

Blast from the past

A series featuring abridged versions of past articles from the Journal of Christian Education (JCE).

Christian students' views on terrorism and religion: An Australian study, John Fisher, Honorary Research Fellow, School of Nursing, University of Ballarat, Australia. Vol 46, No 2, September 2003.

This paper was written in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq by the US and its allies....so it is not surprising that many of the students in the relative safety of Ballarat Christian College were feeling disquieted and uncertain about world events. Even if not overtly, the media seemed to imply that religious differences were the motivating factors for much of the conflict.

A *Personal Beliefs Survey* was constructed to determine how strongly the students held their views with respect to war, terrorism, religious beliefs and their understanding of God's attitude to these things. The survey contained 25 provocative statements, prefaced by "I believe...", each with five alternative responses ranging from Strongly Agree. Participants also took another five minutes to complete the *Spiritual Well-Being Questionnaire...20 items*.

There were no significant differences for the frequency of church attendance and how students related to God (and) no apparent difference between this school and a number of similar Christian community schools in Victoria. Nine factors accounted for 70.3% of the difference:

1. The majority of students supported the idea that all religions are of equal worth to the Australian community and should be practiced freely.
2. Students did not believe that wars are desirable or that they are an effective means of peace.
3. Differences in religious beliefs were not seen to foster terrorism and lead to war.
4. "God loves all people no matter what their religion" but this love was not strong enough to overcome students' belief that "the war on terrorism will never end"

The students were relatively undecided on whether "it is easy to live peacefully with people of different beliefs and values to our own". The students' very limited support for the belief that "people who come to live in Australia from overseas should come from a Christian culture", was a magnanimous gesture considering their assertion that "difference in religious beliefs is the main reason for terrorism".

7. The students strongly expressed the desire that "all people should try to live at peace with others, no matter what their beliefs or religion".
8. There was a widely held belief that negated the proposition "God favours Christians over other people" but they were slightly less against the notion that "God blesses Christians more than others" especially amongst those who attended church frequently.
9. There was a strong view that "all people are of equal value to God."

Stepwise regression analyses were performed with each of the 25 items as a dependent variable. The four items affected by *church attendance* show the distinct influence of church on students' beliefs: The students who do not attend church are more inclined to agree that wars remove the threat of terror and they are more supportive of killing terrorists. Students who *read the Bible* more frequently are more inclined to disagree that "war should never happen".

These students do not see Australia as the exclusive domain of Christians, nor do they think that God's blessing and favour is bestowed only on Christians. The students desire to live peacefully with people of different beliefs, but are prepared to jail them if they become terrorists, not kill them. In summary, the students do not see war as desirable, nor an effective means of peace; and they do not think God is in favour of war.

By expressing views that display courtesy, care and compassion towards others, including those with differing viewpoints from their own, the vast majority of the students showed support, in principle, for the Christian ethos espoused by their school. The views were balanced, egalitarian and inclusive.

(The Journal of Christian Education, including back copies is available from The Business Manager, JCE, PO Box 602, EPPING NSW 1710)