

Confirmation or challenge: The impact of the teaching of religion in the tertiary curriculum

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Abstract

This paper reports on a research project which explored the views of students of Religion Studies in a secular Australian university, the University of South Australia. The aim of this project was to identify the backgrounds and motivations of Religion Studies students, and to investigate their perceptions of the impact of their studies on their knowledge, understanding and attitudes. The research was qualitative, with data collected via linked surveys and focus group discussions. The study suggests that Religion Studies at a tertiary level promotes an understanding and appreciation of religions and cultures generally, which may lead to a greater understanding of and empathy towards people of different religions. However, the academic study of religion does not necessarily translate into a fundamental shift in existing personal religious beliefs, or lack thereof.

Key Words: Tertiary education, Religion studies, Multicultural education

The Project

This paper reports on a research project which explored the views of students of Religion Studies in a secular Australian university. The research examined students' perceptions of the impact of their studies of religion on their knowledge, understanding and attitudes.

Globally, the importance of cross-cultural and cross-religious understandings has been highlighted by events such as 9/11 and the London bombings. This has led to increased concern about the levels of religious literacy and understanding across communities. For example, there have been recent calls in South Australia for school and community education about minority religions and religious diversity in order to foster a sensitive understanding of others (Taskforce on Religious Diversity 2010). In the Higher Education sector, Religion Studies is seen by some as a potential strategy to enhance cross-cultural and inter-religious understanding (see, for example, Teagle Working Group 2008; Gallagher 2009; Stoltzfus and Reffel 2009; Fujiwara 2010). It is therefore important to evaluate whether there is indeed any impact of Religion Studies on the attitudes and values of tertiary education students.

This research project emerged from our teaching of Religion Studies at the University of South Australia where, for many years, we have offered undergraduate courses to students in a number of different degree programs. We became interested in why our students were undertaking studies in religion and what impact they thought these studies were having on them.

Aims and Context of the Research

The aim of our study was to examine university students' perceptions of the influence of their studies of religion on their knowledge, understanding and attitudes.

The context for the research is the Religion Studies program offered at the University of South Australia, a secular tertiary institution serving a diverse population of domestic and international students. The university offers a range of Religion Studies courses to both internal on-campus and external off-campus students, with a total enrolment of approximately 600 students each year. Many of the off-campus students undertake Religion Studies courses via an arrangement between

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University of South Australia and Open Universities Australia. Students may therefore be located anywhere across Australia, or even overseas.

Anecdotal evidence suggested that our Religion Studies students came from a wide range of backgrounds and their unsolicited comments on the impact of their studies varied considerably. It was these anecdotal responses that prompted the research, the aim of which was to explore these impacts more systematically. Specifically, the research questions were:

- Why do students undertake the study of religion?
- What background do they bring (personal and academic)?
- What impact (if any) does the study of religion have on them?
- What aspects of the courses impacted on students?

The paper reports on students' responses to the first three of these questions.

Literature

Religion Studies and Theology have been offered in the tertiary curriculum internationally for many years (Sharpe 1986; Alles 2008) and in spite of an academic interest in methodologies of the discipline (Waardenburg 1973; Gothóni 2005), published research into the impact of the study of religion on tertiary students is relatively scant. A significant exception to this is the work of Barbara Walvoord (2008), although her study is confined to the United States and the majority of the tertiary institutions she studied were religiously affiliated. She found a disjunction between the aims of the teaching faculty and the students. The former emphasized the academic outcomes of the study of religion, the latter its personal implications.

Also in the United States, Stephen Prothero—in his book *Religious Literacy what every American needs to know - and doesn't*—finds it paradoxical that one of the most religious countries on earth is also a nation of religious illiterates (2008, p. 2). Given the vital role that religious arguments play in the civic life of the country this ignorance can have profound effects. He argues that effective citizenship requires religious literacy (2008, p. 11).

In 1998 the journal *Teaching Theology and Religion* was launched, with the avowed aim to support a sustained international conversation about excellent teaching and learning in colleges, universities and theological schools (Williams, Berling and Markham 1998, p. 1).

