

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**Religious Studies: Additional Education for Law Enforcement**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Law enforcement organizations can host the study of various religions inside the walls of the police department for their personnel. There is a great need for religious education specific to law enforcement due to the direct and indirect nature of their service in working for the people as a governmental entity. Additionally, law enforcement personnel deal with stressful events and carry heavy burdens. In this era in history, cultural sensitivities are observed but society has not mastered the “how to implement” in teaching and learning. Studying various religions by law enforcement could earn the respect of the public, one another as peers, and add a positive mark on the rather common negative stereotype that supersedes law enforcement. A religious study can be hosted at the police agency where officers and other personnel can have 24-hour access in order to meet and accommodate shift work schedules. The study itself can sever cultural divisiveness, allow for coping skills to develop (which can relieve stressors), provide a positive environment, and sustain a positive working foundation for the entire organization that is inclusive of varying ethnicities and cultures. In maintaining the integrity of the United States Constitution, each governmental agency will remain within the guidelines with the law of the land. Therefore, teaching of various written doctrines is not showing a preference to any one religion as governed over 200 years ago and still anticipated for the future generations by the highly respected founding fathers of this country.

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## INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement personnel are faced with stressful situations that include solving another person's crisis while still carrying the burden of their own. First responders, such as police officers, assist society in various ways to not only include the response to violent situations but suppressing trivial feuds by providing counseling and guidance. First responders assist society by merely using "listening" skills in response to a meet complainant call.

Imagine, for a moment, carrying a sack of potatoes over the shoulder, every minute of every day. This sack represents a person's life and one potato inside represents a problem, health issue, or burden that a person has been afflicted with. The public seeks help from law enforcement personnel in general, in coping with corrosive and unpredictable situations such as the abusive spouse assault call, neighbors fighting, robberies, homicides and even school shootings (Nottingham, 2009). When an officer helps others, the officer carrying his or her own sack of potatoes now carries another person's sack of potatoes, even if only for a short time period. The officer may assist by taking a few potatoes, which lightens the sack, yet some potatoes overflow out of the officer's control. The sack starts to become burdensome and difficult to manage. These heavy and sometimes overwhelming situations for those in law enforcement cause for a need to retreat and refocus on something positive. One such avenue in dealing with stressors is the refocus to a concentration of learning about people, by way of a religious study also referred to as multi-dimensional training in spiritual intelligence (Feemster, 2010). The intent on obtaining this specific type of education in religion could strengthen law enforcement relationships, eliminate cultural divisiveness,

encourage self-discipline, and provide for the much sought after positive environment in such an austere society. The study of various religions should be provided to law enforcement personnel to serve in addition to current law enforcement education. Learning about various religions could benefit the employee, the organization, and certainly the public. For an easily available and professional setting, the venue of the police department can be utilized as a 24-hour training ground. In September 2009, a LEMIT researcher published that the Austin Police Department had an organization that held Christian-based monthly meetings during lunch hour (Field, 2009). In 2012, International Cops for Christ reached out to the police community and offered guest speakers at no cost (<http://internationalcopsforchrist.com>). The institution of learning religious study as a method to add to police training in addition to cultural diversity is ideal.

## **POSITION**

Police personnel, who include high-ranking administrators, patrolmen, dispatchers, detention officers, and other city members (i.e. public works personnel, code enforcement) can benefit from a religious study. When obtaining this kind of continuing education, it provides a gain in the ability to develop coping skills to the stressors that are put before each person that gradually stack up on a daily basis. Working long shifts and overtime can be stressful, both mentally and physically, on the body and becomes a burden, day in and day out (Levy, 2011). After serving the public, the agency, and their own lives, and depending on the stress level the individual can withstand, even just a few months of service in the area of law enforcement could be difficult to manage. As it appears more prominent in these times of receiving social

media, reports overflow with stories of unethical and immoral behavior of law enforcement employees to include corruption, drug abuse, alcoholism, and suicide. Suicide, an outlet being considered a common escape for police officers has been discussed over decades. Suicide has even been considered as an outlet to some personnel in law enforcement because of allegations of corruption or reportedly, prior to internal affairs investigations (James, 1993). Some might rationalize any immoral behavior as a form of “coping.” Many books have been written explaining police stressors. It is reasonable to find that the public seem to stereotype the profession itself is full of unstable, scarred, and corrupt individuals leading most people to believe that intervention is still very much needed (Decker, 2006). Perhaps a religious approach could be used to intervene and salvage a difficult career for those in blue who make arrests just as much as it helps those who are arrestee.

