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How teaching world religions brought a truce to the culture wars in Modesto, California

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Despite a growing consensus among scholars and activists about the importance of religion, proposals for teaching about it have often been a source of division rather than unity in American public school districts. Faced with familiar cultural conflicts, Modesto, California, chose to become the first public school district in the USA to require all high school students to take an extended and independent course in world religions. The results of the first, large-scale empirical research on the effects of teaching about religion in USA public schools provides evidence that Modesto's bold approach was worth the risk. Surveys and interviews administered to students show statistically significant increases in students' knowledge about other religions, and levels of passive tolerance – willingness to refrain from discrimination – and active tolerance – willingness to act to counter discrimination. The course has not been the subject of lawsuits or complaints by parents and has gained acceptance among all of Modesto's religious groups.

Keywords: tolerance; world religions; relativism

This is a story about how mutual respect for religious rights grew out of strife, and begins in a hardscrabble land that has drawn migrants in search of opportunity since the Gold Rush. Modesto, California, lies not in the valley of movie stars but in the Central Valley, the breadbasket for much of the USA irrigated by the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers. Like many urban centres, Modesto has welcomed immigrants from around the world, including Latin American Catholics, European Jews, Asian Sikhs, Buddhists, Hindus and Arab and non-Arab Muslims. Recent immigrants often stick to their own communities, and single ethnic or religious groups dominate some sectors.

The only place where the cultures meet in a relatively unscripted domain is the public school. In the recent past, the common ground of the American public school has been a battleground for disputes over cultural and religious differences around the nation. Many American communities bear the scars of the culture wars, the misunderstanding and mutual suspicion brought about by disputes over the teaching of evolution in schools, decisions about whether to grant religious holidays and other cultural divides (Hunter 1991; Del Fattore 2004). Most community officials decide to play it

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safe, they think, and banish as many of the cultural divisions as possible from public schools.

Sometimes, this strategy seems to work well enough, if working well can be measured by an absence of conflict. Other times, the strategy fails completely, as when conservative Christians in Dover, Pennsylvania, fought back by taking control of the school board and mandating the teaching of intelligent design. School districts that discuss religion in a careless manner run the risk of inviting lawsuits and running afoul of the US Constitution's First Amendment prohibition on establishing a religion. For instance, in Contra Costa, California, in 2001, a history teacher, using an instructional guide, told students to take on roles as Muslims for three weeks to help them understand what Muslims believe (Egelko 2005). Students used Muslim names, recited prayers in class and tried fasting. After controversy erupted in the Contra Costa community, other school districts thought twice before attempting to discuss religion in depth in the classroom.

Modesto, however, took a risk by forming a committee of community leaders to craft a solution to strife and misunderstandings caused by cultural difference. Rather than keeping discussion of religion out of the public schools, the committee brought religious differences to the fore by requiring a course on world religions and the American tradition of religious liberty for all ninth graders. The idea for a required course achieved consensus, but it was not without its sceptics. What if it turned the public schools into another battleground in the culture wars? As social scientists interested in how communities cope with diversity, we set out to evaluate Modesto's experiment. Other communities struggling with how to incorporate religion into public schools have something to learn from Modesto, but first they should understand the particular pressures that gave rise to Modesto's experiment.¹ We describe the cultural context of Modesto, California, the inception of the course and its content. We then discuss our methodology, how we constructed and administered the survey and to whom. Finally, we present our results and their implications for ideas about tolerance and respect and about religious and civic education.

Tensions in Modesto

Modesto has always struggled with the challenges posed by diversity. Over the past 40 years, the town has made room for an array of immigrants, including Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims. Five evangelical Christian 'megachurches' with over 2500 members have sprung up alongside mainline Protestant and Catholic denominations and a flourishing Jewish community. Overt incidents of religious prejudice have been rare, but the cultural divide bred mutual suspicion. At a lecture about the future of California's Central Valley at Stanford University, Modesto resident Emy Peterson (personal interview, 2006) captured the views of many residents when she asked 'You have all these new people coming in, but why do we have to accommodate them?'

