

Fighting Social Conformity through Religious Literacy

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In the 17th century, the United States was initially colonized as a safe haven for religious persecution, becoming a critical socially defining characteristic of the nation. As a result of a history of mixed immigration and varied religious beliefs coexisting, the United States has often been called “the melting pot”. More recently, the nation has gone through its own evolution in both political and social environments regarding the role of religion in society. According to Robert Bellah, a sociology professor at Harvard University, “...the American state has...supportive attitude towards religious groups...but still missing the positive institutionalization” (40). Immigration has become a hot-button issue as a groundbreaking 14% of the US population was reported to be immigrants in 2016 (Nancy Foner et al. 1). As Bellah noted, Americans have always found it difficult to accept differences, especially when it comes to faith and various interpretations of God’s word. With changes in the racial and ethnic composition of the nation growing over time, a conversation about the American identity has become increasingly prevalent. According to Michael Jones-Correa, the President’s Distinguished Professor of Political Science and director of the Center for the Study of Ethnicity, Race, and Immigration at the University of Pennsylvania, and his colleagues, “...local residents may be less likely to see new immigrants as ‘one of us’...” (48). Building upon Bellah’s interpretation of the American mindset, Jones-Correa further proves how the presence of religious diversity in itself is cause for concern. Further developing the idea, the effects of the consequences of social instability can be seen in the form of hate crimes, specifically targeting immigrants. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the number of hate crime incidents towards Asian Americans had a 12% increase from 2012 to 2014 (Zhang et al. 2). It is clear that social tensions continue to increase as religious diversity and immigration continue, and policymakers must take a more active role to intervene and address these issues sooner rather than later. Thus, society must ask: to what degree should state legislators address the social instability caused by religiosity in the United States?

The political climate of the United States today is inherently distinct from society a century ago with an increasing influx of immigrants from around the world; however, it continues to place divisions within states, communities, and schools. In a multi-dimensional analysis, Gizen Arian from the Trinity College Dublin and his colleagues discussed the relationships between religiosity and social stability through the Religious Motivations and Expression (REME) model. According to them, the model intends to, “...disentangle the complex relationships...by highlighting the motivational force of religion and its manifestation in democratic...behaviors” (Arian et al. 81). The REME Model has helped researchers and politicians pinpoint the correlation between religion and political stability in terms of beliefs, social behavior, and private behavior, which the model identifies as key indicators that should be taken into consideration. Building upon the ideas stated by Arian and his colleagues, Robert A. Emmons from the University of California, Davis, and Sarah A. Schnitker from the Fuller Theological Seminary, concludes, “...the application of the model...can reconcile the existing inconsistencies in the burgeoning literature on individual religiosity...” (320). Connecting both of these interpretations of the REME Model, both establish the importance of religion, but they also recognize the need for further understanding of various cultures and ideas. The continued presence of various religious beliefs has led legislators to identify the dangers of religious illiteracy. According to Edd Doerr, President of Americans for Religious Liberty, “Americans are



the most religious...they are also the most religiously illiterate and ill-informed, and this goes even for vast numbers of the most vocally devout” (46). Doerr continues to explain how religious illiteracy continues to negatively affect security interests in the United States, further emphasizing the need for politicians to focus on providing opportunities to educate their constituents on identifying misunderstandings and stereotypes about other religions to bring stability to the American political environment. State legislators should allocate federal funding to establish and promote community-wide religious education programs to decrease social instability caused by religious tensions in the US.

To understand how to successfully establish such initiatives, we can look at a successful model of a program in England. In his illustrative analysis, *Secular Reasons for Confessional Religious Education in Public Schools*, Winfried Löffler, an Associate Professor in the Department of Christian Philosophy at the University of Innsbruck in Austria, analyzed the current practice of religious education in European schools. His analysis provides insight into the motive, structure, and implications of such teaching foundations. Löffler states that the presence of such teaching styles is imperative to create informed democratic citizens: “...religious mindsets can be destructive...the combination of devoted religiosity and illiteracy, appears especially susceptible to such tendencies” (Löffler 121). To improve both individual competence and political awareness, this curriculum is integrated into public schools and is publicly financed. Teachers are hired to present unbiased theological education and are usually required to have proper credentials to be certified by the state. Referring back to the REME Model, these initiatives contribute to the political and social awareness of a person in terms of their social behavior (Arikan et al. 83). The inclusion of such education programs will lead to immigrants and similarly marginalized communities reclaiming their self-identity and an increase in community-wide understanding and tolerance, which leads to social stability.

