

## **Uncovering and challenging student worldviews through the study of world religions**

Daniel ANDRZEJEWSKI

### **Abstract**

This article provides analysis from a study of 17 students participating in a world religion course using an empathic research approach. Student written reactions and surveys were analyzed to find what worldview and beliefs were expressed pertaining to the beliefs and practices of major world religions and worldviews (Shinto, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity and atheism). Inquiry was also made into how these beliefs challenged and stimulated a new way of thinking in students. Results showed students viewed religion as a part of culture and conveyed resistance to the idea of adherence to beliefs and practices that were considered uncomfortable or inconvenient. Students expressed aversion to both daily observances of religion, such as dietary restrictions, as well as moral absolutes or standards to aspire to. Conversely, participants in the course were able to challenge common narratives about religious restrictions and understand benefits in some practices, in one case seeing the restrictions as empowering. Drawing upon these results, the article briefly comments on the need for further study of religions as a way to foster critical thinking and an emphasis on global education in Japanese universities.

### **Abstract**

本論では、世界の宗教についての授業の17名の受講者の共感的研究アプローチによる分析結果を報告する。世界の主要宗教や世界観（神道、仏教、ヒンズー教、イスラム教、ユダヤ教、キリスト教、無神論）の信条や習慣に対する受講者の感想やアンケート記述を分析し、どのような世界観や信条が表されているのかを調べた。また、このような宗教的信条を学習することで、どのように新たな考え方が彼らの中に芽生えたのかも考察した。分析結果からは、学生は宗教を文化の一部とみなしており、不快で不都合と思われる信条や習慣を順守することに抵抗感があることがわかる。食事制限などの日常生活上の宗教的習慣や絶対的な道徳基準を求める規律に対する反感も見られる。しかし反対に、受講者は宗教

的規制についての一般的な見解の妥当性を疑い、一部の習慣については理解を示すに至っている。中にはそのような規制は自由を確立するものだとした意見もあった。本稿では、これらの分析結果に基づき、批判的思考を育成する一手法として、また日本の大学におけるグローバル教育の中核として、更なる宗教教育の必要性も示唆している。

**Keywords:** religion, worldviews, global education

キーワード：宗教，世界観，グローバル教育

## Introduction

Recently, Japanese universities are increasingly investing a large amount of human and financial resources into the emerging idea of “global education”, with the intent to cultivate students who are equipped for participation in the global community ( グローバル人材 ). This movement takes place as a part of a greater need for globalization in order to address Japan’s shrinking population and economy (Aspinall, 2011 p. 132). “Global education”, in practical terms, has meant more support for foreign language learning or international exchange experiences through government initiatives such as the Global 30 Project and Top Global University Project (ICEF Monitor, 2014). Another aspect of global education is the development of “world citizenship” through the materialization of content-based instruction (Cates, 1999). Included among the wide range of topics covered for fostering participation as a world citizen are morality, values, and religion (Zahabioun, Yousefy, Yarmohammadian, & Keshtiaray, 2013). This study concerns a course on world religion as a part of this effort to promote world citizenship and global education in a Japanese university.

## The Study

While courses comparing and investigating world religions are only a small percentage of religious education in Japanese universities (Fujiwara, 2002, pp. 361-364), I assert they can be helpful for students to understand their own worldview and challenge preconceptions of other cultures different from their own.

### *Research Method & Inquiry Approach*

For this study, I examined written reaction papers and reflections, as well as a survey of students, elicited from a total of 17 students in two comparative religion

courses at a private non-sectarian university in western Japan. These classes were designed as a special course for the university's study abroad program entitled "Global Topics". Students were from a variety of majors, including Business Administration, Literature, and Law and have completed one year in the study abroad program. I used an empathic approach (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2004) to my analysis, trying to understand questions and comments proceeding from my students in side-by-side approach. Empathic research: "seeks to illicit from the world the answers to questions that already exist in the world rather than prodding the world with foreign questions to see how it might react to new stimuli or how it might be redirected to new patterns of behavior" (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2004, p. 127). I acknowledge my position and sociocultural background informs my analysis as a Caucasian North American researcher from a Christian background and 16-year resident of Japan. As an immigrant, I seek personal understanding of a topic my native students might otherwise not, and as an instructor my hope is that students will find some of the answers for their own sake.

