

**Educating for Character and Moral Clarity:  
Religion as a Transformative Vehicle for Inclusion**

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International Association of Management, Spirituality and Religion  
Fayetteville, Arkansas  
May 19, 2017

Project funded from CWRU NORD curriculum development grant, The Ethics Table Fellows Program, and a WSOM Research Award

## **Educating for Character and Moral Clarity: Religion as a Transformative Vehicle for Inclusion**

Religion as a subject matter stirs up controversy on college campuses. Religious identity, for some people, is their primary identity. Any challenge of views is a challenge of their very being. Sides easily polarize. A common campus perspective is to avoid open discussion of religious issues because emotions get quickly unleashed. The ability to learn from one another, to put aside stereotypes, and discover commonalities are often denied to individuals through persistence of organizational norms and personal reservations that rational conversation about religious beliefs and differences is not possible. If religion is perceived to be more about feeling and less about thinking, how can one facilitate conversations about perspective differences? If religious belief is about certainty and exclusivity, how can conversations ever be truly inclusive, or at least tolerant, of other points of view? Many people on college campuses believe animosity, exclusivity, and intolerance are the inevitable outcomes of discussion of religion. Others believe religion and spirituality are private matters, best left to the church, temple, synagogue, or campus ministry. There is separation between church and state in the United States Constitution.

Religion is one of the original areas covered by Title VII. However, when compared to race and gender, religion receives considerably less attention as a diversity concern. It is marginalized. The increasing religious diversity of the US population, partly as a result of increased immigration, with racial profiling and harassment of Muslims or those perceived to be Muslim, makes religious diversity and its understanding an important concern. The US population has historically been Christian and continues to be so, although the percentage of Christians is now 77%, a decrease over the past 15 years (Bell, 2012).

Why should participants have to deny their religious identities whenever they engage in dialogue on campus or in the classroom on some of the most explosive social and political issues we face today? For many, religion is a salient part of their identity (Case & Chavez, 2017). We don't ask others who possess more politically correct identities to silence themselves on these matters. We looked for ways to encourage religious believers to come out of their "theistic closets" (Nash, Bradley, & Chickering, 2008) precisely for the reason that open disclosure and open-minded conversation, not closeted silence, decreases religious intolerance of others. Students get to know each other much better when encouraged to talk about religious beliefs that most deeply move them, along with spiritual practices that give their life rich meaning (Nash, Bradley, & Chickering, 2008).

The aim of this paper is to share the design and outcomes of an undergraduate general education elective taught in a private Midwestern research university business school for transformative teaching, utilizing iterative and introspective tools and bringing religion into the classroom for moral conversations across differences. Its focus is on character development for socially and ethically responsible behavior. Students involved represented more than 18 different majors, coming from nine countries, were predominantly sophomores, and were 56% male. The course uses experiential methods and reflective dialogue, helping students discover ethical principles for guiding their behavior, bridging the gap between who they are and who they want to be. Students reflect on legacies from religion (Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism), spiritual teachings, and cultural upbringing to explore salient, and often latent, personal values, creating a personal ethical code (their Ten Commandments of Character) by which they want to live.

We view religion and religious dialogue in the classroom as a disruptive innovation (Christensen, Horn, Caldera, Soares, 2011), that can transform the classroom, decreasing religious intolerance, and change how students think about and see the world, enabling them to do things they could not or would not do before. Nonetheless, the mention of religion or religious identity in a secular college classroom, not within a department of religion, often continues to be taboo.

In our work in the classroom, in both MBA classes in diversity and inclusion and in undergraduate seminars in ethics, we discovered that strong expressions of religious belief did not lead to intolerance. *“I now understand a person’s values, morals, and ‘way of life’ can be a reflection on one’s religion.”* In fact, the opposite occurred. *“My experiences and conversations in this class is full of small examples of lessons I have learned: my way may not be the best for everyone. This is something I realized while talking about religion.”* Religion became a vehicle for creation of an inclusive classroom where people felt understood and heard (Porter, Case, Mitchell, & Abazza, 2017).

This was in contrast to initial administration pushback in the approval process of a new course on ethics incorporating religion and business. *“There was concern (by the committee) the course would be unwelcoming to those who profess no religion at all...course is not inclusive. It would discourage those who do not see their source of ethics coming from religion or spirituality. What about the atheists? We need to ensure the atheists are comfortable.”* The administration further constrained discourse possibilities through disapproval of readings about religion drawn on biblical heroes and heroines as exemplars of ethical behavior. Whether it was because of political correctness, shying away from controversy, ideological privileging, offending a number of powerful campus constituents, there was an attempt to take religion out of

the classroom (unless it was a class offered in the religious studies department), which the administration felt belonged in the private realm. Nonetheless, we persisted in our view that traditional wisdom from religion is a source of guidance for ethical behavior (Case & Smith, 2012; Conroy & Emerson, 2004), drawing on the world's religions as one source of ethical guidance including narratives of biblical heroes and heroines and religious figures who demonstrate independent thought and action and moral courage.

The course addresses individual moral character development as a foundation for leadership, integrity and moral courage helping students focus on “What type of person ought we be?” and “What type of world do you want to create?” The semester long, iterative process of creating this code involves identifying origins of core beliefs and values often drawn from religion, and assessing their adequacy. Through small and large group interaction and story sharing, students practice and refine ability for dialogue about their values, actively engaging across religions, and with agnostics and atheists, about why these values are important to their moral character. As they apply their code to ethical scenarios, issues in the news, and their campus experiences, they continue story sharing of experiences, drawing from their various religious and non-religious backgrounds, leading to clarity about values and virtues for the kind of person they want to be. Surprisingly, by bringing their whole selves, including their religious or non-religious selves into the classroom, a culture of inclusion is experienced, and dialogue across differences aids in articulating clear principles for moral character to which they can commit for decision-making in life and work.

The course was based on an exercise involving developing ethical codes for anti-corruption behavior (Smith and Case, 2014) and Case and Smith's writing on “The Genesis of Integrity” framing workplace behavior around what is required within Judaism, Christianity, and

Islam to behave ethically (Case & Smith, 2013). In the exercise, participants developed personal ethical precepts as a self-help guide to assist in avoiding compromising choices at work and in everyday life and to aid in counteracting misconduct. The article shaped their views on integrity and was key to the success of class dialogue incorporating religion into moral conversations. Integrity is defined as “part of one’s character, consisting of discrete virtues, such as behavioral consistency between words and actions and espoused values and enacted values, across time and situations; avoiding hidden agendas and acting morally, transparently, and sincerely from internal values – even in the face of adversity or temptation” (p. 308).

The article also explores common values and agreement on behavioral standards for acting with integrity and disapproving unethical conduct that cut across sacred texts of all three Abrahamic religions. These are relevant to morally responsible behavior at work and in life, linking religious beliefs and ethical attitudes to economic development, environmental integrity, and social justice, demonstrating how a religiously informed lens can be applied within a university setting about right and wrong. This helped students focus on “What type of person ought we be?”

