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**Effects of World Religions Courses on Undergraduates: A Pilot Study of Tolerance, Homogenization, and Contextualization**

During the spring semester 2007, the Institute for Humanities Research at Arizona State University responded to national concerns when they sponsored a series of workshops entitled “What are the humanities good for?” In this setting, faculty and interested campus members debated and articulated the value of the humanities – the mere asking of the question bearing witness to the seemingly tenuous state of the humanities within the greater university mission and curriculum. The conclusion of these panels was that the humanities *do indeed* play a critical role in developing individual and social goods, and it is imperative that their health and vitality be recognized by the greater institutional setting of which they are a part. The weakness of these conclusions however, perhaps due in part to the nature of the discipline, is that evidence is most often anecdotal and unempirical. As “science and technology” have come to dominate both funding and prestige, there is strong need to build upon existing theoretical literature with empirical data to help determine the future role of the humanities. Of course, the humanities have their own vested and legitimate interest in understanding their effects and recognizing opportunities for improvement.

In summary, this empirical study attempts to build on relevant books and articles that have either theoretically or quantitatively explored the effects of liberal arts education.

While the theoretical literature is rich, the quantitative research has been lacking, hence the contribution of this research. An additional focus of the following literature review is to select those materials applicable not only to the wider understanding of liberal arts but also specifically to religious studies and world religions courses. Finally, the pilot study also seeks to enter the conversation in the contemporary and lively discourse about world religions construction and teaching methods.

### **Review of the Literature:**

Nussbaum and Eck: *The Virtue of the Humanities and their Relationship to Citizenry*

It is argued that the reflection and critical-thinking required by the humanities enrich lives by challenging individuals to view reality in a more nuanced, less stereotypical, and thereby virtuous manner. On the social or collective level, the humanities are expected to develop a critical-thinking citizenry, more tolerant to diversity and aware of the perils of power, who will then be more protective of democratic institutions. Inspired by the ancient Greeks and specific in her endorsement of the Socratic encouragement of self-examination, Martha Nussbaum argues in *Cultivating Humanity* (1997) that cross-cultural studies are imperative for a well-functioning democracy and ultimately for development of “citizens of the world.”<sup>i</sup> Nussbaum establishes three capacities “essential to the cultivation of humanity in today’s world.”<sup>ii</sup> First, one needs to develop the skills to critically examine oneself and one’s tradition. Second, liberal arts education should assist the student in seeing him/herself as not just part of a local community but a global one. Third, the development of “narrative imagination” is crucial to developing sensitivity and

understanding relating to exercises of “walking in other’s shoes.”<sup>iii</sup> James Russell Lowell, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century poet and Harvard icon went a step further in relating narrative imagination and the humanities to nothing less than morality. He “believed that imaginative writers were in essence moral teachers, and that therefore immersion in great literature made readers more ethical.”<sup>iv</sup> Like Lowell, Nussbaum supports this ambitious and important claim when she links the humanities to virtue, ethics, and citizenry.

Contrary to conservative critics<sup>v</sup> who claim that post-modernism, affirmative action, and a minimization of traditional “classics” for a more pluralistic sampling of texts have left students searching for meaning and moral foundation, Nussbaum says the state of higher education is actually in a healthy state with new attention paid to gender, race, religion and non-Western cultures. By drawing on similar sources of conservative critics, i.e., classics of Western philosophy, Nussbaum argues that liberal post-modernist approaches in reality help fulfill premium the Greeks placed on rational reflection and self awareness. In particular, world religions curriculum, with its near limitless supply of voices and perspectives, provides ample opportunities for students and instructors alike to question traditional Western understandings and critically engage the influences of time and place. While critics may question her understanding of Greek texts or claim her work is overly anecdotal, her three recommended capacities for “cultivation” are worth considering seriously and evaluating with empirical evidence. This pilot study has attempts to test the supposed effects of liberal arts education in the area of increased tolerance and support of diverse religious expressions.

