

# Attitudes of Secondary School Students Toward Religion Studies Courses

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*"A survey of the attitudes of students enrolled in secondary religion studies courses indicates student interest and positive value attached to the experience of studying about religion in school."*

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Offering courses in the academic study of religion is a growing trend in secondary education. While the Supreme Court decision in the 1963 *Murray vs. Curlett* and *Abington vs. Schempp* cases ruled against prayer and Bible reading as school-sponsored devotional activities, religion studies, when conducted as an objective, academic study included as a regular component of the curriculum, were given specific sanction in those same rulings. Since those decisions, the growth of religion studies has been largely at the secondary level, particularly in literature and social studies.<sup>1</sup>

In response to the needs in this growing curricular field, the Public Education Religion Studies Center was established in 1972 at Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio. The Center's objectives are to encourage and facilitate increased and improved teaching about religion within constitutional bounds, mainly in elementary and public schools, and where applicable in relevant areas of post-secondary education.

PERSC's Professional Advisory Council, which comprises public school teachers and administrators, teacher educators, religion scholars, and representatives of a variety of religious faiths, established general goals for public education religion studies (Bracher *et al.*, *Public Education Religion Studies*, 1974), criteria for evaluating curriculum materials, guidelines for teacher education programs, and guidelines for teacher competency (Bracher *et al.*, *Religion Studies*, 1974).

The evaluation of the conduct of religion studies in schools has been limited by a number of circumstances. The very fact that religion studies are often naturally included as a part of a larger rubric such as "literature" or "social stud-

ies" means that the evaluation of a distinct religion studies component is often difficult if not impossible. The research that has been done has been mainly concerned with the church-state issues of practice and indoctrination rather than with academic study. Therefore, although standards exist to guide appropriate religion studies in a public school, the research question of how effectively these standards were being implemented remained unanswered. Hence, the authors of this article determined as a first step to survey the attitudes of secondary students enrolled in religion studies courses to determine their evaluation of the instruction they had received.

## Data Source

The data reported were gathered during Spring 1976, when requests were sent to teachers in 239 schools in Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, and Ohio asking them to participate in administering an anonymous pencil-and-paper attitude scale to their students. The list of teachers known to be teaching religion studies courses was obtained from the files of the Public Education Religion Studies Center. The courses surveyed were at the secondary level and offered under a variety of titles, but generally were a part of either the language arts/English or social studies curriculum. Thirty-nine schools, 30 public and 9 parochial, participated in the survey. In each case, regardless of whether the schools were public or parochial, the teachers participating agreed that

<sup>1</sup> See the special five-part section "Teaching About Religions in Our Public Schools: Questions, Answers, and Imponderables" in the December 1969 issue of *Social Education*.

Figure 1. Class Atmosphere for Religion Studies  
 T = 1,227 ( ) = Adjusted Frequency

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Teacher objective and fair in dealing with different religious beliefs	536 (43.9)	515 (42.2)	101 (8.3)	43 (3.5)	25 (2.0)
2. Person of faith other than Christian would be comfortable in class.	168 (13.7)	637 (52.1)	213 (17.4)	177 (14.5)	28 (2.3)
3. Person with no religious belief would be comfortable in class.	147 (12.0)	590 (48.2)	181 (14.8)	230 (18.8)	75 (6.1)
4. Studying religion in school is different from what is done in church/temple.	371 (30.5)	646 (53.1)	132 (10.9)	51 (4.2)	16 (1.3)
5. This class was too much like a church/temple	23 (1.9)	36 (3.0)	81 (6.7)	512 (42.1)	565 (46.4)
6. Religion studies teachers should clearly indicate their own particular religious beliefs.	107 (8.7)	248 (20.3)	239 (19.6)	370 (30.4)	255 (20.9)

the courses as they were taught were consistent with the PERSC guidelines for the academic study of religion and therefore acceptable in a public school setting. The number of useable student questionnaires returned was 1,227.

The survey instrument was a 30-item, 5-

point Likert Scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" and was completed anonymously. Areas surveyed included those aspects emphasized in the PERSC guidelines for religion studies goals, teacher education, and teacher competency—objectivity, tolerance, and teacher preparation—as well as personal evaluations of the impact of the course, student motivation for taking the course, and the student's own degree of religious involvement.

### Findings and Discussion

Basic to instruction in religion studies, as in any subject, is sound planning for instruction. Students generally felt their religion studies teacher was well-prepared, with 84.4 percent of the students checking the "strongly agree" or "agree" categories.

The context of instruction, however, is probably the greatest concern of those who stress the importance of objectivity in religion studies (see Table 1). To tap student attitudes on this vital issue, a number of questions related to objectivity were posed. In response to the outright statement, "The teacher was objective and fair in dealing with differing religious beliefs," 86.1 percent of the students chose the "strongly agree" or "agree" categories. When the statement read, "A

Vera Hurchik leads class studying Major World Religions in Hazel Park (Michigan) High School.



person belonging to a religious faith other than Christian would feel comfortable in our class," only 65.8 percent chose the two positive categories. At the negative extreme, however, note that only 2.3 percent strongly felt that a non-Christian would be uncomfortable. When asked about the comfortableness of a person with no religious belief, those choosing the positive response categories dropped to 60.3 percent.

Continuing to explore the class atmosphere, students were asked their agreement with the theoretical position (which religion studies educators support) "studying religion and religious belief in school is different from what is done in church or temple." 83.6 percent responded positively with only 5.3 percent actually negative. To determine if this response might be related to classroom experience, students were asked if their own class was too much like a church/temple class. Only 4.9 percent agreed it was while 88.5 percent either "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed."