A recent article (Lewis 2012) reports on a significant quantitative study of the impact on students of religion studies courses at higher education institutions in Arizona. The students were surveyed at the beginning and end of their semester courses and a control group, who were not studying religions, was included for comparative purposes. The results did not reveal statistically significant impacts on the students although there was an indication that students in religion courses increased their 'awareness of issues and challenges related to religious diversity' (Lewis 2012, p. 303). This study is notable in relation to the present research as it also adopts the pre- and post- survey approach. It was also interesting that Lewis' study revealed that students in religion studies courses were likely to be more religious than those in the control courses (Lewis 2012, p. 302). As we shall see, our sample revealed a much less religiously involved group when compared to the general Australian population. Interestingly, Lewis (2012, p. 288) set out to explore the question 'Does the mode of instruction, online or on-ground, make a significant difference?' but does not answer this question.

In the United Kingdom the establishment of subject centres under the Higher Education Academy resulted in an expansion of interest in the teaching of Religion Studies at tertiary level. The Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies sponsored the journal *Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies*, published biannually between 2001 and 2011

(The Higher Education Academy 2012). Unfortunately it appears that government funding for this initiative has been withdrawn, removing an avenue for scholarship of teaching religion studies in tertiary settings.

Research on the impact of religion studies or religion (religious) education in schools is well represented. In fact, propelled by the same global factors that stimulated our research, there has been a renewed interest in the field represented by such research as reported in *Dialogue and conflict on religion: studies of classroom interaction in European countries* (Avest, Jozsa, Knauth, Roson and Skeie 2009) which is part of the *Religious Diversity and Education in Europe* research project (see also De Souza, Durka, Engebretson, Jackson and McGrady 2006). This rejuvenation of religion education in secondary schools will have implications for higher education for, as Robert Jackson has noted, ‘... a supply of specialists in the science of religions will be needed within the teaching professions of all states which introduce teaching and learning about religions’ (2008, p. 178).

In Australia there has been extensive research into values education and spirituality among secondary school students, with a specific focus on the spirituality of ‘Gen Y’ (Tacey 2003; Hughes, Black, Bellamy and Kaldor 2004; Hughes 2007; Mason, Singleton and Webber 2007; Lovat, Toomey and Clement 2010). An emphasis on the need for values education has been part of Government agendas in recent times; however this has only been addressed in the pre-tertiary sector. More generally the need for an empathetic religious understanding throughout the community has been acknowledged (Bouma 2006; Burrows 2006) and demonstrated through such events as a national Deliberative Poll (conducted in 2007), which explored the theme of Islam in Australia. This has also fed into a more recent debate regarding the possible contribution of the study of religion to education for a moral citizenship (Ryan 2007).

Methodology

The research questions focus on understanding what the students bring to their studies and what developments may occur from them. The theoretical underpinning for these questions developed from the assumption that students bring with them a variety of experiences, beliefs and values which, in turn, influence the way in which they engage with their studies and the material they are studying. Pierre Bourdieu’s (1990) concepts of *habitus*, both primary and secondary, and the logic of practice which he developed, are useful ways of understanding the manner in which change can occur. For Bourdieu primary habitus is formed through an individual’s earliest experiences, while secondary habitus is constantly being modified though historical circumstances. According to Bourdieu, habitus ensures ‘... its own constancy and its defence against change through the selection it makes within new information by rejecting information capable of calling into question its accumulated information’ (Bourdieu 1990, p. 60). Habitus negotiates within new situations and environments and change occurs, for Bourdieu, only within the logic of existing habitus. Students exposed to the same information will react differently depending on their different experiences and the environment in which they developed their attitudes and values. Therefore, in order to understand the impact—if any—of the study of religion, it is important to attempt to understand the environment from which the students have come.

Method

This research project was primarily qualitative with some quantitative data. There were three stages to the study, two linked online questionnaires; one at the beginning and one at the end of the students’ chosen course of study, followed by focus group discussions.

Students enrolled in Religion Studies courses were invited to complete an anonymous online questionnaire early in the study semester (Appendix A). Students were enrolled in one or more of the following courses, either as internal (on-campus) students, or as external (off-campus) students:

Religion Studies: The Long Search
Myth, ritual and the sacred
Religions of Asia: Introduction
Contemporary Issues in Religion
Islam: Past and Present
Religions of Australia
Religions of Asia
Contemporary Issues in Religion

Of a cohort of 400 students enrolled in these Religion Studies courses, a total of 58 students completed the first questionnaire. All students were invited to complete a second online questionnaire (see Appendix B) at the end of the semester, irrespective of whether they had completed the first questionnaire. A total of 29 students completed the second questionnaire. An identifier code enabled the tracking of students who had responded to both questionnaires (19 students). Five students also volunteered to participate in focus groups, which were conducted via teleconference.