The two questions guiding my inquiry are: "*What attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews do my students express particularly in regard to religions?*" and "*What beliefs introduced through this course challenged students to think in a different way?*" A worldview primarily "...reflects on how you would answer all the 'big questions' of human existence, the fundamental questions we ask about life, the universe, and everything" (Anderson, 2014, p. 12). It is "...first of all an explanation and interpretation of the world and then an application of this view to life" (Brown, 2004, p. 6). Naugle (2002) further clarifies that a worldview, "is a semiotic system of narrative signs that creates the definitive symbolic universe which is responsible in the main for the shape of a variety of life-determining, human practices" (p. 253). Taking these definitions, I was looking for how students would explain, interpret and apply their answers to the principal questions of life. I was also looking for signs of a narrative understanding of life. I approached my students' reactions with the question: "What stories are my students telling?"

### ***Course Description***

Throughout the 15 week course, students examined and compared major world religions and religions of Japan. Each week, readings were given to understand the origin and basic beliefs of each religion, followed by readings from religious texts and discussions about modern day issues and applications of these religions. Students began by examining Shinto and Buddhism in Japan, and subsequently

moved on to Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity and atheism. While there is much debate as to whether atheism constitutes a religion, using the definition of “an absence of belief in the existences of a God or gods” (Bullivant, 2013 p. 13), atheism “constitutes a full-fledged worldview” (Walters, 2010 p. 33) and is relevant when comparing major religions and worldviews. Students were given tasks of summarizing, writing reactions or researching further about each reading. I draw my data from these surveys and reactions. All students’ written responses appear unaltered and unedited.

### ***Findings***

Students were first presented with readings on Japanese religions. Firstly, many students were unfamiliar with the term “Shinto” to describe the traditional Japanese folk religion and the differences between Buddhism and Shinto. One student noted: “There’re many people who don’t think about religion very much in Japan” (Reaction Paper #3). Historically, the idea of religion (*shukyo*) is relatively new to Japan, as “...’*shukyo*’ is the term developed in the nineteenth century in Japan to refer to the English word ‘religion,’ which at the time was most specifically a theologically oriented term” (Reader & Tanabe, 1998, p. 5). Shinto was forced to organize as a religion itself, only with the introduction of Buddhism to Japan. Students may also feel the impact of the legacy of State Shinto from the Meiji Era through World War II when government policies regulated religious education but categorized Shinto practices as part of approved ethical law (Takeda, 1968, p. 215).

Some students tended to see the topic of religion not as a set of personal beliefs, but rather as a part of culture and a way of life. When introduced to Hindu beliefs, one female student reacted: “My point of view is religions should be free for people believing them. Last time, we studied Shinto and Buddhism, at that time, I thought religions need to have various forms of belief, do not have to have absolutely rules. I consider religions are culture rather than only religion” (Reaction Paper #18). This student expressed the need for a variety of beliefs that may reflect the relativistic nature of religious beliefs in Japan due to the blending of Shinto and Buddhism as well as incorporating a variety of religious traditions and superstitions into everyday life. She favored this relativism because it allowed for the absence of absolute rules to govern everyday life.

Other students expressed reservations about the requirements of religions. When reflecting on Hinduism, another female student stated: “At first, I would not

be able to eat meat. In aspect of behavior, I will not be able to do bad action. If I do bad actions, it means that I cannot become a human in my next life. It is not comfortable for me to follow these religious thought” (Reaction Paper #19). This student saw religion as restrictive of daily habits (eating meat) as well as moral behavior. The idea of moral consequences caused her to feel “uncomfortable” and therefore unable to follow that system of belief. Even with a more familiar religion such as Buddhism, students struggled when realizing that religion required not only belief, but action as well. One male student, reflecting on the life of Buddha, wrote: “I must strive to become generous and compassionate toward other people. However, I don’t have confidence to conduct these things every day. While I understand that these things are right, I couldn’t continue to do. Thus I respect Buddha”(Reaction Paper #14). The student references the teachings of Buddha’s Eightfold Path. While there are no dietary or lifestyle restrictions involved, the student realizes that compassion would require effort beyond what he currently can do. He expresses respect for people who endeavor to live morally, but he excuses himself from partaking in the moral change required by Buddhism. Implicit in both students’ reactions, is the idea that religion is something one chooses to participate in or not. While several students were self-identified Buddhists due to their family’s affiliation, these comments express that religion could be also viewed as a matter of personal choice.