In an effort to develop a deeper understanding of student’s own ethical standards of behavior, they articulate, create, and utilize their own individualized Ten Commandments of Character as a personalized self-help guide to assist in avoiding of everyday compromises through renewed consciousness and awareness of how to behave with integrity. The ethical code students developed drew on values from religion (Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism), spiritual teaching, moral philosophy (deontological, consequentialist, moral relativism, virtue ethics, Timmons, 2013) and cultural upbringing to assist in exploration of salient, and at times latent, personal values that help in decision-making in difficult contexts.

Students listened to their inner voice as they answered questions regarding what right behavior requires and looks like in action.

As part of the course design, stories were shared through discussion of short reflective writing assignments involving ethical decision-making, moments of remorse, ethics in the news and examining role models. As they understood how their beliefs and values influenced their perceptions, attitudes, and behavior, they began integrating these into a coherent ethical code, exploring its exceptions, applying it to ethical scenarios and vignettes from organizations where they answered the question, “Using your Ten Commandments of Character, what would they have you do and say if you found yourself in this situation?”

Conversations were rich in religious, political, class, ethnic, and cultural content. Students worked hard to say what they clearly meant. They explained how they formed their values and why they were important. Through assessment and teaching of listening skills, they learned to actively listen respectfully to others stories, however different. With new information, some changed their mind, uncovering errors in perceptions, attributions, and stereotyping about religious others. Through real and meaningful conversations, they got to know others who were initially different from them.

Our readings and writing covered organizational pressures making courage necessary (Gini, 2011); moral blind spots (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011); how the mighty have fallen (Vega, 2011); moral mindfulness (WestPoint Honor Code; Sandel, 2009); giving voice to values (Gentile, 2011; Pless, 2007); what ethical leadership means to them (Grant, 2014); moral competencies for integrity (Nash, 2008); moral decision-making (Seeger & Ulmer, 2001); and even courageous organizational dissenters (Ricard, 2015). Students were continually asking themselves questions: “What do I currently do that is not as ethical as I think?” and “How can I

act with integrity in these situations in the future?” Increasing moral mindfulness, an ethically inspired attitude of endeavoring to do the right thing for the right reason (Case & Smith, 2012), aided students in articulating clear principles for moral character on which they could rely on for decision-making. For a more detailed analysis of the course process and assignments see Case and Chavez (2017, in press).

## **Methodology**

### *Sample*

During the six semesters the undergraduate seminar has been taught (Spring 2014 through Spring 2017), we have had an ongoing IRB in place collecting data from 90 students, examining development of moral character and integrity in a college classroom. Our sample for this study involves 56 students (out of 58 enrolled) in the first four semesters of the course. Of this group, 56% were male and 44% were female including 15% of them international students from Mexico, China, India, Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, Lebanon, and Japan. The others came from all over the United States. Fifty-nine percent had sophomore standing, 38% freshmen and 4% juniors. The sample heavily consisted of double majors focusing on engineering (21), hard sciences including math, physics, astronomy, and computer science (10), and pre-med health professions (19). Seven students were in business (accounting and finance), 4 in social sciences, 3 in international studies, and one each in music and philosophy

### *Data Collection*

Data available to the authors includes all written assignments, the ethical code, and reflections on learning. In this paper we have analyzed data utilizing three qualitative assessments. The first was Learning Reflections for Code development, a 3-4-page reflections paper that was the last written course assignment. They were asked to reflect on their learning

throughout the course and the role religion or spiritual teachings, upbringing, and culture placed upon their values as they developed their own Personal Code of Character. They reflected on their process, how they became mindful of their inner voice, and implications of completing their code for their behavior. A thematic code was developed to analyze the reflections. Both authors independently reviewed the reflections assignment for coding reliability. The second set of data came from written midterm and ending class feedback questions which they completed and discussed in class. The same code was applied to these, independently coded, with reliability. Fifty-six of 58 students completed each of these measures. The third set came from interviews performed six months after the class was completed for three of the four class seminars. These seven question interviews were audiotaped, ranging from half hour to one and a half hours, averaging one hour each. Individual transcripts ranged from 4-18 pages, averaging 8.6 pages. For purpose of this study, we only used the responses to question 7: “What was it like to have religion enter a classroom and be part of our conversation.” Ninety percent of eligible students were interviewed six months after the class ended (37 of 41). People who did not give IRB permission (2), or were abroad the semester following the class, had graduated, or did not respond to two e-mail requests (4) were not interviewed. A fourth measure, The Religious Identity Salience Questionnaire, was used to measure what if any religious identity was important to students, why it was important, and the values derived from it (Case & Chavez, 2017). Fifty-four of the 56 students completed the questionnaire.

### *Emerging Themes*

The themes emerging through reviewing other course assignments were used to develop our code. It included (1) Creation of a Culture of Inclusion (a safe environment to share own ideas, comfortable environment, being non judgmental of others or not feeling judged, respectful

and respected, empathetic, and curious); (2) Transformed Learners (learning about self; about others; development of new skills and behaviors like listening, speaking up, hearing and understanding others' perspectives, opening mind, shifting perspectives, altering biases and assumptions, and behaving differently; demonstrating courage in actions; thinking differently; and taking responsibility for the impact of actions and their consequences); (3) Religion as Facilitator of Moral Conversations Across Difference (discovering commonalities across religions or no religion, commonalities in values, culture of inclusion characteristics when discussing religion specifically); (4) Values from Religious, Spiritual Heritage, or Cultural Upbringing (categorized as religious, spiritual, cultural, or other); and (5) Including Religion in Classroom (What was it like to have religion brought up in the classroom and be part of our conversation?)

### *Reliability*

In initial coding of learning reflections, reliability was 100% on all categories except transformed learning, where it was 81%. After discussion of disagreements or uncertainties, the code was clarified, two categories collapsed, and items of disagreement independently recoded with 100% agreement. Initially, altering biases and assumptions and discovering commonalities were separate categories with the former in transformed learners and the latter in religion as a facilitator of moral conversations. Reliability on interview transcripts was 95% and on the mid and ending feedback, 100%. Reliability on coding the remaining data from the other three sections follows: Spring 2015 (reflection 99%, interviews 98%, mid and ending feedback 98%); Fall 2015 (reflections 97%, interviews 97%, mid and ending feedback 98%); and Spring 2016 (reflections 97%, mid and ending feedback 98%). Overall reliability for all coding was 97.9%.

### *Course Specifics*

Teaching how to create engaged dialogue and listening for understanding was necessary for dialogue across differences. Polarization often occurs when talking about difficult topics across a range of constituencies, especially in a secular university with a preponderance of engineers and scientists. We knew we needed to create a culture of conversation, not contestation, eliminating the offensive or defensive thought processes and tension between people that might occur. The intent of a moral conversation is to open people's minds. Although it might not change their beliefs, the Latin etymology of *conversation* is to live with, keep company with, to shift perspective.