As founder of The Pluralism Project at Harvard University and author of *A New Religious America* (2001), Diana Eck has been another powerful proponent for the humanities and comparative religious studies. Her research has focused on documenting the changing face of religion in America, which she recognizes as significantly affected over the last forty years by immigration from many areas of Asia, Africa, and the Americas. She argues most Americans are unaware of the vast and significant diversity in their cities and towns and as a result, and in order to protect longstanding American notions of freedom of religion, it is imperative for increasing American religious literacy. She specifically links the importance of world religions curriculum to the ideas of responsible citizenship in undermining dangerous stereotypes and prejudices. In an increasingly global society, Eck argues that Americans cannot remain “provincial” and we/they need to move “beyond laissez inattention to religion to a vigorous attempt to understand the religions of our neighbors.”<sup>vi</sup> Like Nussbaum, Eck’s theories are not free of criticisms. Many argue that she gives too much credit to the ability of religious minorities, Hindu and Buddhist especially, to affect the Christian political mainstream. Others claim that her link between social justice and religion has more to do with race and visual differences than with particular religious doctrines or practices. Critics have reason to raise these concerns, but as a public intellectual attempting to appeal to the widest possible audience, Eck should be granted latitude in using broad brush strokes to promote a literate and tolerant citizenry. Clearly, societal interactions are enormously complex and nuanced, a point Eck

would most assuredly agree, but her project is valid and justified in promoting social awareness and cohesion.

### **Review of Quantitative Research**

Empirical evaluations of the effects of a liberal arts education have often been included with larger attempts to measure the overall impact of higher education including other social, disciplinary, and economic factors. The work of Ernest Pascarella and Patrick T. Terenzini (2005) is the foundational work for statistical analysis of higher education. Drawing conclusions from an immense number of studies, they have found that higher education (not specifically liberal arts) *does* have a significant impact on student attitudes and personal development. Furthermore, traditional means of measuring institutional excellence (libraries, endowments, faculty degrees, etc) may be overemphasized. Related to our inquiry, the research also attempts to tease out variables such as the importance of first year courses, student peer interactions, and growing older (maturation) to account for change rather than mere curriculum exposure. Even in situations when the data do not seem to show change when compared to others without college experience, there was no regression – in essence continuing to show an impact. Clearly, significant contributions are their methodological insights for measuring cognitive growth, values and attitudes, and moral development, areas that proponents of world religions curriculums espouse yet rarely attempt to substantiate.

More specific to liberal arts colleges, a key contribution was made by an ASHE Higher Education Report that includes five separate quantitative studies (2005). Collectively,

they report attempts to answer questions related to the impact of these colleges on students' personal and intellectual development (short and long term) by comparing them to other four-year institutions (research universities, regional comprehensive colleges and universities).<sup>vii</sup> The research has an impressive and rigorous methodology that uses multiple statistical tools and analysis. Showing promise if applied to comparative religious studies, the research tests student attitudes by using regression analysis for total effect, controlling for factors such as distinctive life experiences and testing for the presence of conditional effects and variables such as sex, race, ACT scores, and graduation cohort. The study forwards eight definitions of "good practices" as they attempt to define objectives of liberal arts education such as student-faculty contact, active learning, prompt feedback, high expectations, quality of teaching, and others. The ASHE report also addresses the "increasing political and societal focus on accountability," and states "one way for liberal arts colleges to meet these challenges is to find compelling evidence for their educational superiority."<sup>viii</sup> The emphasis on "accountability" and the ongoing need for "compelling evidence" reaffirms the valuable role of quantitative and empirical analysis in defending particular types of curriculum. "Unfortunately for these institutions, our findings are a mixed bag"<sup>ix</sup> as the conclusion states "modest positive long term benefits.....[are] tempered by the fact that liberal arts colleges often both charge and spend substantially more on their students than other kinds of institutions."<sup>x</sup> The study also notes that those attending liberal arts colleges were "more likely to be attending their college of first choice and to come from families with significantly higher parental income and education....and were significantly more likely

