

Marshall Steven Lewis

EXPERIMENTAL AND APPLIED RELIGIOUS STUDIES FOR REDUCING RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

ABSTRACT

If we wish to increase peace in the world, we must reduce religious intolerance. Potentially, the way we *learn about* religion and *conceive* religion can be a strategy toward this goal. How might we design and continually improve *learning about religion* if our intention is specifically to reduce religious intolerance? This requires experimentation to determine demonstrably effective solutions. In this paper, I briefly unpack the challenge at hand, describe an approach toward collaborative experimentation, and outline a set of mutually-supporting hypotheses with which to design solutions.

Keywords: religion, religious education, intolerance, conflict, violence, empathy, exclusivism, engagement, worldviews, religious constructivism

Religion is a technology—a set of socio-cultural tools for aligning attitudes, ideas, emotions and behaviours within a religious community. These tools include, for example, narratives, myths, rituals, institutions and various arts. To press the tool analogy, one can use a hammer to build a house and also to hit someone over the head. While religion may rarely be the proximate cause of violence, religion is often instrumentalised in support of violence and in many ways exacerbates violence. A 2013 Pew study identified 17 countries as having “very high” levels of religiously-involved conflict, including: abuse of religious minorities; violence and threats to compel adherence to religious norms; harassment of women over religious dress; mob violence; religion-related terrorism; and sectarian violence.¹ If we wish to increase peace in the world, we must reduce the various expressions of religious intolerance.

¹Pew Research Center, Feb. 26, 2015, “Latest Trends in Religious Restrictions and Hostilities,” 10. http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/02/Restrictions2015_fullReport.pdf (Accesses 15 May 2016).

One proposed strategy for reducing religious intolerance is the deployment of secular, school-based religious education, as articulated in the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public School*, published in 2007 by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).² This report claims that “Misunderstandings, negative stereotypes, and provocative images used to depict others are leading to heightened antagonism and sometimes even violence.”³ To address this, the report proposes that “Knowledge about religions and beliefs can reinforce appreciation of the importance of respect for everyone’s right to freedom of religion or belief, foster democratic citizenship, promote understanding of societal diversity and, at the same time, enhance social cohesion.”⁴ The *Toledo* report thus poses a general strategy and rationale for applying religious education to the challenge of religious intolerance, and similar language can be found in many curricular philosophies for religious education. If this strategy can be demonstrated to be effective, then peace can be fostered by continually improving such initiatives through experimentation, evaluation and redesign.

DOES RELIGIOUS EDUCATION REDUCE RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE?

While we might assume that religious education *can* help reduce religious intolerance, I believe it is not known whether or which current forms actually *work*. Evaluation projects have gleaned insights concerning whether parents, children and teachers *value* religious education, but they have been inconclusive regarding impact—and such measurement and evaluation is obviously difficult.⁵

² *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (2007). <http://www.osce.org/odihr/29154>. Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁵ Religious education is rarely designed specifically to reduce religious intolerance. Other intentions may include: reducing anti-social behaviours, fostering citizenship and human rights, developing the spirituality of the learners, increasing religious literacy across a range of traditions, addressing non-religious worldviews, developing the *whole* person, and many other goals. A 2013 Ofsted report emphasised that a key problem in religious education was a lack of clear understanding—on the part of teachers—about the *purpose* of religious education. See: “Religious education: realising the potential,” October 2013, The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted), 14. <http://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/religious-education-realising-the-potential.pdf> (Accessed: 15 May 2016). Examples of evaluation initiatives for religious education include the following: (1) *REDCo* (2006-2009): http://cordis.europa.eu/result/rcn/47525_en.html, (2) *Does Religious Education Work?* (2011), Conroy, James C. et al: <http://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/does-religious-education-work-by-prof-c-conroy.pdf> (3) *RE for REAL* (2014-2015): <http://www.gold.ac.uk/faithsunit/reforreal/> (4) *Living with Difference: community, diversity and the common good* (2015): <https://corablivingwithdifference.files.wordpress.com/2015/12/livingwith-difference-community-diversity-and-the-common-good.pdf>.

Regarding educational strategy, many (perhaps most) non-confessional religious education initiatives are *knowledge-oriented*, such as world religions, comparative religion and religious literacy courses. It is certainly questionable whether or how well *increasing knowledge* is an effective strategy for reducing intolerant attitudes and behaviours. Many of us perhaps know someone with strong prejudices against particular groups, and we might ask ourselves: What kinds of knowledge would change *their* attitudes and beliefs? Given the innumerable options for *designing* religious education, an experimental design method is required if we wish to effectively apply and continually improve upon religious education strategies that intend to reduce intolerance. Importantly, education does mean *schooling*, and we should not constrain our approaches to *school-based* religious education. After all, our conceptions about religion are not necessarily shaped in the classroom, but rather, in daily life: in our homes, public spaces, work environments, popular media, etc.