Recalling the earlier days of incarceration, it is of no surprise to find that Christian-based programs were implemented in the prison system, such as Prison Fellowship Ministries (Sullivan, 2009). Programs have led to many other studies to include one that was conducted over a 14-year span. This study showed proven results of prisoners who attended religious programs on a regular basis were least likely to engage in further criminal behavior. Due to the education and alteration of the inner-self, a change was significant (Messemer, 2007). It would be reasonable to apply a similar form of education for individuals in law enforcement due to a similar need to alter the inner-self in a positive fashion that reflects upon one another as peers, upon subordinates and upward upon administrators.

Along with gaining a form of self-help, a positive environment is simultaneously achieved. Traditional forms of social environment for some police officers include frequenting bars to drink alcohol (at times in excess). Ironically, the very subject of alcohol or “intoxication” happens to be written in some statutes or ordinances where agencies apply a “zero tolerance” approach such as Minor in Possession of Alcohol (MIP). Despite the reason, an MIP citation and parent called to the scene is acted on. Further, whether it is a Driving While Intoxicated (DWI) investigation or an assault situation, there are many times a negative result exists simply due to the uncontrolled use of alcohol. Reports of police officers involved in personal abuse of alcohol are extreme, and “hypocrisy” is a common term.

For example, a D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) officer leaving a school function after teaching about the use of underage drinking, has a moral expectation by the public not to drink in excess after the school function or an even more realistic expectation to not drink at all. In 2001, a New York City 15-year police veteran killed 4 individuals as a result of drinking alcohol in a bar and then driving to the station to sleep before shift. As of April 2012, he completed a 5-year sentence, and he will spend until 2017 on supervised release. The ex-police officer was reported to have .16% blood alcohol content when .10% was considered the maximum limit for that time period (Donnelly, 2012). Often times, officers find themselves in a hypocrisy-state of being as an attempt at coping. To further the irony, this ex-officer formerly taught classes on DWI enforcement. Possibly, if he had sought help for his over-use of alcohol in the past, he could still be a policeman today.

It should go without saying that the law enforcement community or “brotherhood” does have strong inner relationships. Imagine the positive impact a religious study could have for that “brotherhood” that could also extend to the immediate public. The understanding of one another and mere gentle tolerance would be widespread within the department and possibly even become second nature. Self-discipline would be obtained as a result of this area of education. Self-discipline could be implemented in various forms, even at such a trivial level that can be seen in agencies and private sector organizations today; it is called gossip. Self-discipline in the subject of “gossip” and in refraining from repeating such nastiness can mold stronger relationships.

Greg Laurie, a pastor at Harvest Ministries suggests in a radio sermon, that the repetition of a rumor that is neither kind, necessary, or true is gossip (Laurie, 2005). Yet, somehow no matter the organization, gossip finds its way in even professional environments such as police departments. The discipline it takes in maintaining a professional environment can be gained from the education in a religious study. For example, the Holy Bible explains what the Lord hates: “A proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that are swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among brethren.” (Proverbs 6:16-19 New King James Version).