to be white.”<sup>xi</sup> While results overall are disappointing from the perspective of the liberal arts college, by being able to show even modest gains with a relatively homogeneous student body as compared to other four year institutions may in fact be a credit to the quality of education. The impressive diversity (ethnically, financially, socially, etc) at certain state or regional universities may be providing similar lessons outside the classroom through natural socialization that liberal arts colleges, for reasons of their own demographic tendencies, are attempting to confront primarily in the classroom. In fact, the need for world religions curriculum may be the greatest at more homogeneous college campuses. This is a point that builds on Derek Bok’s suggestion that undergraduate education is more than what goes on in the classroom. He explains “the two most neglected traditional purposes of undergrad education were – moral reasoning and civic education – are the two most heavily freighted with issues of values – the values seem to get developed from bull sessions with friends and classmates than from the classes they attend.”<sup>xii</sup> Obviously this begs the question whether the proper place for students to develop moral reasoning is in “bull sessions” with friends? Responsible civic and higher education leadership should make it a point of interest to enter into the conversation as well. Though the ASHE conclusion lacks the hoped for statistical significance in defending liberal arts education, other attempts at research can certainly build on the findings by attempting to show the effects of liberal arts education *within* one school versus across other schools in comparison.

Resources measuring the effects of college level courses in comparative religious studies versus liberal arts are nearly nonexistent amount. Lester and Roberts (2006), however, recently published a quantitative study on the before-and-after effects of world religions curriculum in 9<sup>th</sup> grades in the Modesto, California high schools. They conclude that the empirical evidence clearly shows a number of benefits including “increase of student support for the rights of others” and students leaving the course “with a greater understanding of the major world religions and a fuller appreciation of the values shared across differences,” all of which support the initial hopes of the school board with increasing tolerance and understanding among students.<sup>xiii</sup> The study also provides an important warning and perhaps shortcoming. Teachers fear the curriculum may be perpetuating a *warm and fuzzy* approach that skews the complexity of religious traditions and expressions. One teacher questioned whether it becomes taboo to critically evaluate religion’s impact on society. It can also be argued that the perception of “values shared across differences” perpetuate the sui generis idea of religion that has been found so problematic by scholars such as Said (1978), Asad (1993), McCutcheon (1997), and Masuzawa (2005). (The focus of the next section of this paper) This notion of distorted representation, where difference may be minimized to highlight similarities across traditions in pursuit of tolerance, needs additional investigation, and could be beneficially applied to a higher education scenario. Nevertheless, the positive results of the Modesto study provide a reason for optimism for the humanities to continue pursuing and building upon such empirical studies. This optimism should be tempered as some will argue that the virtue business is better suited in family or religious settings, and higher education

should be free of values orientation. But if society deems certain characteristics are required for a responsible citizenry, and if these can be promoted by the humanities, the discipline should have readily available (quantitative) materials in its defense.

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### **Review of World Religions Discourse Analysis**

Scholars such as Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) and Russell McCutcheon (1997), following the earlier concerns posited by Edward Said (1978) and Talal Asad (1993), have raised serious theoretical questions about today's world religions discourse. The suggestion is that the majority of today's religious studies instructors are naively participating in a discourse that arose, and continues, to perpetuate theological, colonial, and perhaps even racist underpinnings as a result of its historical emergence and evolution.

Masuzawa's *The Invention of World Religions* (2005), a title that aptly sums up her concern with the "constructed" and perhaps artificial nature of the discourse, shows how varying traditions came to be understood and accepted in the "family" of world religions. She begins with 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century academic attempts to discover the origins and perceived evolution of religion through time. She posits that this perspective was based on the assumption that "Europe was the triumphant vanguard and all other civilizations and non-European civilizations merely marked various interim phases already surpassed by the people of European descent."<sup>xiv</sup> Examples of this can be seen in E.B. Tylor's notion of religious "survivals" as relics of the past, and J.G. Frazer's social evolutionary proposal speculating that that "primitive" society is identified with the practice of magic,

then with time evolved into religious systems, and culminated with science (modern civilized and European humans). So to look at the ‘exotic other’ was to go back in time; and to speculate on the future was to either predict the demise of religion as a historical artifact or to defend the ‘most evolved’ brand of Christianity as generated by enlightenment forces.