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. Some students transferred schools while others suffered in silence. One of the student victims of anti-gay taunts, Tina Ransom, went to her school counsellor for help. The counsellor told Ransom that she might not always be gay and she should accept Jesus into her life (Rowland 2001).

Superintendent James Enochs intervened in 1997, holding town hall style meetings. He told a group of parents, teachers, students and religious leaders to craft a policy to protect all students from being harassed on the basis of anything, whether race, religion, class, gender or sexual orientation. The 115-member group sounded a cacophony until Enochs brought in a mediator, Charles Haynes, from the First Amendment Center, a non-profit foundation dedicated to upholding First Amendment principles (Herendeen 2002).

Haynes told the group to start over. Should gay students be harassed in school, he asked. No, everyone agreed. The group set to work on a 'safe schools' policy that would reduce taunting and other forms of harassment and teach students that people should respect each other even when they disagree (Bird 1998).

Haynes had given community mediation workshops before, but never one in which a community wanted to implement so much of what they talked about in the seminar. The district 'took what I said and made the leap', he said. 'I didn't think they were going to do it' (Haynes, personal interview, 8 May 2006). The committee crafted a package deal. The district adopted a policy in favour of safe schools and instituted a 'human relations' seminar to encourage students to get along with one another and a 'day of respect' that featured outside speakers talking about various forms of discrimination.

The centrepiece of the policy, however, was the creation of a course on world religions and religious liberty. At first glance, a course on religion seems like an odd outgrowth of a controversy over homosexuality in the public schools. In fact, this was only the latest controversy that stemmed from misunderstanding. Instituting a course on world religions helped to incorporate 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. 'If you have tensions in your community where religious conservatives are distrustful, if that distrust is so high, you have to say "we're going to listen to you, we're going to take you seriously"', said Haynes (personal interview, 8 May 2006).

Creating a course

Since no other public school district in the USA requires a course on world religions, Modesto had to invent one. Administrators worked with teachers, educational consultants and college professors to design a nine-week course intended to enhance students' knowledge of world cultures and promote mutual respect. After the group designed the basics of the course, the district asked religious leaders to serve on an advisory council to review the course. The council drew on members of the Protestant, Catholic, Islamic, Sikh, Jewish and Greek Orthodox communities; a few other religious communities were asked but chose not to participate. Father Magoulias of Modesto's Greek Orthodox Annunciation Church, who participated on the council, said there were spirited discussions about how much time should be allotted to each religion and the characterisation of pivotal events, such as the split between Orthodox and Catholic churches in 1054, but described the meetings as 'generally amicable'.

Only approval by the school board remained. Since, according to school board president Gary Lopez, 'there's a strong conservative faction in Modesto, and we have a few board members who pretty much are aligned with that faction in town', those members initially had 'some concern' about the course. Once it was clear that the

course was attempting to promote respect and not indoctrinate students in one belief, the school board's seven members voted unanimously in favour of the course.

Content of the course

The first two weeks of the course begin with the US 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. Classes go over all of the rights of the First Amendment, including freedom of religion and freedom of speech, and locate their common origin in a right of conscience. These lessons were reinforced by historical examples. Students learned about Puritan repression of religious heresy during the early days of the American colonies, and of Roger Williams's heroic resistance to this repression.

The remaining seven weeks of the course focus on seven major world religions in the following order based on their appearance in history [sic]: Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Sikhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The district determined that the most neutral way to teach the sequence of religions was to teach religions in the chronological order that they appeared in history. Teachers were not free to deviate from this sequence. Discussions of religions range over founding dates, geographic roots and historical and contemporary practices that give a Benetton world of many colours flavour to world religion. The course leaves discussion of religious violence or discrimination toward women to history classes. The approach to religion taken in the course is thus descriptive rather than comparative to insure neutrality and avoid controversy. Students are not, for instance, encouraged to interpret religious texts based on their historical context.