Perhaps dishonorable conduct by employees would cease and integrity can be re-gained and re-developed. Typically, in the law enforcement community, partnerships are formed or “cliques” with one another due to common interests such as being assigned to specialized units in the department. The SWAT (Specialized Weapons and Tactics) Team is a prime example of where trust and unity are expected. This unit of



officers is made up of individuals who engage in truly physically difficult tasks in just wearing their protective armor in setting a perimeter. Trust of one another is of vital importance for the SWAT officers. A narcotics unit is another group where partnerships are formed, and trust is expected. The officer's duty as a narcotics officer is to befriend and associate with lesser self-disciplined individuals (drug dealers or users) in order to battle the endless war on drugs. Temptation of self-indulgence could arise upon that narcotics officer where he or she could fall prey in the path of a broken society and lose sight of what side of the law he or she is supposed to be on. Integrity and honor can bind relationships, which is much needed in law enforcement.

A pronounced effect a religious study will have in the area of cultural awareness may also lead to a reduction in cultural divisiveness. The natural maturity to cultural sensitivity in the employees will emerge while adhering to and respecting the Constitution of the United States in not promoting one religion over another. Since the formation of the United States, it is widely understood that America is made up of various cultures from around the world (i.e. a melting pot). In order to effectively interact with the various cultures, a mutual respect is often needed. Consider that most all workforce entities, not just inclusive of public sector, but private sector companies as well, must adapt to the social variations and be capable of communicating with others intelligently and respectfully. A religious study of various religions can build an acceptance level toward a more objective outlook with one another allowing fewer to no prejudice for another person's ethnicity and culture but in also welcoming acceptance of another outside his or her own beliefs. Accepting others sustains a solid working foundation and the natural diversity promotes a certain sense of balance.

A study of written doctrines of the various religions could provide patrol officers, for example, self-discipline in the treatment of another person such as the victim in need of help, or the fellow peer having a bad day. An officer's self-discipline can be learned by writings instilled in scripture. When adhering to and living by the word of the Holy Bible, there are many references to scripture relating to law and the treatment of others. A study of the written doctrine of Judaism, known as the Torah, finds similar references relating to the proper treatment toward others.

The reason behind introducing a religious study in the law enforcement environment is very simple. The goal is to obtain education in all or at least a majority of various religions depending on the demographics of the agency, so that it can be instrumental in everyday life and applied when needed. The current state of the country as it relates the Systems Theory between the United States and the Middle East and such effects on first responders in the United States law enforcement community provides intellectual gain of such studies for the police department on even the smallest level (Alexander, 2012). This study in religion could sever stereotyped beliefs between the U.S. and foreign countries and better convey an autonomous grace with which law enforcement can so be armed. This new addition to the education for law enforcement agencies would ensure synonymous education for the melting pot that makes up this great country of the United States, in recognition of the expanding cultures. The actual teaching of religious studies can be provided by expert third party entities, which submit the objectives, lesson plan, test(s) and instructor evaluation to TCLEOSE for credits toward TCLEOSE training hours.

Most religious writings generally share the same concept in terms of specifying a human performance for individuals to conduct themselves. The commonality when learning these various religions is sometimes overlooked due to the human instinct of having no tolerance for religions other than his or her own. This intolerance for other religions, when taken to the extreme, can lead to the “attack” of a religion which leads to a pronounced need to defend that religion. In understanding other religions and becoming educated to what another person’s responses may be, could be a subliminal tool that could lead to a peaceful result to a volatile situation. An example of the benefit of patrol officers receiving education in the Torah (the book for Judaism) during a religious study could be something as delicate as showing respect. The officer who responds to a household where he has been dispatched is required to investigate a presumed natural death of an elderly person. Suppose the officer observes pictures and art along the living room mantel such as the Jewish Star of David or a charm on a necklace worn by the decedent with a similar Jewish Star of David. The responding officer, after receiving the religious education would be aware and even possibly refrain from using misconstrued vocabulary and would further know to be respectful for the family’s Jewish beliefs. The education gained from a religious study would prevent the officer from using insensitive vocabulary as the officer interacts with the family members of the decedent.

Once a religious study is accessible to law enforcement personnel, it could serve in the ability of offering an around the clock study environment if needed. The benefit of being local for personnel could also better serve in immediate moments of necessity, should personnel be suddenly overcome with an intense situation. Law enforcement

personnel during a shift are exposed to child-related tragedies, vehicle fatalities, and regularly respond to these kinds of scenes to include many other traumatic stressful scenes that deal with death and suffering (US Department of Labor, 2012).