In such a sensitive area as religion studies, what should the teacher do about expressing his/her own beliefs? When students were asked agreement with the statement "Teachers of religion studies courses should indicate clearly their own particular religious beliefs," opinion was divided but the general tendency was toward non-agreement with 51.1 percent of the responses in the "disagree" or "strongly disagree" categories.

In summary, an examination of the responses to questions related to the issue of objectivity indicated that students completing religion studies courses generally feel the teacher was objective and fair. At the same time, the class atmosphere leaves room for improvement if students who are of faiths other than Christian or are non-religious are to feel comfortable. Students generally recognize that study about religion in school is different from religious education in church/temple and that, indeed, in practice in their own classroom, the distinction is maintained. Perhaps cognizant of the impact of teacher influence, students generally are opposed to teachers revealing their own religious beliefs in a class setting.

Several questions in the attitude survey attempted to determine the impact of religion studies on both the understanding and attitudes of

Table 2. Impact of Religion Studies Instruction on Students

T = 1.227 ( ) = Adjusted Frequency

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Helped me look at different religious beliefs more objectively and fairly.	211 (17.3)	613 (50.2)	258 (21.1)	116 (9.5)	22 (1.8)
2. Have more respect for different religious faiths.	253 (20.8)	522 (42.8)	265 (21.7)	138 (11.3)	41 (3.4)
3. I understand my own religious tradition better	236 (19.4)	534 (43.8)	202 (16.6)	214 (17.6)	32 (2.6)
4. I understand my own religious attitudes better.	298 (24.3)	494 (40.3)	221 (18.1)	170 (13.9)	38 (3.1)
5. I feel more committed to a particular religious faith.	116 (9.5)	313 (25.7)	260 (21.3)	397 (32.6)	133 (10.9)
6. Helped strengthen my moral and spiritual values.	173 (14.2)	449 (36.8)	360 (29.5)	187 (15.3)	57 (4.2)

the students (see Table 2). In keeping with a goal of religion studies to help students look at different religious beliefs more objectively and fairly, 67.5 percent of the students "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the course they took had helped them do this. When asked if the course resulted in their having more respect for different religious faiths, 63.6 percent responded positively.

While not all the courses surveyed dealt with the student's own religious faith, the survey asked the student to respond to "I understand better my own religious tradition as a result of taking this course." Even under the conditions described, 63.2 percent agreed that the course did have this effect. Then did the course help the student better understand his/her own personal religious attitudes better? Positive responses of 65.8 percent indicated religion studies do have this impact whether intended or not. Does what students learn and experience in a religion studies course cause them to become more committed to a particular religious faith? When asked if the course they took had this effect on them, only 35.2 percent responded positively, while 43.5 percent responded negatively. Interestingly, when asked to respond to "This course helped strengthen my moral and spiritual values," 51 percent responded positively.

When viewed as a composite, religion studies in current practice as reflected by the responses to this survey appear to encourage toler-

ance, and indeed, respect for differing religious beliefs. For significant proportions of the students, religion studies helps them better understand both their own religious tradition and their own personal beliefs. The course itself does not appear to have the effect of leading students toward a stronger particular faith commitment. This fact is consistent with general goal statements for religion studies and the emphasis on objectivity. While religion studies educators have emphasized that the intent of the academic study of religion is distinct from moral/values education, the results of this survey indicate that students feel religion studies have a positive impact on their values.

Several other questions attempted to determine student attitudes on a variety of religion-related issues. When asked to respond to the statement, "religious beliefs strongly influence a society's culture," 80.3 percent of the students responded positively. "People who have religious faith are better people than those who don't have religious faith" received only 24.5 percent agreement, while 48.6 percent of the students disagreed. The statement, "religion study better prepares a person for responding to a changing world," received positive support from 67.6 percent of the respondents. When given the related statement, "public schools should teach about religion," 64.1 percent of the students agreed.

Overall reactions of students to the religion studies courses they took were generally positive. An overwhelming 79.9 percent of the students either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that they "learned a lot in this class." Similarly, 77.7 percent responded positively to "I am glad I took this class."

What is the religious background of students who enroll in religion studies courses? Of the respondents, 70.3 percent responded positively to the statement, "I am a religious person." Membership in a religious organization was claimed by 71.1 percent of the students. Regular attendance at religious services received a 69.5 percent positive response. Only 9.7 percent of the respondents indicated positive interest in a religious vocation. Parental membership in religious organizations was reported by 70.5 percent of the students while regular religious service attendance by parents was claimed by 64.4 percent of the

students. Since religion studies courses are generally elective courses within the curriculum, it is not surprising to see that students taking religion studies courses generally are from religious backgrounds.

Parental influence may well have encouraged enrollment in the religion studies course. When asked to respond to the statement, "my parents were in favor of my taking this class," 63.8 percent responded positively with 23.8 percent strongly agreeing and 40 percent agreeing with the statement.

In conclusion, this broad survey of the attitudes of students enrolled in secondary religion studies courses indicates student interest and positive value attached to the experience of studying about religion in school. On the basis of student perception, the context in which religion studies takes place in the schools in most cases meets the criteria set by the Public Education Religion Studies Center. Future studies will need to examine discrete subject areas in order to evaluate more closely the impact of particular programs of study. [E]

### References

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