This concern with neutrality influenced the school district's textbook selection. At the time we surveyed students, they read *The Usborne book of world religions* which runs to 60 pages. Teachers and administrators emphasised that the book allotted equal time to Western and Eastern religions and included many pictures.

Teacher preparation

Teachers spent weeks preparing for the class, attending special training seminars and reading a classic text on world religions as well as publications from the First Amendment Center. In training sessions with teachers, First Amendment Center consultant Marcia Beauchamp supplied the civic context of the course. Beauchamp lectured about the historical origins of religious liberty, the meaning of the US Constitution's First Amendment, and major Constitutional cases interpreting the First Amendment. We all possess inalienable rights that no human authority can revoke, Beauchamp told teachers, and our responsibilities not only to tolerate but to actively defend others' freedoms flow from the existence of these rights. But respecting students' rights, Beauchamp cautioned, does not mean eliminating differences. Robust deliberation is the lifeblood of American democracy as long as it is respectful. Teachers found themselves returning repeatedly to Beauchamp's advice in the midst of trying situations.

Evaluating a bold experiment

As social scientists concerned about religious freedom and the challenges posed by diversity, we made the course the focus of the first extended empirical and statistical

research conducted on the effect of teaching about religion in US public schools. Beginning in 2004, we surveyed the same students twice, once before they took the course, and once after.² The surveys consisted of 75–80 questions measuring the course's effects on: (1) respect for rights in general, (2) respect for religious diversity, and (3) students' level of relativism. A pre-test determined this was the maximum number of questions students could answer during the time period the school district granted us. Every question on the first survey was used on the second survey, and worded identically. The only difference between the two surveys was that the second survey included four questions on students' evaluation of the course which would have been irrelevant before students took the course. Discussion and wording of particularly notable questions is examined below in the sections on the surveys' results. 'Tolerant' responses were coded as 1 and 'intolerant' or less tolerant responses as 0 in most instances to distinguish between these poles.

Approximately 3000 students took the course the year we conducted the survey. We surveyed at random as many classes of students as logistics allowed and had a 70% response rate for those classes. California state law prohibited us from asking about students' religious identifications in the survey. In the January 2005 iteration of our survey, 355 students participated. Slightly more than half (55%) were female. Slightly under half (41%) were white. Almost as many respondents (38%) were Hispanic, and 29% reported speaking a language other than English in their homes. Blacks and Asians each constituted 6% of our sample, and 9% defined their race and ethnicity as 'other'. Our sample was almost evenly split politically. Forty-three percent claimed to have supported the Democrat John Kerry in the 2004 Presidential election while 35% supported President Bush, and the other 21% had a different preference or no preference at all.

We also interviewed 23 students as well as teachers, school administrators and Modesto religious community leaders to get a better sense of how they experienced the course. The students were selected by teachers, but teachers were not present for interviews. Teachers chose a group of students who represented a mix of levels of interest in the course, academic achievement and religious backgrounds. Modesto's course provided particularly fertile ground for statistical research because the course is required. This eliminated self-selection bias among students, and enhanced both the internal and external validity of our results. Nevertheless, we caution other researchers in generalising beyond Modesto, and we include a narrative about the course's creation and social context in order to frame our study as an inquiry into one community's solution for problems that arose from cultural diversity.

Results: the course's effect on tolerance

A well-functioning democracy ensures that all of its citizens feel included so that they trust one another and can contract freely in the marketplace and participate in politics to make collective decisions (Putnam 2000). A heterogeneous society with multiple religious groups must cultivate two types of tolerance for religious liberty: passive and active. People show passive tolerance when they refrain from overt discrimination and when they voice support for basic rights and liberties. Schools teach passive tolerance when they discourage students from insulting religious groups or from making policies that discriminate against a religious group.