Masuzawa then moves to her main contribution in tracing the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century emergence of the world religions classification system. She shows it was closely aligned with philology and with its corollary, geographical-racial categories that were primarily divided between Indo-European (Aryan) and Semitic language families. This suggests a move from an evolutionary model to a pseudo-geographic model but Masuzawa rightly maintains that substituting one model for another did not liberate the discourse from elitist and prejudicial perspectives. Using the degree of voice inflection as the barometer of linguistic and cultural “advancement,” scholars imagined that inflection resulted “naturally and directly from the innermost spiritual urge of a people.”<sup>xv</sup> Leaving aside the linguistic merits, or lack thereof, it is worth noting the ethnocentric privileging of “innermost spiritual urge” has likely parallels of Protestant emphases on personal experience (and related to reformation and enlightenment trends) over competing Catholic ritualistic traditions and traditional Church authority. But by using inflection as the determining and justifying factor, the Indo-European (Aryan) family of languages that included Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin, were perceived to be most advanced and representative of a higher culture. Meanwhile, the perceived lack of inflection in the

Semitic languages provided an opportunity for religious and cultural denigration as Arabic and Hebrew were considered “decidedly imperfect and inchoate in inflectional capability, and with this imperfection came all the limitations that characterized their native speakers as a race.”<sup>xvi</sup> Everyone else was considered part of a third domain, “consisting of innumerable language whose genealogical relation was less certain” but was perceived “to be even further removed from the inflection qualities of the Semitic languages.”<sup>xvii</sup>

The results of this understanding were the elevation of Buddhism as the first non-Christian “world religion” for its perceived Indo-Aryan attributes, while “scientifically” justifying and perpetuating anti-Semitism and condemnation of Jews and Arabs as being of the “same stock.”<sup>xviii</sup> Masuzawa goes on to explore the complicated and fiercely debated eventual inclusion of Islam as an autonomous tradition rather than merely a Christian heresy. In essence, Masuzawa summarizes the western invention of world religions as a product of poorly informed justifications based on linguistic, geographic, and racist underpinnings. Clearly the original construction of the discourse is most problematic; however, today’s question is whether the discipline has been reformed and rehabilitated or do perhaps the origins necessitate an abandonment of the enterprise?

In another suggestive title, *Manufacturing Religion* (1997), Russell McCutcheon argues that the contemporary academy still harbors ideological and methodological shortcomings. But rather than focus on the 19th century academy, McCutcheon focuses

on the 20<sup>th</sup> century religious studies icon Mircea Eliade and the persistence the ‘history of religions’ approach. First written in 1957, Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane* proposed that the scholar firsts needs to step outside the modern world and enter the world of “archaic man.”<sup>xxix</sup> In this primordial world, still in existence in certain tribes and societies (and watered down in the industrialized world), human life is lived in the “sacred and the profane” as the “two modes of being in the world”<sup>xxx</sup> where the sacred is “the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world”<sup>xxxi</sup> and the profane is that which is ordinary and mundane. Similar to the Lutheran theologian Rudolph Otto’s (1958) understanding of the ‘numinous’ as a mysterious and awesome individual human experience, Eliade’s autonomous, universal, and sui generis element is that which also signals religious activity. McCutcheon understands this idea of the sacred to be “metaphysically loaded, strictly personal, essential, unique, prior to, and ultimately distinct from, all other facets of human life and interaction.”<sup>xxxi</sup> McCutcheon goes on to argue that when viewing religion through this lens, the object of the study of religion becomes largely metaphysical and is insulated from naturalistic or reductionist approaches of understanding. Furthermore, when the “archaic man” is idealized before the lamentable consequences of today’s highly technological and industrialized world, to look at the “archaic man” is to rediscover the past and its “lost values.” Like the evolutionist theories proposed by Tylor and Frazer, to look at the “other” is to go back in time. These “exotic” or “basic” religions provide clues to the West for how it once acted when it was more “primitive” or “archaic.” In simplistic

terms, the East (often also the South and Africa) becomes the holder of tradition and the West becomes a maker of history.