The faculty member encouraged dialogue about individual identity and values including those derived from religious codes of behavioral ethics. She wanted students to voice values impacting their behavior, including values at least partially derived from faith traditions (or lack thereof). One student stated, "individuals avoid talking about their beliefs and values so as not to cause disagreement or strife." There was fear of conflict, fear they would be viewed as proselytizing if they talked about religious views and values, and thought this was taboo. They had never experienced such discussion in classrooms. One student shared in his reflections:

*The change in the classroom can be attributed to the distinction made early on in the semester between dialogue and debate. We were presented with a paper and discussion which had these two ideas juxtaposed. With debate, one often focuses on finding a singular, correct answer. In contrast, dialogue involves individuals exploring the ideas and feeling of others and working together to build realistic conclusions. In general, dialogue usually results in a much more positive, comfortable environment for those involved.*

*Concordantly, I felt I was better able to connect with my classmates and understand their own ideas, while voicing my own thoughts and feelings (including about my religion) without fear of judgment. The dialogue ability has helped me tremendously in my personal life, as I find I am now better able to relate to others, see their points of view, understand their feelings, and draw better, less judgmental conclusions regarding their behaviors and personalities.*

This student captured the distinction made in the classroom. Discussion often implies argument involving putting forth a point of view to refute another viewpoint. This can become a debate to win; and if someone wins, someone loses. In contrast, dialogue involves frank talking, seeking understanding with its intention exploration of an idea without finding a solution.

Students were told:

*Listen to others as you want to be listened to. Listen, don't preach. Listen intently and non defensively. Speak in an 'I' voice. Create a give-and-take conversation that is inquiry based and civil. Respond in the spirit of active engagement. Remember that each member of the class is working toward the same goal as you: to better understand, to grow, and to further develop their own personal beliefs and ideals.*

From previous experiments, incorporating a reading on religion and integrity into an MBA classroom, “The Genesis of Integrity: Values and Virtues Illuminated in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam for Workplace Behavior” (Case & Smith, 2013), differences of perspectives, when modeled, like the professor did by sharing major values she lived by embedded within her religion, when understood, led to transformation. This included enhanced compassion, a respect for alternative narratives of meaning, social justice, and even “hospitality to strangers” (Porter, Case, Mitchell, & Abazza, 2017).

*What surprised me most was how similar all the religions examined are. Society often portrays different religions as incompatible or unable to coexist successfully. In reality, if members of each religious group would be open and honest about their important beliefs and values, as we did in this class, they would discover that there are many values shared between groups, as we did, to our surprise.*

We discovered a surprise during teaching when we incorporated religion, allowing expression of religious identity. Incorporating religion helped create a culture of inclusion where students were able to comfortably bring their whole self to the table. “*It was freeing to be able to say that I am anti-theist.*” They also began to understand how religious beliefs and values embed themselves

within organizations and social cultures. *“I never connected the work place and religion. I was so amazed so many concepts about work and how to treat people in business are in the sacred texts of these religions. A real eye-opener.”*

### **Data Analysis and Discussion**

Interviews conducted six months after course completion indicated ethical codes provided standards for “right” behavior. Students described themselves as becoming more ethical in thought and action, providing examples of ongoing changes in behavior, bridging the gap between who they are and who they wanted to be (Case & Chavez, 2017). The codes helped students become more morally aware, enabling making ethical decisions in difficult contexts. Findings suggest when students were able to come out of their “theistic closets” (Nash, Bradley & Chickering, 2008); they were more open to disclosure and open-minded conversations, not closeted silence. We provide evidence of creation of cultures of inclusion with religion being an important facilitator of moral conversations across differences transforming learners, enhancing self-awareness, understanding of others, discovering commonalities across differences, thinking differently, understanding the implications of actions, and acting with courage.

Students broadened their worldview, shifted from self-centered to an interconnected and interdependent other-centered philosophy, with increased empathy and altruism, and disseminated skills learned to others in their social networks. As one student stated:

*If you just know very little about someone else's religion, you formulate your opinions and you don't have anyone to differentiate from those opinions or prove yourself right or wrong [...] so to be in a room with the actual people and see why they felt the way they did about things and why they believe their religion, [...] and how it drove them to do those things, you see a lot more humanity to a different religion instead of just being a religion you don't agree with for XYZ reasons.*

Analysis of results are structured around the five themes: Creation of a culture of inclusion; Transformed learners; Religion as facilitator of moral conversations across difference; Values from religious, spiritual heritage, or cultural upbringing; and What it was like including religion in the classroom. Each theme includes student examples drawn from the semester students were enrolled in the course and from an interview six months later, asking, “What, if anything, from the course have you thought about or used?” The interview elicited stories about ways their ethical code guided their decision-making and what they were doing differently since they wrote their code. We also drew data from the interview question, “What was it like to have religion enter a classroom and be part of our conversation?”

### *Inclusion*

Once students became clear about values derived from their religious or spiritual heritage, or cultural upbringing, they discovered unifying values like generosity, empathy, compassion, affection, connection, and understanding through moral conversations in the classroom. These allowed empathetic airing of mutual differences. There was healthy disagreement grounded in respect for each other, where all opinions were heard. Conversations were polite, considerate, and full of intellectual conviction, genuine empathy, and curiosity for those who might have a view outside the majority (John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, 1869). People may not agree, but such conversations often led to real relationships premised on mutual understanding, not necessarily agreement. The golden rule of moral conversation is a willingness to find the truth in what we oppose and the error in what we espouse... at least initially (Nash, Bradley, & Chickering, 2008).

While the class was ongoing, 53 students (94.6%) commented on the class as a culture of inclusion in both reflections and mid and ending feedback. They described a non-judgmental,

safe, comfortable, respectful environment where people listened to each other and were honest and open, sharing aspects of their life including their religion. In interviews completed six months later, 31 students (55.6%) brought the culture of inclusion up as important to code development. The following set of comments all comes from interviews.

Numerous students talked about inclusion enabling their ability to bring their whole self into the classroom because they could bring in their religion.

*I liked religion being able to be brought into the classroom because even though we are a secular University, I think that people are pretending like it's not there...you're going to have your religious background and then you are going to have other religions... and differences between... So I like the fact that we actually acknowledged that that's an influence because it is, rather than just ignoring it.*

*It was good we were acknowledging that facet of our lives (religion), which seems we don't acknowledge. I think it's really important in this sort of class where we talk about ethics and ethical development and your personal ethical character. To leave it out would have been kind of troubling.*

*I didn't have to keep a mask on.*

Others described a non-judgmental environment.

*The way you presented the class made it so students didn't feel like they were going to be judged for saying whatever they believed. Even if they were like, "I'm not religious, I don't believe in a lot of these values that come from religion", or "I'm not religious and I do believe in these things", or "I really am religious and I don't believe these things", I think that it was just a very comfortable environment, and that's why I think by the end of the semester, almost everyone in the class was able to talk and not feel like they were going to be judged about it.*

*We had groups in which I could ask questions about different religions and we were lucky to have international students who, even though they sometimes identified more as atheist, it was really interesting to hear why and say, "Here's how I was raised to think", and they say, "OH, that's interesting; this is how I was raised to think." I felt a lot of this was due to the way it was presented... We had a very respectful group of people. Because religion is something that can easily turn into war, I feel it was really beneficial to have an environment that was facilitated in a way that was respectful to everyone.*

*People were able to be fully there and discussing without fear of harassment or fear of embarrassment. People were able to fully discuss who they were.*

In general students talked about group discussion being respectful and pluralistic; an open and accepting environment that provided comfortable discussions and dialogue; feeling safe; being able to be honest; felt more intimate because of religion; and linked to my Christian values more comfortably.