Despite its best efforts, a democratic society is unlikely to eradicate all instances of overt discrimination. When social groups sense threat, they often lash out at groups

that seem different as a first response (Lester and Roberts 2006). When some groups are demonised, a democracy needs a significant number of its citizens to protest this intolerance. Furthermore, even the absence of overt discrimination does not guarantee that members of all religions feel included. Sometimes the failure to acknowledge the presence of religious minorities or the value of religion in general may lead religious believers to feel reluctant about celebrating their religious identities in public.

For instance, our interviewees recounted few incidents of overt religious discrimination in Modesto. Beneath this apparent calm, however, lies a more complex story that demonstrates the inadequacy of passive tolerance. Modesto's religious minorities may not have feared overt persecution, but they also did not feel comfortable expressing their religious identities in public. Modesto Bee reporter Amy White observed that '[s]ince September 11 [religious minorities] are very cautious about being singled out' and 'may not want to advertise if they're having a big event'. 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 9/11 victims sponsored by the city.

While passive tolerance involves refraining from overtly discriminatory behaviour, active tolerance involves taking action to defend vulnerable religious groups against insult and discrimination. It can range from small tokens such as words spoken to a friend or engaging in political behaviour to protect a victimised group. Our democracy not only needs citizens, for instance, to refrain from preventing Muslim groups from holding rallies in public parks, it needs citizens who actively protest the restriction of rights of conscience. One important distinction is in order, however. The vigorous and active defence of rights of conscience is a form of civil respect for the ability of people to follow whatever combination of faith, reason and mysticism they choose as long as it does not infringe on other basic rights. Public schools do not, however, exist to convince Muslims of the truth of Christianity or vice versa, and schools need not take a position on religious truth to further civil respect.

Our surveys showed that Modesto students were supportive of basic rights and liberties. We asked students whether they agreed or disagreed with statements such as 'People of all religions should be able to put religious displays outside of their homes as long as the displays are on their private property' or 'Students of all religions should be able to wear religious symbols outside of their clothing in public schools'. Between 75% and 81% of students agreed with the statements, and for these two, the difference in students' responses before and after taking the course was statistically significant as Table 1 indicates.

Respect for religious rights is pushed to its limits when one must extend those rights to groups with which one disagrees. Yet, in the words of a classic study, '[t]olerance implies a willingness to "put up with" those things one rejects or opposes' (Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982, 2). A long tradition of survey research attempts to understand how people feel about granting rights to groups with which they disagree. When asked about particular groups, Americans voice less tolerant opinions than one might expect. In a pioneering study of political tolerance in 1954, only one quarter of the population was prepared to allow a Communist to take a job as a store clerk. By 1973, 57% would do so, but by then intolerance may have shifted to new groups academics were less likely to measure (Nunn, Crockett, and Williams 1978).

It came as no surprise that Modesto students were reluctant to extend basic rights to their least-liked groups. We asked students about their willingness to allow members of their least-liked group to run for public office, teach in public schools,

Table 1. Means (standard errors) of tolerance survey questions.

Attribute measured	Description or question wording	October 2004	January 2005	May 2005
Knowledge	Percent correct on five-question religious knowledge test	37.4 % (0.012)	66.4% (0.011)***	52.8% (0.020)***
Basic respect				
Percent agreeing that ... (agree or strongly agree coded 1; disagree or strongly disagree coded 0)	'Religious views don't exclude a candidate from running for office'	75.4% (0.023)	78.4% (0.022)	No change
	'Students of all religions should be able to wear religious symbols outside of their clothing in public schools'	77.9% (0.022)	85.1% (0.019)**	
	'People of all religions should be able to put religious displays outside of their homes as long as the displays are on their private property'	81% (0.021)	89% (0.017)**	
Least-liked group				
Percent allowing their least-liked group to: (coded as true or false)	'Run for public office'	15.2% (0.0194)	20.7% (0.0219)*	
	'Teach in public schools'	18.4% (0.0209)	22.8% (0.0227)	
	'Make a public speech'	49.6% (0.0270)	57.1% (0.0267)**	
	'Hold public rallies'	25.2% (0.0236)	35.5% (0.0259)***	
Active tolerance				
A student would ...	'Defend a student whose religious beliefs were insulted by another student'	55.6% (0.0270)	65.1% (0.026)**	
	'Oppose a member of Congress who insulted a religious group'	66.6% (0.018)	66.5% (0.018)	
	'Defend a maligned religious group when talking to friends'	63.4% (0.0133)	62.9% (0.0141)*	

Table 1. (Continued).