Critics argue that this approach, while valorizing the religious “other,” distorts reality by lifting religious activity from its original context, downplaying the tradition’s own capacity for political, social and economic forces, and masking and perpetuating certain theological and political ideologies. Beginning with the theological implications, McCutcheon asserts that phenomenological approaches, as seen in Schleiermacher (1986), Otto (1958), Eliade (1987), and others, mirrors not only Protestant identification of religion with personal experience and intuition but also serves a wider Christian need to reconcile their own religion with the reality of autonomous traditions discovered in the age of colonialism. By minimizing context and historicity, this approach promotes a theological universalism – a “universalism through essentialism.”<sup>xxiii</sup> McCutcheon also notes that “many comparative textbooks continue to presume that the fundamental issue to be addressed in the classroom is the problem of religious plurality.”<sup>xxiv</sup> By using *sui generis* as a common denominator of all humans, the history of religions scholar is able to reconcile religious diversity in a way that is more akin to a type of theology of pluralism rather than the academic study of religion. He urges instructors to “facilitate the leap from the student’s preexisting folk understanding to scholarly analysis”<sup>xxv</sup> and leave theology to the theologians. The alternative for McCutcheon is a naturalistic approach that demystifies religion through a rigorous exploration of the factors contributing to

religious expression; namely, the historical, social, economic, and psychological forces at work whereby differentiation is not compromised for an artificially constructed unity.

In addition to this “smuggled theology,” Said (1978), Asad (1993) and McCutcheon (1993) have forcefully argued the existence of masked political and ideological power motifs at work in *sui generis* scholarship. Simply stated, when the “archaic man” is minimized, as if not to have a historical and social context of his own, these societies and its people are reduced to an imagined and primordial core and are rendered without voice, power, and require interpretation; thus, are more easily categorized, defined, and ultimately controlled. So why has this essentialized notion of religion persisted in the academy? McCutcheon offers a number of explanations. For starters, and for institutional protection of their departments, scholars of religion are sympathetic to the *sui generis* claim that acts to protect their areas of study. Without something distinctly “religious” to study, the field lacks an organizing principle and may simply be absorbed by or explained away by other cultural studies disciplines i.e. psychology, political science, sociology, psychology, or anthropology. Secondly, it is also suspected there are a great percentage of “religious-friendly” scholars who are comfortable with a phenomenological approach that creates space for the mysterious to operate. On a more pedagogical level, McCutcheon suggests that with the daunting task of covering world religions in a single semester the *sui generis* claim provides a convenient lens for instructors to synthesize religious diversity and judging by the course’s popularity, a seemingly attractive framework for students as well. Lastly, the

popularity of the course helps justify the existence of the department in a market driven environment. And to question the foundations of this course is to run the risk of “biting the hand that feeds” a department’s autonomy and budget.

For the conscientious and well-intentioned instructor of religious studies, these critiques are worthy of attention. Yes, the beginnings of the discourse are regrettable. But, the criticisms have played an important role in bringing awareness to instructors, improvements to textbooks, and development of naturalistic theories of diversity. Furthermore, the increasingly diverse faculty and student bodies at larger public institutions would seem to be a mitigating factor to concerns surrounding hidden theological agendas. This pilot study has, nevertheless, attempted to take these theoretical concerns seriously and attempts to assess two of them quantitatively. Namely, are students who have taken a world religions course more likely to see religious groups as ‘essentially’ the same? And are they likely to recognize contextual forces (time, geography) that influence religious expression?