While religious rules were a challenge for students to personally consider, students demonstrated the ability to empathize with customs different from their own after understanding a worldview foreign to them and its implications. One female student wrote about Muslim rules for women’s skin to be covered: “To conceal women’s skin is to protect their own dignity and safety...I know that Muslim women are objecting these rules because it is unequal. However, the rules are for women to protect themselves, so I think women have to be protected with clothes” (Reaction Paper #6). Another female student remarked on the same topic that although these customs seem restrictive, “They don’t feel restraint. They thanks for need not worry about appearances. In fact, they refuse judgment of their looks. I consider they think that they are released rather than threatened” (Reaction Paper #7). Here, the students were able to position themselves in another point of view and find a remarkable conclusion: The covering of women is for their protection. Not only this, but there are added benefits of avoiding judgment based on looks. The students acknowledge the common narrative that covering is a form of oppression of women, but when changing perspectives, the narrative is

reversed. Muslim women are the ones liberated from eyes that judge women's value based on their appearance. As female students perhaps they can identify with this situation and accept the modesty required by Islam. What is more remarkable, is to consider that this class took place in the spring of 2016, a time when Islamic State of Iraq and Syria was prevalent in the daily news and many students admitted their stereotypes connecting Islam with terrorism.

Throughout the course students were introduced to pantheistic, polytheistic, monotheistic and atheistic worldviews. This process allowed students find an outline of their personal beliefs and generate deeper questions that worldviews address. While students came to respect religions and their values, they also were able to better categorize their own beliefs. One female student addressed readings on forms of atheism, namely naturalism and existentialism: "In short, I felt these clarifies that it's okay without existence of God. From this, I have question about being God. What does god exist for? In my opinion, they exist for a psychological support for ordinary people." (Reaction Paper #1) A male student expressed a similar set of questions when considering polytheism: "The most important gods for human being affect good things to human's life. Other gods affect badly for human's life. So why did ancients make badly gods? and If they were made badly gods for human, what profit did they get? I don't understand" (Reaction Paper #20). We can see the underlying assumptions of agnosticism or atheism in the two students' questions. Gods do not exist by themselves, but are a human creation. Both students express that the creation of these gods must have some function to help humanity. Still, if this is the case, the second student struggles to understand the existence of evil gods or beings in different religions. To him, an evil presence is unnecessary and perhaps unhelpful. He is forced to think critically at a deeper level than before to examine his assumptions and the discrepancies within them he finds in studying a variety of religions.

A study of world religions allowed students to consider their own worldviews and express opinions reflecting their personal beliefs. A class survey taken at the beginning of the course asked students to agree or disagree with the following statement: "I can explain my religious beliefs or worldview clearly". Of the 12 respondents to the survey, only two agreed, while 10 students disagreed or strongly disagreed. Students provided a basic outline of their worldviews especially when challenged with differing religious beliefs. Some students expressed a reluctance to accept religious lifestyle-related regulations or even moral requirements. They presented an incomplete narrative where religion was a

marginal part of their lives and thinking without a strong alternative to this narrative. Others found their worldview stretched in order to account for the differences found in other beliefs outside their own. This allowed them to look afresh at the essential questions religions try to answer. From this preliminary data, a course examining world religions and differing worldviews can foster critical thinking about world cultures, examination of one's own beliefs, and empathy for opposing points of view. Content study such as this could meet the goals of universities' global education initiatives. More research is needed to gain a clearer picture of the wide range of students' spectrum of worldviews as the reactions and writings provided only an outline of beliefs from a small sample. I suggest that with more time and more focused methods, students and educators in a variety of settings could be able to examine and interpret the narrative signs of their worldviews and their applications to everyday life. Courses in religion can provide the twofold benefit of understanding others and oneself.

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## Appendix I Global Topics Survey

**Global Topics Survey**

Circle one:

Your major: \_\_\_\_\_

**Male Female**

1. I hope to study abroad in the future Yes No
2. Studying religions is:  
Very important Important Somewhat important Not very important
3. I have studied about world religions  
A lot Some A little None
4. Where did you learn about religions? (Circle any that apply)  
Religion class in school  
TV/News media  
History class  
Temple/Church etc  
Home (from parents or relatives) Friends  
Other \_\_\_\_\_
5. I believe there is/are:  
Only one God Many gods No god Not sure
6. I have attended a religious ceremony/event/activity for these religions (circle and add detail)  
Shinto \_\_\_\_\_  
Buddhism \_\_\_\_\_  
Islam \_\_\_\_\_ Christianity \_\_\_\_\_  
Hinduism \_\_\_\_\_ Judaism \_\_\_\_\_  
Other \_\_\_\_\_
7. If my friend invited me, I would attend a ceremony/event/activity of: (circle all that apply)  
Shinto Buddhism  
Islam Christianity  
Hinduism Judaism  
Other \_\_\_\_\_
8. I can explain my religious beliefs or worldview clearly:  
Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
9. What do you hope to learn from this class?