Two focus groups were held in order to accommodate participant availability (three students participated in one group and two students in the other). The focus group questions were the same for both groups (see Appendix C).

The Respondents

Demographic information compiled from the first questionnaire provides a profile of the respondents. 32 of the respondents were aged 30 years or over, indicating that these students were not transitioning to tertiary education from a secondary school setting. The majority of the respondents were female (see Table 1).

Table 1: Age and gender of respondents

Age range	Number of students	Gender	
		M	F
under 20	4	0	4
20-29	22	6	16
30-39	13	4	9
40-49	7	3	4
50-59	7	1	6
Over 60	5	4	1
Total	58	18	40

Table 2 indicates the educational background of the respondents. The level of post-secondary school education was high, with twenty six of the students having completed some form of post-secondary qualification. Three students reported having a higher degree—Masters or PhD. Eight students had previously completed degrees and fifteen had Certificates or Diplomas. Twenty six students had completed Year 11 or 12 at school while two had completed year 10 or below. Three students nominated alternative qualifications. One student did not respond to the question.

Table 2: Educational background

Highest Level of Education						
No Response	Yr 10 or below	Yr 11 or 12	Certificate/Diploma	Degree	Higher Degree	Other
1	2	26	15	9	3	2
1.7%	3.4%	44.9%	25.9%	15.5%	5.2%	3.4%

The ethnic background of the majority of respondents was Australian or Australian of European descent, as indicated in Table 3.

Table 3: Ethnic background

Ethnic Background	
Australian or Australians of European descent	47
Asian	1
Israeli	1
African	1
Aboriginal	1
Mixed	4
Not specified	3
Total:	58

When asked to indicate their religious affiliation (if any), the majority (30 respondents) did not identify with a religion or spirituality, while 28 did (Table 4). This contrasted with the students choosing religion studies courses in Lewis' Arizona study where students were more likely to be religious than a control group. The distribution of our respondents is interesting because it does not reflect the religious identity of the Australian population in general. At the last census in 2011, 22.3 per cent of the Australian population identified as 'no religion', so our sample has a much higher proportion of this group (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012). Whether this is simply a characteristic of the research sample or is representative of students enrolled in Religion Studies in Australian Higher Education institutions requires further research.

Table 4: Religious affiliation

Religious Affiliation	
Identify with a religion:	
Christian (various denominations):	18
Judaism	2
Islam	2
Zoroastrianism	1
Theosophy	1
Wiccan	1
Zen Buddhism	1
Keylontic Science	1
Total who identify with a religion:	27
Do not identify with a religion:	30
Unsure:	1
Total	58

The affiliation of students who did identify with a religion was quite diverse. A total of 18 respondents identified as Christians with some respondents volunteering further information.

Denominations mentioned were Catholic, Anglican, Born Again, Pentecostal, Lutheran, Uniting Church and Greek Orthodox. Two respondents identified as Jewish and two as Muslim. One each listed Zoroastrian Theosophy, Wiccan, Zen Buddhist, Keylontic Science, while one student stated 'unsure'. This diversity is reminiscent of Quartermaine's (2007) survey of Religion Studies students in the UK.

The majority of respondents (39) had not previously studied religion at university, while the remaining 19 had previous exposure to tertiary study in the discipline.

Just over half the students (29) came into their course(s) with questions they wished to explore through their studies. Twenty four did not have any questions while three students did not offer a response.

When asked to indicate if there had been any major changes in their religious identification within their lifetime, 25 students stated that there had been. Thirty-three respondents stated that they had not experienced any major changes.

The majority of the students tended to consider themselves as having some form of understanding of religion or spirituality with 25 stating they had an in-depth understanding. A further 16 were unsure if their understanding of religion/spirituality could be considered in-depth, while 16 considered that they did not have an in-depth understanding. One student did not respond to the question.

Students were asked to indicate the sources of their current understanding of religion/ spirituality; multiple selections were allowed. Of the 58 respondents, 48 listed life experiences and 43 listed informal study. Friends and colleagues were listed by 34, and 33 listed their family. The four areas which were selected by fewer students, although still strongly represented, were religious or spiritual communities/ organisation (31), school (25), religious and spiritual experiences (21) and formal study (21).

When asked if they felt they had a significant understanding of more than one religion or spirituality 23 indicated they did, while 35 did not.

Respondents were asked to indicate their prior knowledge of the Religion Studies course topic they were currently undertaking (limited, moderate or extensive knowledge). 20 students considered they had limited knowledge, 35 reported moderate knowledge and two claimed extensive knowledge, while one indicated moderate to extensive knowledge.