### **The Study: Design, Methods, and Results**

To build on and respond to the sets of literature previously described, an online survey tool at [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com) was used was designed to gather the quantitative data. A stratified random sample was employed with an over-sampling of religious studies majors to produce a 600 person sample of which roughly half were religious studies

majors. The number of returned surveys was 110 of which sixty-one percent had at some point in their academic career taken a world religions course. Though this is a low response rate it should be interpreted as more a product of student time demands and should not introduce bias into the results. As far as religious identity, forty-one percent of the students surveyed recognized themselves as Christian while forty-seven percent defined themselves as “agnostic,” “atheistic,” or “other.” The survey also had Jewish (3.5%), Muslim (4.4%), Hindu (1.8%), and Buddhist (1.8%) respondents. The independent variable in this study was whether the students had taken a college-level world religions course. The dependent variables were the various attitudinal effects which the sets of literature suggested are produced.

Three major areas were addressed by the survey questions: If a student has taken a world religions class, does it impact his/her attitude towards religious tolerance, and are the speculation of Nussbaum and Eck substantiated? Secondly in response to the “smuggled theological” concerns, to what extent do former students of world religions courses view various religions as the “same” or “similar” (homogenization effect) as compared to those who have not? Lastly and in response to neo-colonial concerns, do world religions courses improve students’ abilities to recognize the contextualized (i.e. time or geographically influenced) nature of religion? The research findings are organized in these three respective areas.

The attempt to develop a “tolerance scale” by combining the six survey questions designed to measure attitudes related to acceptance/fear/tolerance resulted in a poor reliability statistic as noted by Chronbach’s Alpha of .193. which tells us that the survey questions need to be analyzed separately. This is represented in table 1 and organized in the order of approximate significance of the Kendall’s tau-b. The use of Kendall’s tau-b as the statistical measure in this context is underscored by Nachmias and Frankfort-Nachmias who note “when a large proportion of the observations are concentrated in only few categories, there will be many tied pairs. When there are many tied pairs researchers [use] Kendall’s tau-b.”<sup>xxvi</sup>

**Table 1: Measuring Tolerance Propensities**

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Kendall's tau-b value	Approx. Sig.
<b>Students, faculty and staff should learn more about world religions</b>					0.177	0.066
Have Not Taken WR Course			42.6%	57.4%		
Have Taken WR Course			23.3%	75.0%		
<b>I would defend a student of ASU if their religious beliefs were the object of hate speech</b>					0.152	0.121
Have Not Taken WR Course	2.2%	4.4%	44.4%	48.9%		
Have Taken WR Course	1.9%	1.9%	32.1%	64.2%		
<b>People of all religions should be able to put religious displays outside their homes as long as it is on private property</b>					0.144	0.129
Have Not Taken WR Course		10.6%	42.6%	46.8%		
Have Taken WR Course	1.7%		39.7%	58.6%		
<b>I believe that one religion is definitely right and the others are wrong</b>					-0.073	0.425
Have Not Taken WR Course	10.4%	4.2%	8.3%	77.1%		
Have Taken WR Course	10.0%	11.7%	8.3%	70.0%		
<b>Students, faculty and staff should not be critical of any religion</b>					-0.044	0.628
Have Not Taken WR Course	15.2%	15.2%	13.0%	56.5%		
Have Taken WR Course	10.0%	20.0%	23.3%	46.7%		
<b>Students and staff should be able to wear any religious symbol they choose</b>					0.022	0.821

Have Not Taken WR Course		6.5%	37.0%	56.5%		
Have Taken WR Course		1.7%	41.7%	56.7%		

While the relationship does not reach the traditional .05 level of significance, the actual significance level of .066 to .129 is partly the result of a small sample size and suggests a possible avenue for future research. When analyzed, the results show a positive slope on each for the first three questions, suggesting that those respondents who have taken a world religions course are more supportive when it comes to encouraging others to learn more about other religions, defending those whose religious views are under attack, and supporting individual rights to display religious displays on private property. This is good news for proponents of the course who argue the values of developing citizenry for a tolerant and pluralistic society. There were no relatively significant findings with the other three questions to suggest an alternative understanding.

