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Impact of the Academic Study of Religion on Interreligious Preferences: The Evidence from Australia[*]

I

Religions are sometimes classified into major and minor religions, where Christianity would represent a major religion and Zoroastrianism, for instance, a minor one. From the point of view of this paper, however, a more vital distinction may be drawn between some religious traditions, specially those commonly called "major" or "higher" which have "developed, in addition to ritual, myths and forms of organization, distinctive *systems* of thought or worldviews" (Burke: 1978 : 704).[1] Thus in "consequence departments of religion construct courses on Christian thought, Jewish thought, and Islamic thought, on Buddhist and Hindu thought, on Taoist and Confucian thought" (704).

For the past several decades now instruction in the above-mentioned religions has become a standard fare at western universities. The purpose of this paper is (1) to investigate what effect such instruction has on interreligious preferences in one part of the western world which like the rest of it is fundamentally Christian in orientation, namely, Australia, and (2) to see what general conclusions can be drawn on the basis of this investigation.

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1. Patrick Burke, "Patterns in Comparative Religious Thought," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 15 (4) 1978.

II

The study of religion as a regular academic discipline is a recent development on the Australian academic scene (Council: 1977, 57)[2], though apparently well-established in North America (Graduate Studies in Religion: 1979).[3] In Australia, although religious studies, as distinguished from theological studies (Osborn, 1978) has been going on in various forms for some time (Hayes: 1975) it has now advanced to the tertiary level and two universities in Australia now boast of full-fledged departments in religious studies: the University of Queensland and the University of Sydney. The present writer has taught in both of these departments. While thus engaged the following question suggested itself as a subject of research: *How are the interreligious preferences of students affected by taking courses with a comparative religionist orientation, as a group?*

To obtain an answer to this question the following research programme was designed.

The religious preferences of the students (not their religious identities) were taken as the dependent variable and it was hypothesized that courses with a comparative-religionist orientation (Sharpe: 1975)[4] will alter interreligious preferences at the collective level. It is not surprising that some individual preferences will be affected but the question related to the preferences of a group as a whole. To test the hypothesis three samples were collected over the years from two universities mentioned above, that of Queensland (Course RE108) and Sydney (RSII, Honours candidates). The procedure was to ask the students to rank religion by preference *before* and *after* the course. The religions were listed in the following alphabetical order: (1) Buddhism, (2) Christianity, (3) Confucianism, (4) Hinduism, (5) Islam, (6) Judaism, (7) Shinto, and (8) Taoism. When Shinto was omitted from the list Taoism became number 7. Two samples related to the same instructor and course and a third sample to a different

2. *Council on the Study of Religion Bulletin* 8 (2), 1977.

3. Helen M. Walker & Joseph Lev, *Graduate Studies in Religion* (Canada : Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Council on the Study of Religion, 1979).

4. Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A history* (London : Duckworth 1975).

instructor and course. Finally, it was decided to use Kendall rank correlation coefficient (Walker & Lev: 1953, 282)[5] to measure individual changes and Kendall coefficient of concordance to measure changes in ideological homogeneity (1953: 283-286). It was decided to use sum of ranks to assess ordinal changes in interreligious preferences of the group.[6]

III

The results of the sampling surveys are presented below:

Sample 1 (1977: Brisbane: sample size 22/51)

Individual changes: In 9 out of 22 cases the individual changes were statistically significant at a 95% level of confidence. The interreligious preferences of 41% of the students were affected.

Collective changes

Kendall's concordance coefficient is a useful statistical device to use in such a situation as it will measure the extent to which all students tend to give the same ranking. The Kendall's concordance efficient for pre-course data is 0.271. This indicates that the preferences were very poorly correlated. The coefficient for the post-course data is 0.278. This indicates that the course had no appreciable impact in homogenizing the preferences of the students—the heterogeneous nature of the preferences persisted.

This fact can lend itself to two interpretations: one positive, the other negative. Positively, it could be argued that the various religions were presented in such an unbiased manner or "phenomeno-

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5. Helen M. Walker and Joseph Lev, *Statistical Inference* (New York : Henry Hold & Co., 1953).

6. Victor L. Hayes, *A Guide to Religion Studies in Australia* Adelaide College of Advanced Education; Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1975.

   Victor L. Hayes, *Studies in Religion in the University of Queensland* Brisbane : University of Queensland Press, 1977.

   Helen M. Walker and Joseph Lev, *Arts Handbook*, (Sydney : The University of Sydney, 1980).

   Huston Smith, *The Religions of Man* (New York : Harper & Row, 1978).

   Eric Francis Osborn, *Religious Studies in Australia since 1958* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1979).

logically" that the instructor did not bias his presentation in any way Negatively, it could be argued that the lecturer was ineffective and did not make any impact on the students.

Changes in overall interreligious preferences

So far as the individual religions are concerned, the following table presents the data to facilitate comparison.

Order of pre-course preferences	*Post-course order of preferences*
1. Christianity	1. Christianity
2. Buddhism	2. Buddhism
3. Hinduism	3. Hinduism
4. Judaism	4. Judaism
5. Confucianism	5. Islam
6. Islam	6. Confucianism
7. Shinto	7. Taoism
8. Taoism	8. Shinto

Thus the first four rankings remain unaltered, even though within the same order support for Christianity, Buddhism and Judaism went down a bit and for Hinduism went up a bit. The last four rankings showed changes—with Confucianism losing and Taoism gaining in popularity—but not enough to change the order. Islam rose in rank and Shinto fell. The changes were significant in this instance but confined to the lower range of preferences.

Sample 2 (1978: Brisbane: sample size 15/48)

Individual changes

In 4 cases out of 15 changes in individual interreligious preferences were statistically significant at a 95% level of confidence. The interreligious preferences of 27% of the students were altered.

Collective changes

Kendall coefficient of concordance *before* the course was .405 and *after* the course was .496. This indicates that although preferences were less poorly related after the course than before, still the change was not statistically significant.

Changes in overall interreligious preference

The overall ranking before and after the course on the basis of sum of ranks indicates that no change took place in the following order:

Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto.

Sample 3 (1980: Sydney: sample size 6/10)

Individual changes

In 1 case out of 6 changes in individual preferences occurred which were statistically significant at a 95% level of confidence. The interreligious preferences of 17% of the students were altered.

Collective changes

Kendall Coefficient of concordance *before* the course was .341 and *after* the course was .373. This indicates that preferences continued to be poorly correlated both before and after the course.

Changes in overall interreligious preferences

The data of overall ranking before and after the course on the basis of sum of ranks indicates that no change took place in the following order: Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Confucianism.

Note: Shinto was not included in this list.

IV

Conclusion: the hypothesis was that courses with a comparative-religionist orientation alter interreligious preferences at the collective level.

The evidence suggests that while the individual preferences of some students are affected as expected, collective changes do *not* take place *nor* do overall interreligious preferences seem to change in a statistically significant way: and if they do such changes seem to be confined to the lower order of preferences. It is interesting that the courses did tend to homogenize preferences marginally in all cases, as suggested by a slight rise in the coefficient of condonance, but not in a statistically significant way (as tested by the Chi-square test).

These conclusions seem to possess a general relevance for the future of organized religion in the western world. It is clear that the organized religion of the western world, namely Christianity, had little to fear by way of inroads into it caused by the teaching of comparative religion, notwithstanding some fears on this score (Smith: 1965, 351).