Attribute measured	Description or question wording	October 2004	January 2005	May 2005
Common ground	'Sign a petition supporting a small religious group suffering discrimination'	57.4% (0.0140)	55.8% (0.0150)	
	'Write a letter to a newspaper defending a maligned religious group'	41.8% (0.0140)	39.2% (0.0140)*	
	Agreed with the statement 'all religions share the same basic moral values'	45% (0.0270)	63% (0.0270)***	

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Note: Use of quotation marks indicates exact wording used in survey. *t*-tests compare target group with previous test. The October and January tests have an *N* of between 345 and 365, while the May test has a much smaller *N* of 163–166. Although logistical difficulties prevented a full canvass in May, we have no reason to suspect the May students differ in any significant way from those in the first two surveys. The May group includes only students who were surveyed in both October and January.

make a public speech or hold public rallies. We introduced the question with this preface: 'Here's a list of political groups that some people have problems with: Racists, Feminists, Nazis, members of Al Qaeda, Communists, skinheads, Ku Klux Klan, members of groups that support rights for gays and lesbians. In your head, choose the group that you dislike the most. (You don't need to write down the name of the group)'.

The initial number of students expressing tolerant attitudes was surprisingly low, ranging from 15.2% to 49.6% 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. Table 1 shows that the increase in means ranged from 4.4% to 10.3%. Although we did not expect a course on world religions to have much of an effect on the respect for political rights generally since most of the subject matter covered the basic practices of world religions, the results concerning least-liked groups defied our expectations.

To provide a climate of mutual trust and cooperation, as we suggest above, a society needs a group of people who actively defend the rights of people with whom they disagree. Active tolerance requires more effort than many theorists think that liberal democracy can provide. Our research, however, shows that civic education can produce modest yet measurable changes in students' willingness to defend actively the religious freedom of fellow students.

We measure active tolerance through five questions about students' willingness to take action in defence of religious freedom as indicated in Table 1. In the only instance where the mean response increased and the differences between the pre- and post-test were statistically significant, students were asked about a situation that applied to their daily lives. The mean number of students who would 'defend a student whose religious beliefs were insulted by another student' increased from 55.6% before the course to 65.1% after. Although several interviewed students were concerned about standing out too much or being bullied themselves by larger classmates, almost all said the course strengthened their willingness to take action either by standing up to the insulter or comforting the victim. 'If a person took [an insult] the wrong way', one student told us, 'I would go say something. It's not polite to talk about a person's religion because that's what they believe in'. 'I do try to step up for classmates whose religion has been insulted', another related, 'because I believe in my own religion a lot, and I know what that feels like'. For the other questions, about opposing a member of Congress, writing a letter to a newspaper, or signing a petition, the course appeared to have no effects. These activities may have been too distant from the experiences of 14-year-olds to register effects.

Though the course's effects on tolerance appear modest, they are notable in the context of education policy. Education research shows that most interventions to improve knowledge and educational performance fail to produce measurable effects (Heckman and Krueger 2004). The results are even more impressive given the short duration of the course.

Results: why the course increased tolerance

The course set a foundation for thinking about religious liberty by explaining the US tradition of religious liberty and the fundamental nature of the rights of conscience. Thirty percent of the students we surveyed spoke a language other than English in the

home, and recent immigrants as well as long-established Americans could benefit from a tutorial in the ideas behind basic rights and liberties. Such an education used to be conducted in US high school civics classes, which were largely replaced by amorphous 'social studies' courses. Now more than ever, facing the pressures of diversity, school districts find that students need instruction in the basics of civics.