The second major research question attempts to evaluate the claims of critics of world religions curriculum who maintain that the current approach presents a distorted and “essentialized” version of religion that does not respect the true complexity of religious and cultural systems. Similar to the tolerance question, the attempt to develop a “homogenization scale,” this time by combining the four survey questions designed to measure attitudes related to ideas of an “essential” religiosity, ultimately resulted in a poor reliability statistic as noted by Chronbach’s Alpha of .594. Due to its value of less than .7, we once again see that the survey questions need to be analyzed separately. This

is represented in the Table 2 and organized in the order of approximate significance of Kendall’s tau-b.

**Table 2: Measuring Propensity to See “All Religions as the Same”**

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Somewhat Disagree</b>	<b>Somewhat Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Kendall's tau-b value</b>	<b>Approx. Sig.</b>
<b>People of all religions share the same basic moral values</b>					0.184	0.04
Have Not Taken WR Course (NO)	15.6%	28.9%	51.1%	4.4%		
Have Taken WR Course (Yes)	3.4%	29.3%	51.7%	15.5%		
<b>I believe that some religions are more violent than others</b>					0.119	0.188
Have Not Taken WR Course (NO)	23.9%	39.1%	26.1%	10.9%		
Have Taken WR Course (Yes)	16.7%	38.9%	20.4%	24.1%		
<b>People of all religions try to answer the same questions about life</b>					0.189	0.85
Have Not Taken WR Course (NO)	4.3%	14.9%	51.1%	29.8%		
Have Taken WR Course (Yes)	3.4%	11.9%	55.9%	28.8%		
<b>People of all religions basically believe the same things</b>					0.004	0.969
Have Not Taken WR Course (NO)	41.3%	21.7%	34.8%	2.2%		
Have Taken WR Course (Yes)	39.7%	27.6%	25.9%	6.9%		

For the question of whether “people of all religions share the same basic moral values,” the results suggest that respondents who have taken a world religions course are more likely to respond that all religions share the same basic values (sig = .04). These findings would seemingly lend support to critics who claim that world religions courses have a homogenizing effect that limits students’ abilities to contextualize and differentiate. On the other hand, they could be interpreted that those who have been exposed to religious diversity in an academic setting have developed their sense of common human elements “at work” across religious and cultural divides – leading perhaps to increased levels of tolerance and sympathy as noted by the research in the preceding section.

Additional support is provided to the critics on this question of homogenizing when another positive Kendall's tau-b value is derived to the extent a student thinks that "some religions are more violent than others." It is however, although at a more questionable significance level of .19. This would lead one to infer that those who have taken a world religions course are less likely to think that some religions are more violent than others, in other words, that religions are similarly violent or nonviolent.

The last two survey questions designed to test the same "homogenizing effects" of world religions classes proved insignificant. The approximate significance of "people of all religions basically believe the same things" and "people of all religions try to answer the same questions about life" were .97 and .85 respectively. Thus, not surprisingly when these three questions were combined in a "similarities" scale, the findings were also insignificant.

The third major research question was an attempt to evaluate another criticism closely related to the homogenizing effects. If a curriculum focuses too much on similarities, critics are concerned that students will fail to develop critical thinking skills particularly in understanding the deeply contextual nature of religious systems and expressions.

**Table 3: Measuring Propensity to See the Impact of Geography and Time**

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree	Kendall's tau-b value	Approx. Sig.

<b>I believe that geographic location influences religion</b>					-0.118	0.211
Have Not Taken WR Course		6.7%	33.3%	60.0%		
Have Taken WR Course	1.7%	5.0%	46.7%	46.7%		
<b>I believe that religions basically stay the same over time</b>					0.054	0.551
Have Not Taken WR Course		17.4%	47.8%	34.8%		
Have Taken WR Course	6.8%	15.3%	30.5%	47.5%		

As shown in Table 3, both questions designed to test this criticism were deemed insignificant and therefore not worthy of further interpretation. Upon further reflection, the problem is most likely a methodological one in that the questions were lacking a required complexity to spur differentiation in its responses. A question such as “I believe that religions basically stay the same over time” is perhaps too “easy” and the predicted responses seem to confirm this. Future surveys will need to take this into account.