PROPOSED WAY FORWARD

What might it look like to progress a coordinated effort to continually improve the effectiveness of *learning related to religion* that intends to reduce religious intolerance? A basic experimental method might include the following steps:

1. Deploy multiple initiatives, with varying design strategies
2. Measure efficacy/impact
3. Compare initiatives and revise designs based on insights
4. Repeat indefinitely

As simple as this process might be, conceptually, it is much easier said than done, and there is tremendous complexity within each step. However, given the consequences of religious intolerance, we should not shy away from the challenge. For the first step, we need to conceive appropriate hypotheses for testing, drawing upon available empirical studies. (I offer an initial set of hypotheses in the next section.) For the second step, we need to clarify what we are trying to measure and find or design instruments for this purpose. How might we measure ‘religious intolerance’ of target audience members? For the third step, how do we glean insights that can be used to create or revise new initiatives? Comparing initiatives requires capturing common sets of quantitative and qualitative data, such as the following:

- A context-setting narrative describing the recent, historical context for religion in the geographical region, and in particular, issues related to religious intolerance.
- Goals of the initiative, and related metrics
- Participant demographics

- Learning objectives, behavioural objectives and other intended educational outcomes
- Statement of curricular philosophy, pedagogical approaches, etc.
- Lessons plans with learning resources, media and materials (source files ready for use, modification, replication, etc.)
- Assessment instruments intended to measure achievement of the goals and objectives
- Assessment results and other evidence of impact and efficacy
- Post-implementation review narrative: What may have worked and why?
- Recommendations to improve the solution

Following the above method, over time and with increasing confidence, a participating community-of-practice could gather insights about what works and why, and could therefore design and deploy increasingly effective initiatives. One can easily imagine an internet-based environment designed to support the overall effort, and such a system could also support synchronous and asynchronous learning delivery. In short, I am proposing an online, global and collaborative *teaching, learning and research* effort—and purpose-built technical environment—for religious education that intends to reduce religious intolerance and foster peace.

HYPOTHESES: HOW *MIGHT* RELIGIOUS EDUCATION REDUCE RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE?

The experimental approach described above requires hypotheses for testing, and in this section, I offer a starting set of mutually-supporting strategies. Particular educational activities related to any such hypotheses should be the outcome of collaborative and interdisciplinary design efforts, ideally leveraging relevant empirical studies. My hypothesis set for educational initiatives that intend to reduce religious intolerance includes the following:

- 1) Increase empathy for the religious other
- 2) Decrease exclusivism
- 3) Reframe religion functionally
- 4) Critically and creatively engage people with radically diverse worldviews
- 5) Practice a form of personal religious constructivism

INCREASING EMPATHY FOR THE RELIGIOUS OTHER

Empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of another, is frequently cited as a desired outcome for religious education.⁶ Multiple studies

⁶ Hess, M. 2012. “Mirror Neurons, The Development of Empathy, And Digital Story Telling.” *Religious Education*, 107, 4, 401–414. Also, see the *Toledo Guidelines* description of “empathic education,” 46.

have suggested a strong correlation between increased empathy, increased pro-social behaviour,⁷ and decreased prejudice.⁸ While many religious education initiatives may have the *intention* of increasing empathy, the question remains exactly how this might be accomplished. For example, perhaps the subject of study and practice should *be* empathy,⁹ rather than hoping to achieve increased empathy as a by-product of learning *about* religions. Instruments for measuring empathy are available, so pre- and post-testing could support evaluation and improvement.¹⁰

Decreasing religious exclusivism

My second proposed strategy is to foster a *decrease in religious exclusivism*—the position where one’s own beliefs are considered uniquely true in comparison with other religious beliefs. Alternative positions to exclusivism include varieties of *inclusivism* and *pluralism*.¹¹ *Inclusivism* roughly means that, while one’s own religion is true and correct, some of this truth may be found in other religions. *Pluralism* suggests that many or most forms of religion might be considered equally valid approaches to living.¹² I am in agreement with John Hull who notes that, when people define religion in terms of exclusivist ideas, e.g., “the one and only god,” or “correct faith” or “god is on our side—not theirs,” etc., negative consequences of religion are reinforced and perpetuated.¹³ Some studies conclude that exclusivity is a strong predictor of scapegoating, while

⁷ Masten, C. L., S. A. Morelli, N. I. Eisenberger. 2011. “An fMRI Investigation of Empathy for ‘Social Pain’ and Subsequent Prosocial Behavior.” *NeuroImage* 55, 1, 381–8.