In summary the group of students who participated in the first survey were rather less likely to identify with a religion, and less likely to identify with Christianity than the general Australian population. Half had experienced some major change in their religious identification during their lifetime and the majority were of Australian European cultural background. The majority were also undertaking tertiary study in religion for the first time, although a substantial minority had previously studied religion at tertiary level. A significant characteristic of the survey population was the educational level. Nearly half of the sample had post-secondary school qualifications. This suggests that these respondents likely have a wider life experience and more nuanced view of religion than students transitioning to university directly from secondary school.

Motivations: Why Study Religion?

The first survey asked about the reasons for students undertaking the study of religion. Students listed a variety of motivations. Many of the students were motivated by wanting a better knowledge of religion and an understanding of religious practice:

I want to understand the significance of religion in society and for the individual.

I would like to be able to make informed judgements as to the reasons people undertake certain actions without being negative in my judgements.

An interest in religion, history and culture were also listed prominently. Sometimes this interest related to the student's own religion where understanding their own religion, developing their personal spirituality, or making sense of a spiritual experience was listed, but only by a few students:

I would like to learn more about my religion.

To broaden my personal concepts of spirituality and religion.

Others expected their studies to confirm their critical view of religion:

As an atheist, I am interested in why people believe the certain things that they do.

For me to become more informed on my opinion, I need to understand the other side of the argument as much as possible. I don't expect this course to change my opinion, but rather to enhance it.

For personal interest and curiosity. A wish to understand how religion works and why it is so resistant to change.

For some students their motivations related to the nature of the degree studies they were undertaking. Those enrolled in degrees such as science or engineering wanted to broaden their studies. The study of religion was understood to be beneficial for the degree of 'B.A. in Security, terrorism and counter-terrorism' as students were interested in the connection between religion and global events:

Understanding Islam's role if any in the global phenomenon (sic) of Jihad.

International engagement with S E Asian nation that are predominantly Muslim, to understand the religious explanations to terrorism/insurgency to aid in the development of effective (counter terrorism) strategies.

Other than assisting students in specific degrees, the study of religion was also linked to vocational preparation by students such as teaching religion in an ecumenical school; however two students listed motivations which tended to be a little different and provide an insight into their experiences. One young woman had renounced her Islamic religion when she 'decided at 16 that Christ was the way to get to heaven'. Under motivation for studying religion she wrote:

I am studying this to further equip myself when serving in the missionfield. It has been laid on my heart to go and reach the people in need, and if I understand their religion even somewhat I believe that I will be more accepted in their communities.

Another practical motivation was articulated below:

The course that I am doing is good as it augments my practical training as a monk with the actual and diverse knowledge about the theologies of the various religions, including (and perhaps importantly) the theologies of the other schools of Buddhism.

What appeared to be a negative motivation was described by a north-African student who had renounced his Islamic religion and no longer identified with any form of religion:

To study Islam from a Western perspective so that I may understand the Islamic perspective and how they compare and contrast ... [I want to find out] what may have been concealed by Muslims in their teaching of Islam. Western perspective would allow me to see its negative elements, and how it could be subject to critique.

Overall, when answering the survey question regarding their expectations of the course, the development of knowledge and understanding was the most common response (thirty six). Other motivations listed were enjoyment, wanting to pass and pass well and wanting to go onto further study. Five students were uncertain of their expectations.

Impact of Religion Studies

The second questionnaire, conducted at the end of the students' chosen religion studies course(s), asked respondents to reflect on the impact (if any) of their study. Of course, the timing of the second survey can only capture respondents' rather immediate reflections of the impact of their study and as the response rate was small, any findings are tentative. In the following we are reporting on the results by making use of characteristic quotations from specific respondents. These responses are illustrative of the most common responses given. After summarising the responses, case studies derived from the focus groups will offer a more detailed and individual picture.

Almost 83 per cent of respondents reported an impact from their studies of religion. This impact broadly divided into two categories. Firstly, students reported developing knowledge and understanding of religions through their studies and, secondly, they indicated a change in thinking, attitude or sense of connection towards religion. Within these categories a number of specific areas of impact were further identified.

Development of Knowledge and Understanding

82.8% per cent (i.e. 24 of 29 students) who responded to the survey at the end of their semester studies of religion reported that their general understanding of religion/spirituality had changed during their study of religion. However, three of the five students who indicated there had not been any change made more extensive comments which implied the opposite, suggesting a much higher percentage of students (i.e. 27 of 29 respondents or 93%) had developed their knowledge and understanding of religion and spirituality through their studies.