They demonstrated many dimensions of inclusion described in, *Beyond Inclusion: Worklife Interconnectedness, Energy, and Resilience in Organizations* by Smith and Lindsay (2014). They cared about what they thought and felt, wanting to share that with classmates. “Peer discussion brought out my true opinion, and in some cases changed my opinion when I was able to see the logic in another person’s argument and the fault in my own.” They felt a connection to their peers and to a larger purpose, living a life with integrity.

*The art of conversation has had a profound impact on how I view others’ morals. I can no longer label other peoples’ morals as wrong because they are different from mine. I have learned to listen more to people which helped me listen to my inner voice.*

*Thanks to the conversations, I was able to connect with those in my class. We all struggle with the same type of issues; we just handle them differently or see them in different ways.*

They were intrapersonal, both expecting inclusion and initiating inclusion by reaching out to others and asking for their perspectives.

*When confronted with the political climate that has pushed me far to the left, some friends looked to the right to guard their privileges. In the past, I might have cautiously ignored the opinions of others or arrogantly dismissed them. Instead, I endeavored to understand their concerns and why they would accept authoritarian solutions. Through dialogue, withholding judgment, I found we had common grievances and acknowledged the need for institutional reform. In establishing that common ground they became more receptive to my thoughts, showing me the same respect I gave them.*

Trust was evident in the process of engagement, with peers and their professor. “We were able to speak openly and honestly about what we thought of each other’s ideas.” A comfortable

communication space was created where they felt safe and could give and receive feedback.

*“Does a great job making people feel comfortable sharing their ideas on issues.” “I am often close minded. In small groups I am comfortable and exposed to different viewpoints. So by listening to other perspectives, it helps me realize I can sometimes agree with these other points of view.”* The feedback they received made them feel heard and appreciated, visible and rewarded. *“I focused on improving my active listening skills with my peers. This has helped me communicate better and be more engaging in conversations. As I actively listen to people, and they listen to me, I am more open to understanding their perspectives and value.”*

Dogmatic coercion and self-righteous aggression against those who thought differently disappeared. The students, with guidance from the professor, co-created an atmosphere of exchange and dialogue. Nobody was silenced. Nobody was shamed. There was no tyrannizing of minority voices. Nobody was a victim or privileged. Students asked each other questions to understand perspectives. Stories gave meaning to people’s lives and enhanced understanding. Students learned that everyone has their own story based on lived experiences. Those stories were shared with candid, personal disclosure.

### *Transformed Learners*

Students talked about seven different kinds of learning in their reflections and interviews. Thirty-two (57.1%) said adding religion to the class helped transform their learning. Everyone interviewed mentioned learning about themselves, whether they described the class as “an unexpected journey of self-discovery,” or “learning how I want to live my life.” In general, they talked about discovering the kind of person they wanted to be and much self-enhancement. They talked about becoming more conscious of their own ethical (and unethical) behavior. Frequently

included words were “more mindful, self aware, changed beliefs, enhanced my inner voice, using my voice, grew as a person, and saw flaws in my own thinking.”

*Going to that deeper level in class has taught me so much about why I believe what I believe and where what I believe is intrinsically wrong... I have come to find a more supported voice in me, which has made speaking up against unethical actions easier.*

*My personal sense of integrity has been affected and I have a greater feeling of comfort in my own skin.*

*This course has made me more self-aware, ethically aware, and more equipped to make unselfish decisions.*

*This class facilitated a sense of moral confidence and helped me better understand why I stand for what I do, and helped me to become a better version of myself.*

*I listen to my inner voice clearer than ever now.*

A second kind of learning was about others. Thirty-six students (69.3%) wrote about learning through others, new found respect for others, their impact on others and others impact on them, being more accepting of differences, more open to others opinions, and enhanced understanding of others perspectives. Thirteen students (35.1%) highlighted this during their interviews. In general, they were more accepting of thinking about ideas differing from their own.

*I learned about social and cultural differences and why certain groups act and feel the way they do about certain situations and subjects.*

*I learned about where other non-religious people got their morals and values. Surprisingly, I learned many non-religious individuals had values that parallel with Christianity... and from certain people they saw as noble or great. From this I was able to comprehend why they act in a certain way and was able to become more open to their ideas.*

*I talked to people in class who are Christian, Catholic, and Jewish, and they made me realize that religion is much more than the stories in the books. It is part of who they are and it was intertwined with their upbringing. Hearing them talk about their religious role models made me realize that I couldn't be more wrong*

*before thinking my belief is the only right one in the world. They opened my eyes and made me more willing to accept them, and respect others religion and their ideas.*

Conversations included multiple viewpoints. By practicing pluralistic conversation techniques and dialogue facilitation, with its give and take with the “other,” and willingness to modify previous views, students learned to speak about strong beliefs in ways that engaged rather than enraged. They took risks. It allowed others to hear instead of fear.

*Most of my learning occurred while observing and evaluating my classmates. My classmates had very different values from mine and when they would articulate their values, inside and outside the classroom, I would be encouraged to share my own, which requires thinking about my values and finding a clearer inner voice. While Kant prompted me to think about where I stand with being truthful and Gandhi prompted me to think about how my actions can influence and change my peers, my actual peers prompted me to reflect and reshape my own opinions and values because they were able to sit with me and work through ethical dilemmas.*

A third type of learning involved new skills and behaviors, or as one student called it, “an ethical tool kit.” Every student talked about their newly developed skills they were using both in and out of class and of changed behavior, mentioned 86 times. Twenty-three spoke of learning to really listen with more appreciation of others. Nineteen mentioned being more honest in what they said and did. This included less deceiving, stealing, lying, gossiping, cheating, drinking, using drugs, and less ‘hooking up.’ Thirteen mentioned speaking up instead of ignoring others behavior they thought was wrong. They indicated becoming more morally mindful and were more able to almost instinctively voice their values. They were more confident in decision-making. They also talked about understanding others better, especially people very different from them in religion, culture, race, gender, and class. They attributed this to becoming more open-minded and less judgmental. Adjectives used to talk about their “new” selves were “helpful, kind, generous, empathetic, and respectful.”