⁸ Pettigrew, Th. F., L. R. Tropp. 2008. “How Does Intergroup Contact Reduce Prejudice? Meta-analytic Tests of Three Mediators.” *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 38, 6, 922–934. Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, EBSCOhost (accessed April 10, 2015).

⁹ Gerdes, K. E., E. A. Segal, K. F. Jackson, J. L. Mullins. 2011. “Teaching Empathy: a Framework Rooted in Social Cognitive Neuroscience and Social Justice.” *Journal of Social Work Education*, 47, 1, 109–131.

¹⁰ Francis, L. J., J. S. Croft, A. Pyke. 2012. “Religious Diversity, Empathy, and God Images: Perspectives from the Psychology of Religion Shaping a Study among Adolescents in the UK.” *Journal of Beliefs & Values: Studies in Religion & Education*, 33, 3, 293–307. For a discussion of pre- and post-deployment of “implicit association tests” to measure attitudinal change related to prejudice, see: Monroe, K. R., M. L. Martinez-Martí. 2008. “Empathy, Prejudice, and Fostering Tolerance.” *PS: Political Science & Politics Volume*, 04, 857–863.

¹¹ De Cea, V. A. 2011, “A Cross-cultural and Buddhist-Friendly Interpretation of the Typology Exclusivism-Inclusivism-Pluralism.” *Sophia*, 50, 3, 453–480.

¹² For a discussion of various meanings of pluralism, see: Grimmitt, M. 1994. “Religious Education and the Ideology of Pluralism.” *British Journal of Religious Education*, 16, Also, see: Eck, D. *What is Pluralism?* <http://pluralism.org/what-is-pluralism/>

¹³ Hull, J. M. 2009. “Religion, Violence and Religious Education.” In: *International Handbook of the Religious, Moral and Spiritual Dimensions in Education*. De Souza, M. et al. (Eds.). Springer, 591–605 Hull’s recommendation is that we teach that religions are continually transcending themselves through necessary and ongoing reinterpretations, and that therefore one should not hold tightly to particularities, which leads to exclusivism, fanaticism, terrorism.

theism in general is a weak predictor.¹⁴ This suggests that religious *belief* is not a cause of conflict, so much as religious *exclusivity*. Reducing exclusivity could conceivably yield multiple benefits, including reducing religious extremism (where one's own beliefs warrant extreme and at times violent behaviour) and fostering empathy—i.e., it should be easier to deeply understand and relate to *the religious other* if one avoids judging them as necessarily in error. While reducing exclusivism is certainly controversial as an intended goal of an initiative, it may be a powerful strategy for reducing religious intolerance, conflict and violence.

REFRAME RELIGION FUNCTIONALLY

Religion is often understood to codify truths, such as right and wrong ways of believing and behaving; therefore, religious *diversity* is often conceived as a competition or conflict. However, religion can instead be conceived *functionally*—as the set of psychological, social and cultural *tools* that are common to human societies and which reinforce and align attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of communities. Religious differences are particular, cultural expressions—the clothing on the exterior of a similar skeletal infrastructure. While the specific beliefs and behaviours of various religious traditions may differ radically, the functions performed by religious practices are largely the same. While focusing on the *sameness* of religions has been severely (and I believe, appropriately) criticised,¹⁵ I am referring specifically to the sameness of underlying psychological and social functions and impacts. Loyal Rue describes this functional perspective as follows:

“The general function of religious traditions is to educate the emotions of individuals so that they will think, feel, and act in ways that are conducive to their personal and collective well-being. This general function may be seen in the way the supporting strategies bear upon aspects of human nature, and in doing so they engage individuals in the meanings of the myth. The strategies work together to bias the various neural systems that are responsible for

¹⁴ “Does Religious Belief Promote Religious Scapegoating?” Hansen, I., A. Norenzayan. (in press) available online:

<http://www2.psych.ubc.ca/~anlab/pdf/Hansen&NorenzayanScapegoating.pdf>

(Accessed: 14 May 2015). Also see: idem. “Religion, Evolution and Intolerance.” Available online:

http://www.ibrarian.net/navon/paper/Religion__evolution_and_intolerance_Ian_Hansen_an.pdf?paperid=5695835