Overall students reported their studies had broadened their knowledge of religion and it developed an appreciation of the similarities and differences between religions:

... it does enhance your knowledge, the way that you look, you know, at things ... for me it was just, you know, creating more of a really bigger picture of it.

It allowed [me to] explore the similarities and differences between my religion and others.

I have come to understand what can be classified as a religion and am learning to understand the cultural differences.

One reported impact was moving from a view that religions were monolithic entities to developing knowledge and understanding of the depth and diversity within them. This was most evident when students were looking at religions other than their own but also applied to their own religion. This is illustrated by the following comments:

I now know that there is a minority group who are traditionalists and this does not reflect the views of all.

Being brought up a Catholic but now see a different view of this religion.

Understanding that there is a range of different beliefs and practices within religions enabled students to empathize with aspects of different religions, making them more accessible.

Some students reported having developed an appreciation of the ways in which religions have evolved and reflect historical and cultural contexts:

Better understanding of history and culture and rituals.

[Now] my opinions tend to be formed more from historical influences and circumstances surrounding that particular religion and from the beliefs and practices to which particular individuals adhere to.

I now have a better understanding of their theologies and philosophies in their own cultural contexts.

A further impact was developing an understanding of the way religion performed a function in the lives of individuals. This included the need that some individuals have for the transcendent:

Broader understanding of the need of man for a transcendental experience...

More understanding of why people believe

Although students reported they had developed a deeper understanding of religions in general, particular religions appeared to “connect” with or have a greater impact on some students than did other religions. Islam and Buddhism were at times singled out for special mention.

I feel more connected with Buddhism and Islam because they seem to be more down to earth and honest.

I feel a much closer link to Buddhism as a set of beliefs.

Given the world we live in I was fascinated by Islam – found it eye-opening. I am still going to struggle with Hinduism but now understand a whole lot better what this means to India.

In summarising this overall development of an increased knowledge and understanding through the study of religion, students reported a broader, more holistic understanding of what constituted religion, an understanding of the diversity within and between religions as well as understanding their similarities. Some students were able to appreciate that religions change and are influenced by historical and cultural circumstances, while others also understood that religion performed a role in the lives of believers. The development of knowledge and understanding was, however, not the only significant impact.

Changes in Thinking and Attitude

The second major impact which was reported by the students was a change of thinking and attitude. Twenty four students (82.75%) stated there had been a change in their attitude towards religions as a result of being challenged by their studies. They were challenged in a number of ways. It challenged their assumptions about religion and the way in which the media represents religion:

[it] dispelled some myths and stereotypes

[I] Realize that a lot of what I believed to be true about Islam/Muslims was driven by media bias

It challenged them to learn more about, and re-assess, their own religion in a more enquiring way:

[I have re-evaluated] the strengths and weaknesses in my religion

I am now able to consider my religious background in a more enquiring way

The challenges they faced varied depending on the course studied, with some courses looking at a variety of world religions and primal traditions while others focussed on a region or specific religion, including the religions of Asia, Islam and Christianity.

A number of students made a connection between a deeper understanding of religion gained through their studies and the way in which they had become more tolerant in their assessment of religion and different religions.

It has provided a deeper understanding which in turn helps to promote tolerance.

I believe I am becoming a better person who is more tolerant of others.

[I have a] More understanding point of view rather than judgements.

I just really feel grateful for the sense of deeper understanding and respect that I now have after taking this unit, it was exactly what I had hoped for.

One interesting finding of the study was the number of students who reported that while they had been challenged in their assumptions about other religions, their prior beliefs and commitments were confirmed by their study. This was the case whether they rejected religious belief, or held beliefs in new religious movements or in traditional religions. Illustrative statements included:

I am still an atheist, probably more so. It made me a more staunch atheist.

I am stronger in my belief that religions and religious doctrine needs to be abolished.

I am more amused by religion than I was.

I designated myself as Pagan and still do, but I understand it better now.

I think I'm a lot happier to openly declare myself a Christian ... I think I am looking for answers for questions that I wasn't fully aware that I was asking.

This raises the question whether the students undertook the study of religion in order to reaffirm or expand their understanding. It seems it may have done both. While, as we have seen, students suggested their understanding of religion had been developed, students who had rejected religion or rejected traditional forms of religion were confirmed in their scepticism. Students with more traditional religious identification reported that they were able to see the more positive aspects of their religion through their studies.