Examples of skills developed follow:

*One of the most significant factors which has contributed to my personal growth this past semester were the pluralistic conversations in which I was engaged. As the class progressed, I felt I more able to listen and empathize with other individuals in our small groups. I felt more in touch with their ideas, and found myself focusing more on better understanding their points of view, rather than trying to find flaws in their arguments.*

*The conversations served as an outlet for my opinions, and as a way to hear others. They were fantastic tools to learn how to talk about controversial issues in a civilized way. Most topics with opposing views can get heated and turn into unproductive arguments quickly. However, in this class, with our exercises and enhanced listening skills, that was no longer an issue. I now constantly think about whether I am listening to the person I was talking to, in class and with my friends and family.*

*I listen more effectively to everyone I meet. My favorite poem is Desiderata, and a line from it reads, 'Speak your truth quietly and clearly, and listen to others, even the dull and ignorant; they too have their story.' I have always considered listening important, but reflection in this class has given me ways to listen more effectively, practical techniques to work on. I believe I have developed more empathy...In turn, I am able to understand peers in new ways.*

*Being more open minded in general, to different situations, different people's beliefs, different scenarios that we come across and how different people might be viewing them. I am just trying to be more open-minded and look at things with a different perspective than what I did before the class. I have been close-minded and automatically judgmental in the past.*

More detailed examples of behaviors changes students talked about follow:

*By the end of the class, I could handle conflict with different ideologies. I used to avoid conflict altogether and let the other person win. Now I can openly share my disagreements and try to discuss the issue.*

*I have begun to do what is right rather than what is quick and easy. For example, I have completely stopped downloading free music and movies from the internet. It is a big step for me because of how ingrained this habit had become in my life. When I wanted something, I downloaded it without a second thought. Now if I can't pay for it, I simply go without.*

*Now I lie less, and help others more. I am also braver to speak up. I can refuse helping others by signing up attendance (when they are not in class).*

*I am more affirmed in my values, so feel comfortable speaking up for my values.*

*If I have to summarize what this class has helped me develop, I would say it is 'moral confidence'. It has given me a quiet sense of confidence in my own beliefs, and ability to act in accordance with them.*

*I didn't experience conflict in this class around religion. I'm an atheist. Usually there is conflict and messiness. Talk about religion was allowed. When we were doing dialogue, I kinda keep noting myself, 'Be open. This person you're talking to has probably a reason he's saying whatever he's speaking... I consider this person totally different from me. Probably not dumb. There's a reason why he's thinking like he is. Just respect it'... I asked people more questions about why they thought what they did.*

Forty-five students (80.4%) mentioned learning to think differently. As one student stated, "I got better at understanding what "I should do" instead of doing what "I want to do." Reasoning was altered including recognizing flaws in their own analysis. A major change was thinking about the impact on others of decisions they made.

*My thought process has definitely changed. I now consider all aspects like who the action would harm, what laws or parts of my ethical code are being broken and what are better ways to approach the situation. I found myself finding alternatives to unethical actions.*

*This class changed my attitude toward religion. My parents and grandparents, who are all doctors, raised me... My family believed that science is the only truth in the world, and what you cannot see does not exist. I believed in that too and was skeptical about all religions... This class made me pay more attention to my experiences and began to see the good aspects of religion. No matter it's in the optimistic homeless people I met or in the stories of my classmates, I was able to realize the charm of religion and that I shouldn't believe that I'm completely right. I will learn much from others.*

*People are generally not religious in China and I was raised in a family where everyone only believes in science. If I cannot see it with my eyes, I won't believe it. I believed God does not exist because I could not see him. However coming to America and encountering numerous people with different backgrounds, through dialogue in this class, I began to change my mind. As I talked to my religious classmates, I saw their religion intertwined with their upbringing, which ultimately made them better people. I began to rethink my beliefs from respect and learn from others, to respect and accept others even though our understanding of the world is different. From that point I was able to have so many more meaningful moral conversations, which help me understand my peers better.*

*Having the knowledge to say that something is right or wrong encourages me to do the right thing more. Before this class it was easy to convince myself that my selfish and unethical actions were OK. A company as big as Chipotle or Sony Music won't miss the extra dollar not paid for double meat or the dollar for the song I downloaded last. Whether they miss it or not, I now know that I'm still stealing.*

*I don't think I actually knew that a lot of what I believe draws on religion. It was interesting to learn about different religions because some things I believe are from other religions and I just didn't realize it.*

Some students recognized they were making life decisions based on what others wanted for them, deciding to include strategies including what they wanted for themselves.

*My family has always thought of me as successful, and that pressured me to behave in ways that was good in their eyes. I forgot my opinion about myself also mattered in my decision-making because, in the end, it is my life that was passing by. Now I not only consider what others may want for me but also what I want for myself.*

A fifth type of learning was shifting from a focus on ones self to realizing individual decisions and actions affect others. Seventeen students, more than 30%, described responsibility and interdependence, becoming more conscious of ethical implications and consequences of their actions on others.

*I am now more cognizant of my actions and the repercussions of these actions on those around me."*

*My study of ethics has shown me that it's not all about me and that there are more people than just myself to consider when making decisions about how to act. My decisions affect myself, others around me, my environment, and even society.... One of the best quotes I ever heard was 'A single rain drop never feels responsible for the flood' and it perfectly captures the selfish mindset of an individual.*

*I thought more about how my actions affected other individuals and became more sensitive to my ethical blind spots.*

*I have a heightened sense of empathy, and consider how both my words and actions are going to affect those around me. I no longer say unkind words, even if I would be just joking. This follows my sixth commandment, 'If I have nothing*

*nice to say, say nothing at all.' I care more about my relationships with people... I view it as a strength.*

*I justified unethical behavior like lying and stealing when these actions were simple to accomplish, it seemed like there were no consequences, and no one was harmed... I have begun to see how lying to my parents negatively affects our relationship... I have adjusted my behavior by becoming more honest and straightforward.*

Sixteen students (28.6%) mentioned their courage was enhanced, with one stating he had gained "moral confidence." This was a sixth type of learning.

*Throughout our life we are told to stand up for what we believe in...This class showed me the reasons behind that saying and provided concrete, indisputable evidence about why following that mantra of standing up for what we believe in is the right thing to do*

*Defining my own code made me more aware of the morality that exists in everyday situations, as well as the fear that too often paralyzes us from doing the right thing. This realization has given me more courage and wherewithal to act ethically in situations where it can be difficult.*

*The class has allowed me to have more courage. The courage has encouraged me to behave more ethically in college. I have lied less, respected myself more, and respected others more. The courage I gained from the ethics class helps me speak up. I am proud of myself.*

*The process of writing my ethical code has improved my ethical courage. I find I am willing to do the right thing more often at personal cost, and am more willing to object to my friends' unethical proposals.*

The last kind of learning, gaining new knowledge, was mentioned in both reflections and interviews, especially knowledge gained through introduction of readings across western and eastern religions.