The survey also included three “special interest” questions not directly applicable to the above categories, but intended to shed light on those who have taken world religions courses. Two of the three questions showed very close to significant results. Assuming some liberalization due to sample size, we will attempt to read the results as suggestive.

**Table 4: Perceptions of “Religious People” and the Suggested “Secularizing Effect”**

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Somewhat Disagree</b>	<b>Somewhat Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Kendall's tau-b value</b>	<b>Approx. Sig.</b>
<b>Religious People Tend to be more intolerant than non-religious people</b>					-0.166	0.068
Have Not Taken WR Course	18.2%	27.3%	43.2%	11.4%		
Have Taken WR Course	29.6%	35.2%	25.9%	9.3%		
<b>While on campus, sometimes I feel uncomfortable because of my religious beliefs</b>					-0.159	0.084
Have Not Taken WR Course	50.0%	17.4%	28.3%	4.3%		
Have Taken WR Course	66.7%	11.7%	20.0%	1.7%		

The first question Table 4 seems to suggest with its negative relationship that those who have not taken a world religions course think that “religious” people tend to be more intolerant than “non-religious” people. This can be interpreted that those who have taken a world religions class are less alarmed or concerned about other religious people. This has significance in religious studies attempts to deconstruct stereotypes and caricature images of the “other.” It may also suggest a greater ability to contextualize reasons for “intolerance” beyond religious factors. The second question seems to show that those who have not taken a world religions course are less likely to feel uncomfortable on campus for reasons of their religious beliefs. This can be interpreted perhaps as a “secularizing effect” because those who have taken a world religions course seem more comfortable in a secular setting such as a large public university. Conversely, this may not necessarily be an effect of the course as much as trend of the type of student most interested in enrolling in such a course. Here, an entry and exit survey would be of benefit.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

A significant limitation is the uncertainty that any direct changes revealed by the data are necessarily a result of the world religions curriculum. It is highly likely that the students under study are in the midst of a highly formative period of life in which they are dealing with multiple social and intellectual issues. Changes witnessed in this pilot study, positive

and negative, may be the result of other stimulus, including other humanities or social science courses, rather than necessarily world religions. However, the trend at large public institutions such as Arizona State University is that first-year students are the majority of those enrolling in the introductory world religions course. This suggests these students would not have as much “outside” influencing exposures and stimuli as those who have been in college longer. For future research, an entry and exit survey administered before and after the semester, will be of benefit in more clearly noting the effects of the curriculum. Secondly, the future survey should also be administered to non-religious studies students to further control for the curriculum’s effects. A second limitation of this study is the high likelihood that results may vary based on different instructor styles of each of the instructors and in my opinion to the lesser extent in the particular textbook. Perhaps these variables can be controlled or the data can be presented to account for such differences. While initially seen as a limitation, this variable may provide an opportunity to recognize those particular teaching styles or textbooks that engender the greatest measurable differences in surveyed students. Lastly, and perhaps of most concern, is the likelihood that students who enroll in world religions courses are, from the beginning, disposed differently than their counterparts who do not choose to take the course. In the future, this “self-selection” factor can perhaps be minimized by structuring a survey question to measure the desire of those respondents to take the course if they have not already done so.

## **Conclusions**

With questions dealing with tolerance, a significant correlation appears between a more open and embracing idea of religious diversity than the student counterparts who had not taken the course. As for the question of an “essentialized” or the sui generis basis of religion that is supposedly perpetuated by contemporary curriculum, attempts to scale these dependent variables proved unsuccessful. While this result may be blamed on overly simple or “softball” survey questions, it may also be a preliminary indication that while the critical discourse scholarship should be considered carefully, what the students are actually absorbing may be a different matter. We should not be quick to discredit student’s abilities to recognize the nuanced and complex nature of religious systems and expressions. In light of the long history of contesting the role and direction of the liberal arts, it is apparent that clearly articulated defenses of the humanities serve an important need. By conducting empirical research on one aspect of the liberal arts, in this case world religions curriculum, this research succeeded in evaluating the ability of religious studies to promote a virtuous and healthy citizenry.

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