Overall, the impact that the study of religion had on their thinking about religion and their attitude to it, or sense of connection with it, was evident. Students were able to assess religion from a more informed perspective and the assumptions - which a number recognized as being developed through the media or their past experiences - were for some dispelled. Some students reported a greater appreciation of difference, the development of tolerance and a less judgemental attitude. The study of religion had the ability to stimulate further study and raise questions to be explored. Some were able to re-engage with religion through their studies while others were confirmed in their beliefs and rejection of religion.

The following descriptions of students from the focus groups provides a richer illustration of the students, their motivations, attitudes and the impact of the study of religion on them. The focus group interviews were one means of connecting the three questions the study was focussed upon: Why do students study religion? What background do they bring and what is the impact on them? The first focus group consisted of three students, Nola, Sam and Eva, while the second focus group consisted of two students, Tracey and Don².

Eva

Eva, a Jewish woman in her 50s, had been brought up with the traditions of Judaism while growing up in Israel, but she did not consider herself a religious person. She had completed a degree in Art History some time ago. She was motivated to study religion as she was interested in the link between religion and art.

Living for most of her life in Israel, she had been brought up surrounded by different religions. She spent some time speaking about the way in which she had an appreciation for other religions and traditions through her experiences in Israel. She suggested that her study of religion had strengthened her ecumenical attitude towards religions. She also mentioned she was not challenged by her studies but confirmed:

² All names are pseudonyms

... it just, I think, more confirmed what I had, you know, what I knew before, what ideas I had before. It just strengthened maybe the fact that we are all so much alike, even in religion, the way that we think and what we believe, and it's such a shame that based on religion people, their hatred or the wars, or the fighting, you know, based on something that if you look at it or if people will study more this subject, they'll realize how much we are under the same umbrella.

Eva suggested that many of her own rituals were cultural but derived from religious rituals. For her, the cultural practices legitimated by religion tended to set people apart. She added that the study:

... gives you a different perspective to what other people might believe in, or not even believe, but how they are raised or what their beliefs are all about.

Although her studies clarified and strengthened her knowledge and beliefs, she identified that the understanding and approach which she brought to her study was a major factor in the outcomes she derived from it. She suggested '... when I approached this subject, things were already there in my mind'. For her, the study of religion was confirming, reinforcing her previously held beliefs rather than challenging them.

Nola

Nola was a 38 year old music teacher who had been brought up a Catholic. Since she was 18 years old, she reported that she had been on a 'different journey' and 'some really wild paths' through her own research and personal quest. She rebelled against her Catholicism while a school student. When growing up, she did not consider her family religious, but they did keep up the Catholic traditions. She was motivated by wanting answers to questions:

[I] always had certain questions that have never been answered by the religion that I was brought up in ...

Nola elaborated upon the impact of the study and the study of religion generally:

... it does definitely create a change in a person, you're more open minded, more at peace even, because previously, coming back from that Catholic tradition that I was in, that was more, you know, the uncertainty of why I couldn't get the answers, and once you realize that no, you're not ducking that particular mindset, you can explore, the answers tend to come, and so does peace eventually.

Nola was confirmed in her beliefs. She was confirmed in her rejection of Catholicism as a school girl. She was confirmed in her interest in New Religious Movements and her studies helped her understand the validity or nature of alternative religious beliefs and an enquiring mind and her studies helped her come to an understanding of religions that satisfied her.

Tracey

Tracey reported a more significant shift in attitude toward her own religion. She discussed her faith and struggles with Christianity. Her studies were motivated by the uncertainty about her beliefs. She had many questions about religion—her heart believed in God but her head did not. She was brought up as a Catholic but rebelled against her Catholic schooling. She had been on a journey since her school days, stating:

... I hated being told what to think, I like to make up my own mind ... I was questioning too, always questioning and still am ... at the point where I told them, when I was about 15, I was an atheist, and that was the end of that.