*It was specifically having assignments that dealt with religion and religious grounds of ethics...that was a signal saying, 'It's okay to talk about this and this is going to be part of our discussion.'*

*All the new knowledge is so intriguing and it amazes me how impactful this opportunity has been on my morals as I now follow many Buddhist values.*

*New ideas such as universality have influenced my view of morality. I use to think*

*many of my actions were acceptable because I did not think they had an impact on others or a significant change on the group as a whole if I was the only one committing these actions. Universality, however, has made me rethink my sense of right and wrong because if everyone were to do something like download a movie illegally, then the producers and people involved in making the movie would be victimized. Thus it is not acceptable to do this either because I would be contributing to the harm of others.*

The favorite articles students indicated they learned the most from linked to religion. They included the following five:

*Case's article, 'Genesis of Integrity' opened my eyes to similarity in Abrahamic religions; Mohammad's Last sermon – surprised that his lessons were part of teachings I learned in church. I thought Islam was completely separate from all the other religions in the world; 'Resnicoff's, The Causes and Cures of Unethical Business Practices, A Jewish Perspective, described unethical work-related situations; Tim Beal's excerpt from 'The rise and fall of the Bible: The unexpected history of an accidental book, made me understand the Bible can be used to justify anything; and the article on religion and nationalism describing how nationalism influences cultures more than religion.*

The emerging general pattern of learning appeared to have a logical order to it. Students began with a focus on self (awareness, understanding and acceptance). This was followed by a focus on others (listening, understanding, recognizing personal differences, asking questions, and accepting). Through reading, writing, and dialogue with others, they began to think differently. They started to see commonalities across all kinds of differences, recognized their interdependence and impact on others, and began to rethink priorities. This led to practicing new skills and trying out new behaviors. Many behaviors took courage for them as they tried to do what they now saw as “the right thing to do” based on the kind of person they wanted to become. Each time they did something different from their past usual behavior, they gained moral confidence to act in new ways.

*Religion as Facilitator of Moral Conversations Across Differences*

Of the 64 articles and supplemental books used as sources of content information for developing an ethical code of character and understanding ethical decision making, only ten had something to do with religion (16.4%). They did not focus on one set of values, but drew on Eastern and Western religions and the noble prize lectures of both the Dalai Lama and Mother Teresa. Eighty-eight percent of students described in their reflections that allowing religion in the room facilitated their moral conversations. Seventy-four percent talked about this in the interviews. Many felt that although they were not religious, they still had strong ethics, many of which were similar to more religious classmates.

Students began to look for commonalities and agreements as well as differences even as they addressed aspects of their religious or non-religious identities. It was no longer the typical academic discussion of critique, challenge, and debate, trying to prove that one's view is right. Students began to see there could be multiple truths that were both self- and other-respecting. They also began to recognize their own blind spots, which often justified immoral behavior. More than half the students stated their favorite dialogue impacting their moral code was facilitated by the insightful readings on various religions the week we spent on religion.

*The class provokes religious and moral thoughts. Considering my religious and spiritual experiences and relating it to my ethical decisions, I discovered inconsistencies in my behavior and religion and tried to reconcile the differences.*

*In our class, religion was very well handled. I am not particularly religious, but am spiritual. There was not attacking for their religion or anything like that. People talked about commonalities being rooted in their religion. They weren't preaching...why their religion is better...They were just saying this is how it helps me. Religion was definitely handled right. The students in class who were religious were very appropriate about it.*

*...we had some people who were really religious and...some completely notreligious.it was very interesting dialogue. I'm not super religious, but found the moral conversations really interesting because we had people on both sides. It was really cool to hear what their thoughts were.*

*These conversations facilitated and catalyzed my learning and personal development.*

*...these class discussions were the most beneficial parts of class. Valuable to hear perspectives of other people... that were not my own.*

*...it brought a new perspective, a different way of thinking about how these morals originated.*

*It was surprising to see the values that even as an atheist had roots in religion.*

*Even though everyone had different reasons for believing what they believe, all their moral commandments and views of ethical behavior were similar... I guess those morals have been accepted into society today. So even if you are not religious, those rules still apply to you.*

*I am a straight up atheist but definitely am more willing to listen to other people and talk about religion and what it means to them. I talked to Catholic and Jewish classmates about how religion is an important part of how they grew up and how their parents reinforced religion as a moral code as an everyday sort of behavior thing to them. That helps them grow up and have this really strong moral code to stick to.*

Three Chinese students who had no religion described their learning transformation through these discussions.

*I thought religion is useless before. I thought it is more like mythology and that people have no reason to believe in it. I argued with my friend that if he cannot prove god exists, he should not believe in go. However, in talking to three classmates who hold different beliefs, I realized that it doesn't matter if religion makes sense scientifically or not. All that matters is that it provided them the moral standard to begin with. Religion made them better people so I should be respectful...*

*I see change internally when I interact with other people... Now I see the reasoning behind why people think the way they do.*

*I liked the reading that introduces Buddhism. I didn't know I could resonate with a religion so much before I read that article. I learned that even though I am not a religious person, I could still be philosophically the same as a religious person. That made me feel closer to all the people around me.*

Religious dialogue was convenient, accessible, and most of all, positive. Religion became a force for inclusion possibly because of how individuals conveyed religious experiences,

allowing others to better know and understand them. The focus on growth, guided by values, helped shape students views of their future. With a focus on values of character, which many discover are rooted in their religion or religious legacies even if they no longer practice their religion or no longer believe in G-d, they developed moral clarity on the type of person they wanted to be and the world they wanted to help create and shape. In place of evangelism or exclusivism, people had the opportunity to come together and share what values and insights they gained from their religion, how religion impacted how they saw themselves, and what their experience was as a member of a given religion in relation to a larger community. Students participating in this course bear witness to the effects these methods have had on their own perspectives and identities as well as those of their classmates. If the aim of religion is to unite, not ignite, then hiding religious identities from view will only serve to continue division and exclusion.

#### *Values from Religious, Spiritual Heritage, or Cultural Upbringing*

When students described in their reflections where their values came from, 44% indicated primarily from their religious upbringing, 28% said cultural upbringing, 22% both religious and cultural; 4% said spiritual, 2% said both religion and spiritual, and 2% spiritual and culture. For those who still were practicing a faith tradition, there was clarity on the origin of their values.

*I recognize the distinct role Catholic Catechism and Catholic philosophy played in the formation of my code.*

*...I was clearly able to see the influence that my faith had on my values. My commandments were closely linked to certain parables and teachings from the Bible.*

*...The longing to live in love the way Jesus did is constant encouragement to try to do what I believe is ethical.*

*As a Christian, I was striving to act and behave the way God wants and demand...The Bible is the greatest instruction book for life...It is filled with*

*directions for how to lead a life pleasing to God, including many different character traits we should have and develop.*

*...I connected every single one of my commandments to multiple Bible verses.*

*My religious background influenced my code. There is a parable in which a rabbi demonstrates an important lesson to a boy. He tells the boy to meet him on a rooftop with a pillow and directs him to hit the pillow until it falls apart and its feathers scatter in the wind. The rabbi tells the boy to retrieve every single feather; a task which, of course, is impossible. The lesson is that our words and actions, like feathers, cannot be taken back or undone. This lesson is why I feel it is very important to be careful about our words and actions and try our best to live up to our moral responsibility. Each choice one makes remains forever and so effort must be made to make the best possible decision.*

Even those who did not currently consider themselves to be religious, but were religiously educated as a child, found they predominantly drew on values drawn from their religion.