¹⁵ For example, L. Philip Barnes warns that focusing on the sameness of religions is “dangerous, disrespectful and untrue,” and will “necessarily fail to frame and implement policies and methodologies that are effective in challenging religious prejudice and intolerance.” Barnes, L. P. 2014. *Education, Religion and Diversity: Developing a New Model of Religious Education*. Routledge, 240.

mediating behaviour. In particular, the supporting strategies are designed to engage the so-called social emotions in ways that enhance social cooperation.”¹⁶

The “supporting strategies” that Rue refers to are similar to Frank Whaling’s *elements of religion*, and Ninian Smart’s *dimensions of religion*:¹⁷

- Narrative, mythic, scriptural
- Ritual
- Experiential, spiritual, emotional
- Social, institutional
- Aesthetic, material
- Ethical, legal
- Intellectual, doctrinal, philosophical

There could be several pedagogical uses for such a functional framework, most obviously as an analytical tool for learning about religious traditions, and for reflecting on one’s own religious or cultural perspective and experience.¹⁸ This framework can also supports creative activities, e.g., writing one’s own cosmological narratives and designing rituals that reinforce one’s own goals and intentions (see ‘Personal religious constructivism’ below). In addition, and in connection with the next strategy, such a framework can support *deep engagement with others* by providing a structure for dialogue—for understanding each other’s lives through the lens of these categories.

PERSONAL, CRITICAL AND CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH RADICALLY DIVERSE WORLDVIEWS

Tying together the strategies proposed so far is perhaps the single most powerful strategy: highly interactive engagement with the religious other. Increasing empathy is supported by (and perhaps requires) intensive interaction with people: working collaboratively, sharing meals, playing games, discussing shared experiences, etc. Personal and critical engagement suggests deep learning achieved through observation, questioning, reflection and, in particular, conver-

¹⁶ Rue, L. D. 2011. *Nature is Enough*. State University of New York Press, 94.

¹⁷ This list combines language from Rue, Whaling and Smart. See: Whaling, F. 1995. “Introduction.” *Theory and Method in Religious Studies: Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion*. Whaling, F. (Ed.). Walter de Gruyter, 34–35. Smart, N. 1990. *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*. University of California Press, 10. Rue, L. 2005. *Religion Is Not About God: How Spiritual Traditions Nurture Our Biological Nature and What to Expect When They Fail*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 128.

¹⁸ See: Rue, L. 2005, op. cit. for Rue’s application of his version of this structure to descriptions of major religious traditions, 167–h313.

sation.¹⁹ This takes time, informality, rapport building and getting to know one another. The overarching hypothesis is: When one becomes deeply engaged in understanding diverse worldviews, it becomes harder to conclude that one's own worldview is obviously and uniquely *correct* or *better*—and therefore exclusivism is likely to decrease; and it becomes easier to understand how and why others live, think and feel the way that they do—and therefore empathy should increase. For these reasons, I believe that any initiatives intending to reduce religious intolerance should include deep engagement with the religious other.

PRACTICE A FORM OF PERSONAL RELIGIOUS CONSTRUCTIVISM

A functional approach to religion can be explored *creatively* by prompting learners to reflect upon their own, personal perspectives in relation to the functional strategies (narratives, ritual, experiential, aesthetic, etc.) such as their own:

- Descriptions of *how things are* (cosmology) and *which things matter* (ethics)
- Narratives and myths that embody these descriptions
- Rituals that enact aspects of these narratives and myths
- Environments, activities, symbols and various expressions that support all of the above (personal spaces, works of art, music, etc.)

How might such activities serve the cause of reducing religious intolerance? Through creative practice, participants would deepen their understanding of the functional nature of religion, making the various elements/dimensions/strategies real for them. This would thereby reinforce each of the other strategies—i.e., increasing empathy and reducing exclusivism. Such activities would prompt reflection about what is important to the individual, and about how their ideas, attitudes, emotions and behaviours align with their notion of importance—or how they do not align. In short, I am in agreement with Michael Grimmitt, a pioneer of the pedagogical approach referred to as *learning from religion*: “[I]n a world in which life-styles are often pre-packaged we should seek every opportunity to strengthen young people’s capacity to ‘roll their own.’”²⁰

¹⁹ This kind of learning is emphasised in transformational learning theory. See: Mezirow, J. 1997. “Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice.” *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*, 74, 5.

²⁰ Grimmitt, M. 1987. *Religious Education and Human Development*. McCrimmons, 208. Quoted in: Cooling, T. 2010. “Doing God in Education.” *Theos*, 32. Available online: <https://www.canterbury.ac.uk/education/our-work/research-knowledge-exchange/national-institute-christian-education-research/docs/doing-god-in-education.pdf>.