Tracey married an Anglican almost 30 years ago and had been attending the Anglican Church. As part of her studies, she decided to interview a Catholic priest and an Anglican clergyman in order to understand the similarities and differences between these two Christian denominations. She had not realized the extent to which she harboured negative feelings towards Catholicism from her past experiences. Due to her study she was challenged to critically assess the assumptions she held about Catholicism. It not only gave her a positive way of looking at Catholicism but it also provided her with the opportunity to engage in Catholic Church worship and, as previously suggested, her negativity towards Catholicism was altered through her studies. Her attitude has changed dramatically towards Catholicism as it ‘... has now actually become positive, more understanding’. When reflecting on her previous attitude she stated:

I didn't realize how bad it was, but I found myself reading all the Catholic faith business and having automatically an assumption that was negative, and I really had to critically evaluate what I was thinking and what I was reading, and reread many things with fresh eyes just to ... I had to really critically evaluate my assumptions, that I didn't realize were so deep set, I think.

Compared with the other focus group participants, Tracey had one of the strongest reactions to her studies. It was both challenging and confirming. She managed to reconnect to the Catholicism she has turned her back on and become cynical about. She challenged the negative view she developed from her schooling. Through her studies she also gained confidence with approaching people who were different. She had developed the confidence to speak with a Muslim family who had arrived in her community.

Don

Don was in his 40s and had not previously studied at tertiary level. He had been brought up as a Catholic and his brother was a Catholic priest. He acknowledged the influence of his Catholicism on his identity, but was not a practicing Catholic. He reported having been negatively influenced by his Catholic schooling. Don had recently read such popular books as *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (Baigent, Leigh & Lincoln 2006) and appeared to have a negative view of Christianity. At the time of the focus group, Don had just completed the course *Islam Past and Present*. Although he also mentioned his early negative feelings towards Islam coming from the attitudes within his school, these attitudes had changed even prior to his study. Once again, he understood himself as having a questioning and open mind and had engaged in his own study. The study of Islam had a positive impact on him. He mentioned gaining a better understanding, an academic understanding, of the Islamic world view. He suggested that:

you walk away from any of these courses with better knowledge ... I think that that does change your attitude for sure ...

I am very open-minded and I want to learn more ... it's more wanting to understand it better so when you do get in discussions with people you have an educated point of view.

For Don his studies were confirming. He had empathy for Muslims but he reported that he constantly argued with Christians about their beliefs. He was very keen to study religion at a tertiary level in order to provide legitimacy for his opinions.

Sam

Sam, the third member of the first focus group, was also on a journey and had undertaken a number of our Religion Studies courses. Sam had been brought up in “a Salvation Army family” but had subsequently rejected religion for many years. Now, at the age of 39, he was approaching religion through university study. His stated motivation was to find a spiritual path which was not as dogmatic as Christianity.

Over the time of his studies, Sam became more open to all religions—including Christianity as practiced within the Salvation Army—although he did not consider himself as being religious. He suggested his studies had challenged him:

[It]opened my eyes to a different way of looking at religion ... I think I've become more open minded, yeah, wanting to learn more about different religions and taking it all in. I think I've actually grown, yeah, I suppose that's the only way I can put it, I've grown.

He suggested he would never go back to the Salvation Army lifestyle but was more understanding of it. One impact of his study had been his attempt to challenge peoples' stereotypes of different religions, particularly Islam, while engaging with them via online social networks.

Sam was challenged by his studies; he was on a spiritual journey and searching in a number of areas of his life. His studies in religion helped him to see his Salvation Army background in a different light, and also opened up the possibility of alternative spiritualities.

Conclusion

Students participating in the research project were asked about the background they brought to their studies. They were less likely to report being religious than the population in general and half had experienced some major shift in their religious identification over their lifetime. They had higher educational levels than the general population and many had not transitioned directly from high school. The reasons for undertaking the study were a general interest in religion and a quest for understanding.

The courses tended to fulfil the expectations of these students, specifically to gain knowledge and understanding of religions. There was no evidence that their studies had challenged their personal adherence or non-adherence. It can be concluded that, for these students at least, the study of religion at tertiary level does have a role to play in developing a greater knowledge and understanding of religions generally which may lead to a greater understanding of and empathy towards different religions. However, the extent to which the study of religion can have a major impact on students' own beliefs appears to be minimal. The study of religion did challenge these students as it broadened their understanding of religion but not to the degree of fundamentally altering their personal commitments. Their engagement with the study of religion was therefore

filtered through their habitus, their personal beliefs and experience of religion, and hence limited the extent to which their fundamental beliefs were altered.