Immigrants coming into the US are often expected to assimilate into the cultural environment, which translates into a forceful change in one’s self-identity and expression. For immigrants who are leaving behind the land of their ancestors and migrating to a new nation, their cultural traditions and beliefs are likely their last connection to their roots. According to Marian Rawan Abdulla, policy officer for the Commonwealth Initiative for Freedom of Religion or Belief at the University of Birmingham, UK, he states that “To be fully human, humans need to have either a form of self-expression which is self-defining; or the freedom to partake in forms of cultural expression...” (106). Conformity and the loss of culture are more probable in the face of isolation. Going back to claims made by Arikan and his collaborators, the REME Model highlights the importance of the expression of religiosity to one’s social behavior (Arikan et al. 91). Without a properly established connection to a belief system, a continued besetting of religions will continue to radically alter the ideals of a cultural group. According to H. Sidgwick from Newnham College in England, accepting the growing and diverse changes in the American cultural environment will lead to more comprehensive efforts to create an open-minded society that can hear marginalized groups: “...the divergence of religious beliefs, conscientiously entertained by educated persons...shows no symptom of diminution” (Sidgwick 280). The acceptance of different beliefs will allow these groups to thrive and continue to maintain their own beliefs and traditions. Community-wide religious education programs will give immigrant groups the space and opportunity to educate their community about their self-identity. Referring back to the REME Model, it emphasizes the power of constant communication of religion to exert social acceptance (Arikan et al. 82). Increasing the religious literacy of society allows for the acceptance of marginalized communities.



Recognizing the vast religious spectrum of the United States while also making notable efforts to increase familiarity with unknown thoughts and ideas has been proven to help combat the impacts of conformity. An increase in religious literacy and social understanding also allows for community-wide acceptance and helps to change the cemented viewpoint some may have of religious diversity. Referring back to Doerr's analysis of the status of religious literacy in the US, the best remedy for such a solution are educational initiatives: "a remedy for this ignorance compulsory public school and university courses "about,"...religion(s) in the United States" (Doerr 46). Allowing the opportunity for optional religious education that is less focused on indoctrination and more focused on theological, intellectual, and philosophical discussions is productive in teaching ethics, psychology, and social sensitivity training (Loffler 121). Referring back to the REME Model, exposure to a multitude of ideas across the political spectrum directly impacts the political environment. Arikan states, "...the effect of religion on political intolerance in the United States...completely due to personal orientations" (83). Without the proper exposure, prejudice is likely to form, manifesting into a "closed mind," and resulting in social tensions. With the proper subtext, religious education programs can help foster attitudes like mutual respect, cultural openness, and understanding of different standpoints (Loffler 125). Connecting these various ideas is the promise of increased tolerance and understanding in a community of strikingly different political values. All researchers have noted that these educational efforts offer the opportunity to find the similarities amongst the differences by presenting religious neutrality. Learning to accept the presence of religious diversity in America helps not only to practice tolerance towards others but also helps work toward intellectualizing and de-creedalizing traditional religion in America (Doerr 46).

The establishment of community-wide religious tolerance programs has many obvious advantages; however, the implementation is expected to be met with some resistance. According to Loffler, the biggest pushback is by parents and teachers because of the danger of ideological indoctrination (Loffler 122). The US has established its continued determination to the separation of church and state, which this initiative may endanger. Critics have stated that the strict oversight of all instructors and curriculum prevent active indoctrination and is extremely difficult to maintain. In such situations, how does one separate this democracy from an authoritarian nation forcing cultural beliefs on its citizens? In an excerpt from *Democracy in America, 1835-1840* by Alexis De Tocqueville, the former French foreign minister, "...government attempt to go beyond its political sphere...the opinions which it favors are rigidly enforced...never easy to discriminate between its advice and its commands" (Tocqueville 25). Some may argue that the presence of religious education in public schools is an affront to democracy itself. However, in contrast to the claims made by Tocqueville, religious education should not be treated differently than any other form of education received at public schools. In a comparison made by Loffler, "...it appears natural to request the quality of a practicing musician or athlete... [there is] no reason why religious instruction should be treated otherwise" (126). Religious education is simply offering students the resources to explore different ways of thinking or understanding life, so it seems unreasonable for the political outcry to be present. If offered the opportunity, public schools should look into providing such accommodations for their students to benefit the community at large.

State legislators should take the responsibility to offer resources to help communities identify and understand various religious and cultural ideals and beliefs to help marginalized groups, primarily immigrants, reaffirm themselves and offer a path toward political and social stability. The REME Model is a great example that establishes the link between cultural beliefs



and social behavior. Arikan and his colleagues have analyzed how various degrees of religiosity may play a role in community structure, especially regarding political intolerance. Various researchers from all over the world have reaffirmed staying accustomed to social trends is vital to help shape a socially aware, stable, and tolerant generation. Religious education programs are a place for people of different backgrounds to come together and celebrate the beauty of religious diversity and fight to understand each other in their similarities and differences. While a hot-button issue, there is no doubt that such initiatives could help combat the waves of instability spreading across the US. These discussions allow us to celebrate one of the original, fundamental values of America, religious diversity, and how it has shaped the political and social landscape of the nation for decades in the past and will continue to do so for decades in the future. Thus, it is vital to take an active stance in celebrating these values rather than concealing where the nation originated from many centuries ago.

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