

Combatting Terrorism Starts in School: Saybrook Professor's research finds that devout and secular Muslim teenagers both want to live in a pluralistic world

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After the tragic “Charlie Hebdo” shootings in France, people across the world are wondering whether societies can peacefully live with devoutly religious minorities in their midst.



Dr. Benina Gould has been studying just that question for the last several years, recently conducting studies of Internet use among teenagers at conservative Muslim schools in Indonesia, which has the largest Muslim population in the world. Also surveyed were the attitudes towards religious diversity among high schoolers in America, Pakistan, and Germany.

The good news is the **studies showed that the majority of Muslim students, even the most devout ones, want a pluralistic society.** And, although there is no easy answer to combat terrorism, Dr. Gould strongly believes that increased education and awareness can make a difference. While horrific acts of violence can command our attention, the data clearly shows that they are not representative of an entire population. That’s why her research, which examines the stereotype that 'madrassas' are the breeding grounds of fundamentalism, is of great significance.

What she’s found often confirms our best hopes for the Internet, the young, and for the possibility of living together in peace – if we know how.

“Given the politicization of religion globally, we hypothesize that our results will demonstrate that students from both religious and secular schools have strikingly similar responses, and that both feel the need for a more pluralistic education,” Dr. Gould says.

Dr. Gould, a psychology professor teaching in the Transformative Social Change program at Saybrook University, in Oakland, began this work in 2012, when she published the results of a survey of Internet usage among teens in Indonesian Madrassas and secular schools, and followed that research up with studies of Internet usage of Muslim students in Pakistan, Germany, and California.

In most cases, she said, Web use is both a force for pluralism and a result of even conservative Muslim students’ desire to live in a pluralistic society. Similarly, she said, her more recent work suggests that attempts to prevent high school students around the world from learning more about religion, and understanding religious practitioners, are counter-productive:

“Religion is obviously important in our world right now, so most kids do want to learn more about it,” Dr. Gould says. “Not necessarily from a devotional position, but as something they can study and ask questions about.”

Based on these findings, teachers in Indonesia and Germany have been offered assistance adding discussions on religious pluralism to their curriculum. In the United States, Dr. Gould has been able to offer teachers interfaith and pluralistic resources that have been shown to work and are easy to access.

Practically applied, these results could help the next generation move forward past the violence of the current one, and towards a thriving society where various religious, ethnic and political groups can work and live in harmony. It can begin in schools – and online.

(Boilerplate)