder just where such students are supposed to find out about their country's basic principles, if not in a public school.

Modesto's course amounts to a civics education for a new, more diverse era. Its emphasis on the reciprocity of First Amendment rights led students to connect their own desire for respect with respect for others. One student told us that if he saw a student being insulted because of her religion, he would "step up for that person because I believe in my own religion a lot, and I know what that feels like." Students' increased knowledge about other faiths dispelled ignorance, reduced suspicion and helped students realize the religious diversity in their own community.

Discussing several religions in one class made them seem more familiar. The number of students who agreed with the statement, "all religions share the same basic moral values", increased from 45 percent before the course to 63 percent after. But the course's emphasis on the commonalities among religions did not turn students into relativists. We wanted to know whether the course encouraged the belief that one religion is just as good as any other, so we asked students whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "I believe that one religion is definitely right and all others are wrong." Virtually the same number of students agreed with the statement after taking the course as before—a little more than 20 percent. Nearly one quarter of the students we interviewed told us the course deepened their commitment to their own faith.

Lessons Learned

When Modesto chose to implement its world religions course in 2000, it seemed to risk becoming fodder for the culture wars. Modesto has a large evangelical Christian population, an active group of liberal residents, and adherents of a wide range of religions. Yet today Modesto's diverse communities celebrate the course. Not a single legal or constitutional challenge has been registered. Parents have the right to opt their children out of the course, but only one out of a thousand students annually exercises this option. How did the course manage to flourish in such a divided community? The answer has implications beyond Modesto, for the town's burgeoning religious diversity and thriving evangelical Christian community mirror the nation's cultural bouillabaisse.

Religious leaders, school board members, and teachers agreed that extensive consultation with community members after designing the course was essential to calm fears. All involved praised program mediators for providing a framework for respectful discussion and disagreement. Instituting an advisory council of religious leaders was vital in pre-empting criticism. "Bring all the stakeholders to the table at first", school board President Gary Lopez advised other districts who might be considering a world religions course.

The best salesmanship would not have worked, however, without a sound product. The course is broad enough that it can further the goals of almost every group, but without allowing a single faction to claim exclusive ownership. Thus, talking more about religion held particular appeal for Modesto's evangelical Christians and religious conservatives who, like their cohorts around the nation, lamented that neglect of religion in school trivializes its role in people's lives. If conservatives primarily wanted recognition of religion, liberals and religious minorities primarily wanted a greater emphasis on the importance of tolerance. The course's emphasis on religious liberty and its connection with a policy of non-harassment for all students appealed to these constituencies. So did the focus on *world* religions instead of just the Judeo-Christian tradition.

But the course was not just a success because it gave each group a piece of the pie. Giving equal time to religious and political factions, "Crossfire"-style, might only have deepened divisions. The secret to Modesto's triumph is that divisions are not as deep as the culture wars narrative implies. Empirical social science research strongly suggests that the media exaggerates religious differences.³ A silent majority of religious conservatives, while strongly committed to faith, recognizes the value of religious liberty and accepts pluralism. A silent majority of secularists, while emphasizing the separation of church and state as that concept has evolved over the past century, realizes the contribution that robust religious views make to one's private life and to progressive causes. But the recent prominence of extremists in media-driven controversy has made it harder for Americans from diverse backgrounds to recognize what they share.

Religious pluralism and disagreement can continue to be a great source of strength for American society, but only when coupled with a commitment to religious liberty and respectful debate. The right type of religion courses, introduced in the right way, as Modesto's example proves, can enhance civic unity without eliminating productive differences or squelching individual freedom. And indeed, once the ground rules for civil discussion were in place in Modesto, dialogue transformed perceptions by unearthing common ground. Religious traditionalists agreed with secularists that the purpose of the course was not preaching, but teaching the value of religious pluralism in a democratic society.

The American Founders recognized a fundamental truth—once taught in civics classes and now more urgent than ever: All our freedoms have their roots in the freedom of conscience. Modesto's example shows that, for all their sincere and often serious disagreements, Americans' creedal commitment to religious freedom makes teaching about religion possible. Our circumstances make it necessary. 🌐

³Alan Wolfe, *One Nation After All* (Viking, 1998); Christian Smith, *Christian American: What Evangelicals Really Want* (University of California, 1998).

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