*Though I no longer identify as a Christian, I was raised in a Christian home, and found many of my values well-aligned with those found in the Bible such as honesty and the need to help others.*

*Since I am no longer religious, I thought growing up religious would only have a small impact on my ethical code. However, I began to see that multiple values I hold are influenced by Christianity.*

*Although I am not religious, my family is Catholic and raised me to be Catholic throughout my youth... Many rules in my ethical code are derived from the Bible and other spiritual teachings because my environment made me very familiar with them and I agree with their message to this day.*

*I am not a religious or spiritual person. But I think going to church every Sunday planted the seed of moral beliefs...like doing no harm.*

Others recognized the role of their upbringing, including what their parents taught them about religion.

*If it weren't for my mom and dad, I wouldn't have been exposed to religion and I would not have been taught right from wrong.*

*My religion and upbringing had a tremendous impact on my Personal Code of Character. Being raised a Catholic played a role in establishing my ethical principles, but it often seemed inter-related with ideas my family instilled upon me.*

*My religion is apparent in my commandments...such as honesty, no stealing and deception. Themes of hard work, and loyalty are facets of my upbringing that had a lasting impact on me.*

*...I have realized how much of my character stemmed from my Christian upbringing. My want to point out and fix wrongs and my want to remember sacrifices made for me come directly from Christian teachings. But indirectly my entire culture has been steeped in Christian tradition for two thousand years. My abhorrence of stealing, cheating, and lying all trace their roots to biblical passages. But a most influential aspect of my character comes from my father's shopkeeper wisdom... which paints a great portrait of honest, father-to-son conversations.*

*As I developed my ethical code, I became mindful of my inner voice because I began to think about where my values came from. I began to better understand how my religion (Hindu) and cultural upbringing have guided me in developing my code.*

*I was blessed to be in a family that allowed me to see the world and understand cultural differences specifically Buddhism which presented a different approach to life and religion.*

Some talked only about the role of their culture in values they believed in.

*My upbringing and the culture I grew up in were imperative to my understanding of morality... Many of the rules in my Ten Commandments are derived from lessons taught to me by my parents, my teachers, and television shows I watched when I was much younger... the importance of honesty, respect, and love, and to never harm or steal...our environment is our home and should be taken care of...giving freely rewards itself...do not be lazy and help your friends...*

*I grew up around and in national laboratories and my entire family work in research and academia; I noticed academic and intellectual trends in my precepts running parallel to my secular tendencies.*

*My upbringing played a huge part in my development of my Ten Precepts for Ethical Livelihood. My parents taught my brother and I as we were growing up most of the precepts I have because they wanted us to be well-behaved and conscious of others.*

*My upbringing had the largest effect on the creation of my code. The values that my parents and teachers displayed and demonstrated encouraged me to act in ways that I thought were the most ethical...I modeled how I acted off their behavior...*

*People say Confucianism is not a religion, but it's part of who Chinese people are and we respect elder people, we take care of other people... Confucianism is part of how I make sense of my relationships.*

A few talked about spiritual values in different ways.

*The spirituality I have adopted in mid to late teenage years seems to have more influence on my commandments, which I think is due to the fact I chose spirituality to reflect my personality and morality as opposed to being raised in that manner.*

*I had little religious influence to draw inspiration from. My family did not raise me to be a religious person, but my father did make me a spiritual person. Everything I learned about spirituality I learned from him.*

*My spiritual teachings, upbringing, and culture norms have played a crucial role in developing my personal code of character.*

### *Including Religion in Classroom*

Drawing from the interview question about bringing religion into the classroom at a secular university, everyone addressed it with the overall response that it was comfortable (26, 70.3%), was interesting to hear others views (23, 62.2%), and was valuable and helpful to the dialogue (18, 48.6%). Students felt it was engaging (5) appropriate (4), and open (4), learning a lot from the conversations. Sixteen (43.2%) indicated it was *refreshing, good, fun, nice, enjoyable, and really, really liked it a lot*. The framing to add a religious lens from a variety of world religions for ethical behavior, as one of the ways to understand values that might shape moral character, was perceived as “a unique perspective” and “interesting framing.”

*Class was a very comfortable environment (whether non religious, not a believer, or religious) and that's why by the end of the semester almost everyone in class was able to talk about and not feel like they were going to be judged about their beliefs.*

*It was shocking being thrown in a room and opening up through religious differences.”*

*Had people from both sides (religious, non religious including atheists) talking beneficially.”*

*It was refreshing to be able to talk about many religions in our classroom without any fear or backlash.*

*I liked the synonymy found between religions about things regarding taking care of the environment, as well as looking out for our fellow humans the way we look out for ourselves...*

*Using religion made it easy to connect and more personal because it is about deeply held values that you want to hold onto.*

*I feel like it was more intimate because of religion.*

*I rather liked it because it's one of those topics that's either too daintily stepped around...either tactfully avoid it or it becomes a big problem and a big mess and people say things they shouldn't say or don't mean and it ends very poorly. Being able to talk about religion in a more structured setting found the middle ground between completely avoiding it and getting into arguments over it. It was one of the things I particularly liked.*

Students also discussed how different it was to include discussions about religion within a secular university since they recognized the accepted organizational norm to not include such discussions.

*It was a breath of fresh air because so many classes, especially in biomedical engineering, it's all about evolution and how religion can't exist....so many people in that subsector are so convinced that religion is just crazy and like, anyone who is religious is crazy for it. And that's kind of annoying to me.*

*Coming from a secular university where I'm in physics classes and chemistry classes, it was, I wouldn't say shocking, but it was different....it was a completely different experience and it was refreshing...in a secular university certain ideas are more common than others and it was an interesting change to move from attitudes held in a secular university to attitudes held by religious people and viewing it with the same validity... in a secular university religion is kind of pushed aside. It's not viewed as important. It was nice to be somewhere where religion was viewed equally as any secular aspect of a class.*

An engineering student, who has closeted his Christianity within a secular university, also found inclusion of a religious lens a refreshing addition in class content and process since he experienced his religious ideas generally discounted. Even in an ethics class he conjectured, that

if he took his code from religion, it would be perceived as less valid than people who took theirs from secular sources. He said in his interview:

*Having religion present in this class validated my code whenever it came to religion. It said, 'it's ok to have a code that's religious. I don't think you're stupid.' 'I don't think you are being completely ridiculous.' There's validity in the code that you have. It was refreshing because, even in high school, people were not particularly religious, and if you were, it was 'Oh, you go to church?' Kind of like that. That's why it was refreshing because I've never really talked about it much to people because we just don't talk about it.*

Others shared similar sentiments of feelings of exclusion when their faith, a central part of their lives, was either disparaged or viewed as irrelevant in their university and classrooms. As another student shared: *"I usually don't bring my whole self to the classroom. You feel like you're not welcome.* Religion seemed to be something people were told would offend someone and become a bad situation, so they were instructed explicitly and implicitly not to bring it up. These students all thought religion should be discussed more since it is central to their identity. One asked, *"Why is it such a sensitive topic?"*

### **Religious Identity Salience Questionnaire Data**

We had not looked at the results of the Religious Identity Salience Questionnaire for any of the classes until after we had coded the data for this study. Given that religious affiliation has decreased in the US (Cooperman, Smith, & Cornibert, 2015)), that the majority of the students were engineers or scientists, and that our institution is a Tier 1 secular research institution, we expected many of our students would be non-religious, atheist or agnostic. For one of the authors, in 28 years of teaching at her institution, except when she introduced religion into a diversity class, no student had ever talked about their religion in any class that she had taught. She also had not drawn on her religion and linked it to her values and behavior until 2014 when she discussed religion, as part of one's multiple identities in a diversity class.