The Modesto course frames the discussion of world religion in the context of the free exercise of religion and the rights of conscience. From there, students learn the basics of major religious traditions. When we administered a five-question religious knowledge test, student scores improved from 37% correct in the October test to 66% correct in January.³ Four months after taking the course, scores dropped 14% but were still substantially higher than before taking the course.

By making the unfamiliar seem more familiar, learning about religions reduced suspicion among religious groups. One student told us that 'I had a Hindu person living across the street and they'd be praying to a statute ... I thought it was just plain dumb, but I notice now that they had a pretty good reason to'. In addition, students came to believe that major religions were more alike than different. Table 1 shows that the number of students who agreed with the statement 'all religions share the same basic moral values' increased from 45% before the course to 63% after taking the course. Since the curriculum avoided criticising religions, students were left with a rosy picture of religious harmony. To provide a more balanced portrait of the religions studied, public schools with world religions courses should consider discussing the darker side of religious traditions. While avoiding the singling out of any one religious tradition, schools could mention instances where religions have advocated dangerous fanaticism and repression of vulnerable social groups.

But although the course emphasised commonalities among religions, students did not become more relativist after taking the course. 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 with the following statement: 'I believe that one religion is definitely right and all others are wrong'. Twenty-one percent of the students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement before taking the course, and 23% agreed or strongly agreed with it after, indicating that there was no significant change.

Conclusions: community acceptance and lessons learned

Numerous controversies over teaching about religion in US public schools have fed common perceptions that secularists and religious conservatives cannot find common ground on this issue. School districts face an uncomfortable compromise: do not speak about religion during the school day except in the most perfunctory manner, and schools will escape lawsuits and public confrontations. But silence about religion in the classroom does nothing to address the religious intolerance toward or ignorance of basic beliefs held by minority religions present in communities around the USA. If American citizens had a better understanding of Islam, they would have at the least been better able to assess major policy choices they have recently confronted such as the Iraq war. Intolerance toward religious minorities within American communities, and understanding of religious groups abroad can only be adequately addressed by requiring all students to learn about religions besides their own.

When Modesto chose to implement a required world religions course in 2000, it appeared to face daunting odds. All the elements of a perfect American cultural storm – a large evangelical Christian population, an active group of politically and culturally

liberal residents and adherents of a wide range of religions – were present. A recent dispute over tolerance for homosexuality was an ominous portent.

Our surveys and interviews of over 350 students indicate that the course not only increased respect for religious liberty, but for basic First Amendment rights in general. Students left the course, on average, with a greater knowledge of other religions and increased appreciation for the shared moral teachings found in major religions. At the same time, students were not more likely to become relativists or discount the value of their own religious traditions after taking the course despite fundamentalist Christian concerns that exposing students to different religious and moral viewpoints constitutes indoctrination of relativism (US Court of Appeals 1985, 1987).

Even more impressive has been the acceptance of the course by a broad spectrum of Modesto's residents. In the seven years since the course's implementation, not a single legal challenge to the course has been registered. Parents have the right to opt their children out of the course but only one out of 1000 students on average annually exercise this option. Modesto's course is not only accepted by all of its diverse communities, but many voices from the left and the right celebrate the course as the best way to treat religion in schools. On consecutive days in Modesto, we interviewed Russ Matteson, co-pastor of the liberal Church of the Brethren, and Paul Zeek, associate pastor at Modesto's evangelical First Baptist megachurch. Matteson, during the course of our conversation, condemned the Bush Administration's 'hyperpatriotism'. Zeek's office prominently displayed a framed picture of the conservative idol Ronald Reagan. Both effusively praised the world religions course.