CONTRASTING STRATEGIES: KNOWLEDGE VERSUS ATTITUDINAL OBJECTIVES

How might educational initiatives based on the above strategies compare to current forms of religious education? I propose that religious education that intends to reduce intolerance should be less about *religions* (i.e., facts about religious traditions, e.g., names and descriptions of gods, founders, beliefs, histories, symbols, ethics, scriptures, institutions, rituals, holidays, etc.) and more about *attitudinal* objectives, e.g., increasing empathy for the religious other and reducing exclusivism. Facts and descriptions about particular religions are certainly useful: they serve as examples and illustrations of particular religious functions, and they allow some adherents to *feel represented* in the learning and to participate from a position of knowledge and experience. Also, as suggested in *Toledo* and other writings about religious education, it *may* be that increased knowledge about religions does indeed decrease intolerance. While I am currently sceptical of the assumed connection between knowledge and attitude, this is an empirical issue. If reducing religious intolerance is an important goal, we should find out what works best in which situations, ideally through methodical experimentation by a community of practice that collaborates on the design, evaluation and continual improvement of new and varied forms of learning related to religion. This, I believe, will serve the goal of a more peaceful and cooperative world.

CHALLENGES AND OBJECTIONS

The research question at hand is straight-forward: How should we design—and continually improve—religious education if our goal is to reduce intolerance? Yet there are numerous conceivable objections to my proposed hypotheses; here is a sample: (a) *Too atheistic or anti-religious*. By attempting to reduce exclusivism, one might argue that this approach is fostering agnosticism or even atheism: (b) *Too religious*. Some atheists and anti-religionists may argue that my approach is *too respectful* of religion and may even foster or deepen religious conviction—thus reinforcing the negative consequences of religion and countering the anticipated demise of religion. (c) *Circumvents parents' rights*. If applied to childhood education, this approach could arguably violate parents' rights to be responsible for the religious or worldview development of their children. (d) *Illegal*. Depending on the jurisdiction, it might be argued that my approach is illegal for government-sponsored initiatives or environments (e.g., public school), violating the separation of religion and government. (e) *Misconceiving religion*. One could argue that the entire functional perspective is mistaken, that religion is *not* a cultural technology, but is, for example, God's guidance for humanity. These are all important issues to discuss, and for the

purpose of this paper, I offer one general response: We need all of these voices at the table. The challenge of religious intolerance requires a highly interdisciplinary and interest-based collaborative response. Many domains can offer insights and concerns with the mission I have described, and *philosophy* is one such domain.

CONCLUSION: RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AS A FORM OF TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION

Technology education fosters the safe and productive use of tools, because powerful tools tend to be dangerous tools—and the technology of religion can certainly be both powerful and dangerous. The functional strategies of religion evolved with our bodies and minds, and are woven into culture and consciousness. Unlike physical tools, religious technology cannot easily be avoided or destroyed—humans *use* worldviews, narratives, myths, rituals, symbols, etc., whether or not these are conceived as being part of a religious context.²¹ Therefore, *turning off* religion—as per new-atheist aspirations—is not a reasonable strategy or expectation; and rejecting religion *because* one rejects supernaturalism is like throwing out the baby with the bathwater. As Rue contends: *Religion is not about God*.²² Religion is a set of socio-cultural tools for aligning and reinforcing attitudes, emotions and behaviours. Religion is a technology, and a key aspect of life for many millions of people around the world through which people engage their ultimate concerns, including *how things are* and *which things matter*. Clearly, one does not *need* religion to engage these issues. However, just as clearly, this *is* what religion *does* for many people on our planet. Meanwhile, religious education is happening right now all around the world, so the issue is simply *whether* and *how* to design such initiatives with the specific intention of fostering peace. If we choose, we can design religious education—like technology education—to focus on *safety and well-being*. The better we understand religion and religiosity, the better we might protect ourselves from abuses of religion that foment conflict, violence and suffering.

²¹ See: Smart, N. 1999. *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs*. University of California Press, 13. Smart applies his “dimensions” to United States nationalism, demonstrating that these are not specifically “religious” dimensions, but more broadly applicable to cultures and worldviews. Also, see Rue, L. 2005, op. cit., 328. Here, Rue applies his framework to consumerism.

²² This is the title of Rue’s 2005 book.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR — PhD candidate in Religious Studies at the University of Otago, 362 Leith St, North Dunedin, Dunedin 9016, New Zealand. He comes to the study of religion with a thirty-year career in instructional design, instructional technology and organisational learning. His research is exploring design methodologies for religious education that intends to reduce religious conflict.

E-mail: lewma212@student.otago.ac.nz