In spite of the nature of the students and school, the results on the questionnaire, completed by 54 of the 56 students in the sample, were surprising. Of the respondents, 68.6% either strongly agreed or agreed their religious identity was important in their life. Only 10 (18.5%) indicated they had no religious or spiritual identity. Of the group who indicated religion was part of their identity, most were Christian and Catholic (77%, evenly split between the two) but also included students who identified as Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucius, and Deist. Another 12.9% percent indicated they were spiritual. But of this group only 7.4% said it was important to their identity. Across the classes 81.5% of the students indicated their religious or spiritual identity was important to their life.

Most students, not placing an importance on religion, were not without religious understanding or background. Many had been raised with religion in their households, had religious family members, or attended religiously affiliated events, such as bible study with friends, and church.

The focus of the university administration around inclusion was to ensure atheists felt comfortable in the classroom. They did not recognize how many students have to hide their religious identities in the classroom (*keep a mask on; pretend it s not there*), or are judged as “stupid” for believing in something that science cannot prove. Most students drew their values from a religious upbringing, whether it was a Western religion, even if they no longer went to church or believed in a God, or an Eastern religion, without a god centered theology.

### **Implications**

The mission in the classroom was to open up minds rather than shut them down. This involved creating a conversational space where students experienced respectful conversations on controversial topics drawing on their values, where they did more listening than telling,

explaining not complaining, and were curious, not furious (Case & Chavez, 2017). The class facilitated a respect for alternative narratives of meaning and a commitment to fostering close relationships with others initially thought to be different. It is clear from the comments derived from class reflections, and six months later when interviewed, that significant benefits were derived from exploration of religious identity in the classroom, even for atheists. They learned from each other across differences. They discovered commonalities across faith traditions, as well as commonalities in values that surprised them. Whether values came directly from a faith tradition or from their cultural upbringing, they saw commonalities and what they believed it took to do the right thing and act with integrity. As they became educated about religious differences and discovered similarities, they developed a deeper respect for differences that make a difference as they moved from fear and avoidance to dialogue and engagement.

Through the coding process, a general pattern of learning emerged that is important to shaping moral conversation. The authors found sequential reflective writing assignments requiring introspection, then shared this with their classmates, enhanced learning about self and others. Students shifted their worldview from egocentrism, “it’s about me”, to connection and interdependence, leading to changed thoughts and behaviors different from the class onset, inspiring a greater sense of altruism and social responsibility for ethical actions, even ones requiring courage when faced with difficult situations.

Early in the course, students focused on themselves, examining their own diversity including their religion, upbringing, and culture and how it impacted their thoughts, values and behavior. Through writing and dialogue, they uncovered the origins of their beliefs and values, assessing their adequacy and validity as they recognized how these influenced their perceptions, attitudes, and subsequent behavior. In examining what was important to them, they worked on

integrating important values and beliefs necessary to become the kind of person they wanted to be, becoming mindful of their inner voice. This led to more self-acceptance as they developed a coherent and principled world-view based on their most fundamental values and beliefs, bridging who they are into whom they want to be.

As they were exploring themselves, their focus began to include others. Since religion (or no religion), faith traditions and spiritual teachings, upbringing, and culture were part of individual identities shared in the classroom, students were taught how to listen to understand the other and perspectives that were different. Through questioning for learning the other's story, they saw their classmates differently. Many had been debaters in high school and listened to argue and prove the other person wrong. Students used these new listening skills to understand diverse viewpoints, to recognize intersections of lived experiences and personal differences, to formulate and ask meaningful and honest questions, and to accept others for who they were. In particular, integrating religious identity, or its lack, into the classroom became one of the key facilitators for transformation of the moral conversations in which students were partaking.

Through readings, writing, dialogue and conversation with others, they began to think differently. They were surprised to recognize commonalities across differences, including commonalities across the Abrahamic religions and behaviors expected in Eastern religions or philosophies. Students recognized interdependence with others. They began to question preconceived notions they brought into the class from upbringing, society, or other, challenging themselves and each other to act with more integrity. Personal changes were visible even to other students.

*Throughout this course I watched 2 international students literally change who they were as people. Both transformed from having low moral and ethical standards out of carelessness, partially because that is what their culture has*

*taught them, to having an understanding and sincere desire to act more ethically when complicated situations arise in their lives. It was absolutely incredible.*

Moreover, students observed how they fit into the ideas they were uncovering, rethinking priorities and their position in the world. This led to practicing new skills and behaviors as they committed to ethical principles for behavior in their codes or Ten Commandments.

Many students' new behaviors reflected conscience, courage, and candor, enhancing individual and organizational integrity. Their ethical codes were a blueprint for moral leadership and integrity based on a sense of responsibility to themselves, each other, humanity, or the environment. For some, it took courage as they tried to do what they now saw as "the right thing to do" based on the kind of person they wanted to become.

*Before I began writing my code, I still had moral principles by which I lived my life. I had basic values that were part of me, which governed most of my behavior. But my principles stopped at me. If I saw something immoral or unethical happening in the world around me, I would simply turn the other way. If my friends were cheating on the homework for class, I would perhaps feel uneasy, but never would I try to stop them. After reading so much in Blind Spots about why other people do not stop unethical behavior, I recognized those same flaws in myself. I knew that I had to change, because I just could not feel good about allowing unethical actions to slide. So, I've begun to call my friends and family out on questionable behavior. While I cannot always stop my friends from cheating, I can at least plant a seed that might grow into a realization someday.*

Each time students did something differently, they gained moral confidence to act in new ways. Six months after the class was completed, student commitment to their codes, mostly called their Ten Commandments of Character, surpassed responsible behavior. This was replaced by a profound feeling of moral obligation to continue to consistently act ethically in all contexts of their lives with moral confidence they would do the right thing consistently.

There are challenges in creating a course culture where students feel they can actually comfortably express the part of themselves that involves their religious identity, its values and perspectives embedded. One challenge is not to impose "a" religion on class members. Another

is managing expectations that religion is considered too personal and inappropriate for classroom dialogue. Extra care needs to be taken to not judge the rightness or wrongness of beliefs and values no matter their source, yet not create an atmosphere of moral relativity where any view is acceptable. Many students initially felt uncomfortable and awkward within this secular university when religion was introduced. From student reactions, the structure and culture created in the class made it not only work, but provided opportunity for interfaith learning through dialogue, with diversity respected. Integrating religious identity into the classroom transformed both the process and outcomes of moral conversations that enhanced students learning and character development.

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