How did the course manage to survive in such a divided community? The answer has wider implications. Understanding how Modesto addressed its religious differences can provide guidance to other communities about how to implement a required world religions course. Religious leaders, school board members and teachers all stressed that extensive consultation with community members in the initial stages of the course was essential to the course's acceptance. Everyone agreed that Charles Haynes's mediation provided the framework of respectful discussion and disagreement that enabled the course's establishment. Instituting an advisory council of religious leaders was vital in clearing away misconceptions about the course and pre-empting criticism. 'Bring all the stakeholders to the table at first', school board president Gary Lopez advised other districts considering a world religions course.

The best salesmanship would not have worked, however, without a sound product. District officials realised that world religion courses can be framed broadly enough that they offer something for each major cultural group without giving the impression that one group is benefitting at the expense of another. Simply including a robust discussion of religion in the curriculum won the approval of all the advisory committee's members. When the course was presented to the council, Father Illo of St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Modesto recalled 'all [the members] congratulated the schools on actually talking about religion because that's usually a pariah in schools and academia'.

Talking more about religion held particular appeal for Modesto's evangelical Christians and religious conservatives. Like their cohorts around the nation (Carter 1993), they lamented that ignoring religion trivialised its role in people's lives and society. Paul Zeek told us that students in his congregation leave the course with a better understanding of the 'distinctives' of Christianity.

If conservatives mostly wanted recognition of religion, liberals and religious minorities mostly wanted tolerance. Prior to the course, Russ Matteson related, several students in his 'liberal congregation had uncomfortable or bad interactions with students from evangelical denominations'. The course's emphasis on religious liberty and its connection with the safe schools policy appealed to Matteson. Focusing on world religions instead of just the Judeo-Christian tradition would open students to the wisdom of other faiths. Matteson approved of the way students in his congregation 'used the course to incorporate different religions into their perspectives'.

The course was not a success merely because it gave cultural groups what they most wanted. Policies that satisfy opposing groups can still founder when suspicion and mistrust are high. The deeper secret to Modesto's triumph was that what the two sides wanted was not as far apart as the two sides themselves originally thought. Modesto provides a case study of successful deliberative democracy in action. Once the ground rules for civil discussion were in place, dialogue transformed perceptions by unearthing common ground. Conservatives may have stressed recognition of religion in schools more, but liberals thought it was a good idea too. Liberals may have wanted tolerance more, but conservatives also valued safety.

The terra firma that most united Modesto's citizens was a belief in the value of religious freedom. Disagreements over the status of homosexuality and parents' authority over their children do not lend themselves to easy policy solutions. Communities, however, do not need to resolve all of these issues once and for all to prosper. The American founders recognised a fundamental truth civics classes once taught and that is perhaps now more urgent than ever. Freedoms have their roots in the freedom of conscience and the right to make up one's own mind about the most important things. This freedom includes the right not to endorse positions with which one disagrees. Modesto's example shows that for all their sincere and often serious disagreements, a creedal commitment to religious freedom makes cultural peace over teaching about religion possible.

Notes

1. Some US public schools and districts offer elective courses on world religion. Modesto's experiment is unique in that it is required for *all* students, and unlike elective courses, emphasises the connection between learning about religion and learning respect for religious liberty.
The fragmented nature of the USA's educational system means that there is no national database describing what courses are taught in all of the nation's public schools. To determine absolutely if Modesto is the only school district to offer a required world religions course would have required a phone call to each of the thousands of school districts in the USA. We are confident of the unprecedented nature of Modesto's course, however, because we consulted extensively with experts in the religion and education field such as Charles Haynes, Warren Nord and Susan Douglass among others. None had heard of a similar required course.
2. We administered the survey to 365 students in October 2004 and again to the same students in January 2005. (Our *Ns* for these surveys vary between 345 and 365 depending upon the question because some answers were unreadable or missing, and because some students dropped out of the later survey). We attempted to survey the same students several months after taking the course to see if the effects of the course persisted, in May 2005, but were only able to identify 166 of those students who had since moved on to other courses. We do, however, report the knowledge test scores for this survey iteration. We also first administered a survey to 168 students in May 2004 in order to refine our survey and test our questions.
3. $N = 353$. $p > t = 0.0000$.

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