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Appendix A: First Questionnaire

1. Please enter the first letter of your given name, and the first three letters of your family name.
2. What is your age?
 - Under 20
 - 20-29
 - 30-39
 - 40-49
 - 50-59
 - 60 and over
3. What is your gender?
 - F
 - M
4. How would you describe your ethnic background?
5. What is the name of the Religion Studies unit/course that you are currently studying?
6. What is the name of the degree you are currently studying?
 - BA
 - BEd
 - Other (please specify)
7. Is this the first time you have undertaken a Religion Studies unit/course at a university?
 - Yes
 - No
8. Prior to starting this unit/course, what was your highest level of formal education?
 - Year 10 or below
 - Year 11 or 12
 - Certificate or Diploma
 - Degree
 - Higher Degree (Masters or PhD)
 - Other
- 9.. Do you identify with any religion or spirituality?
 - Yes
 - No
10. If so, which one? (Please be as specific as you can)
11. Are there any questions about religion or spirituality that you would like to explore (either in the course, or generally)?

Yes

No

12. If so, which questions?

13. Have there been any major changes in your religious or spiritual identification during your life?

Yes

No

14. If so, in what way(s) has your identification changed?

15. Do you feel that you have an indepth understanding of religion/spirituality?

Yes

No

Not sure

16. Where have you gained your current understanding of religion/spirituality? (select all that apply)

Informal study

Formal study

Family

School

Friends or colleagues

Religious or spiritual communities/organisations

Religious or spiritual experiences

Life experiences

17. Feel free to comment further on Question 16 if you wish:

18. Do you feel that you have a significant understanding of more than one religion/spirituality?

Yes

No

19. If so, which ones?

20. Why are you studying this Religion Studies unit/course?

21. How would you describe your prior knowledge of the topic of this unit/course?

Limited

Moderate

Extensive

22. What are your expectations of this unit/course?

Appendix B: Second Questionnaire

1. Please enter the first letter of your given name, and the first three letters of your family name.

2. Has your general understanding of religion/spirituality changed while studying this course/unit?

Yes

No

3. If so, in what way(s)?

4. Have you changed the way you think about your own religion or spirituality while studying this course/unit?

Yes

No

5. If so, in what way(s)?

6. Have you changed your identification, or sense of connection, with a religion, spirituality or denomination while studying this course/unit?

Yes

No

7. If so, in what way(s)?

8. Has this course/unit addressed any of your questions about religion/spirituality?

Yes

No

I didn't have any questions

9. If yes, which question(s) were addressed?

10. If no, which question(s) had you hoped would be addressed?

11. Has this course/unit raised any new questions about religion/spirituality for you?

12. If so, which question(s)?

13. Has your attitude to the religion(s) you explored changed while studying this course/unit?

Yes

No

14. If yes, in what way(s)?

15. Has your personal attitude to your own religion/spirituality changed while studying this course/unit?

Yes

No

16. If yes, in what way(s)?

17. In this course/unit, what aspect(s) of your study were valuable to your own learning and development? Please select as many as applicable:

Course materials and content

Readings

Lecturer / tutor

Online discussions

Interaction with other students

- Approach (methodology) of the course generally
- Other (please specify)

18. Please comment on your response to question 17.

19. Are there any further comments you would like to make about the impact of this course/unit on you?

20. Finally, would you be interested in participating in a focus group, in which the themes covered in this survey are discussed in a group conversation? (a single one-hour teleconference; time to be arranged). If so, please supply your preferred email address or phone number.

Appendix C: Focus Group questions

1. Very briefly, tell us a little about the Religion Studies or Catholic Studies course(s) that you have studied.
2. What attracted you to choose the course(s)?
3. In hindsight, can you think of a couple of things that stood out for you in your study?
- 4a. Did your study confirm any of your beliefs about religion?
- 4b. Do you feel that it challenged any of your beliefs about religion?
5. What do you think is the influence of your family or cultural background on your understanding of religion?
- 6a. Some scholars think that to be a member of our multicultural society you need to understand other religions and cultures? What do you think about that?
- 6b. What do you think is the place or role of religion in a multicultural society like Australia?
- 6c. In what way has your study contributed to your attitudes towards this?
7. What do you think is the role of religion in Australian society today?
- 8a. In NSW at the moment, there is a debate about religion and ethics in the school system. The debate focusses on whether students who do not attend religion classes should attend ethics classes. What do you think about that?
- 8b. Do you think that religion should be taught in the government school systems?
9. How do you see the role of religion in your present or future workplace?
10. Has your study impacted on your affiliation or connection with a particular religious tradition? Can you elaborate on that?
11. Do you feel that you have changed in any way as a result of the course that you studied?
12. Briefly, are there any particular life experiences that have influenced your understanding of religion?