Reassurance and spiritual knowledge in written literature or in conversation can assist in healing during times of uncertainty; having this access for personnel could be phenomenal in attending to the sensitive and potential result of posttraumatic stress disorder.

A religious study group can begin their topics in the education of learning various religions and relating to parables that can help refer prevalent past events to modern issues. Some of the written doctrines, the Holy Bible for Christians as an example, affirms there is a tolerance toward other belief systems just by the way of peaceful treatment towards one another. Furthermore, the bible meets the objective of how to learn the importance of conducting ones' self appropriately in society. In reflection of a racist time in the 1960's, Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, "We need religion and education to change attitudes and to change the hearts of men" (Messimer, 2007, p. 225). A parable can be applied such as when Jesus calmed a colt's behavior to ride him. The same difficulty it takes to train a colt, so it is the hearts of men, yet both situations can be bridled by such studies. The Torah, the book of Hebrew law, that directs Judaism contains many of the same books as the Old Testament in the Holy Bible. Learning these written materials can lead to a greater expansion of knowledge with a positive side effect of achieving further maturity.

In recalling an incarcerated setting on a broader scale, governmental entities provide access to the Holy Bible for jail or prison inmates. The United States Secretary

of State implemented the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRF) where there are five specific prohibitions against religious constraints. When distributing the Holy Bible, the Torah, or the Koran to inmates, the absolute freedom to learn is openly given by the United States government in coordination with this Act (U.S. Department of State, 2011). Research by Messemer (2007) concluded that the positive effects of a Christian program in the low-literate male inmate setting indicated “significant learning gains in the reading, math and language skill areas” (p. 225). Further, principles taught in the Holy Bible, such as the importance to discipline one self and with this, gain a higher moral understanding, could serve as a reinforcement tool toward enforcing moral character and integrity in the field of law enforcement.

### **COUNTER POSITION**

Naturally, when there is a proposed idea, there will be those who oppose or resist it. It would be perfectly reasonable to suggest that with religious study there will be a downfall to any religious study such as various interpretations of each religion. The variance is an anticipated aspect of a religious study, in that learning from one another and together about the different religions allows for engaging discussion. Applying what is learned during real world applications and sharing with one another can be comforting. For example, employee Ty practices Buddhism, yet had no knowledge of fellow employee, Maria’s religion of Catholicism until he attended the religious study. Ty is able to show respect for the knowledge that he learned during the religious study and in turn, Maria also shows respect for Ty’s beliefs.

In society and even in a professional environment, there is almost always some form of segregation or ostracizing. In high school, recall the “jocks,” the “thugs,” and the

“ropers” (certainly a Texas reference). These groups either purposely or inadvertently segregated themselves based on their personal interests that seemingly provided a sense of belonging. Each individual had something in common with his or her group. In law enforcement, consider the various groups such as SWAT, Narcotics or Motors. These groups may tend to segregate themselves due to the common interests they share. In having a religious study, there could be potential for someone to hold that religious viewpoint against the person. This disparity in treatment can eventually be overcome. The goal of allowing a religious study in the police environment is to dissipate the negative aspects of segregation and allow for tolerance to be introduced.

Perhaps the most vivid and obvious issue in allowing a religious study to be conducted in a police agency would be the absolute certainty that the government was not promoting one religion alone. Reviewing history and Thomas Jefferson’s letter to the Danbury Baptist Association, he mentions the “separation between church and state.” Thomas Jefferson’s meaning was not to deter the government from upholding the established belief system of God in which the country was founded on, the statement was to convey that the government could not force the people to not have liberty of choosing what religion to follow (Standridge, 2009). The proposed religious study at the police department is not discouraging learning solely one religion; the study is welcoming all religions in the course of study in order to be understood and equal.

As with all suggested programs, timing is a sensitive issue. Concerns of whether a religious study should be permitted before duty or on duty should be addressed. Some may challenge whether it would be a matter of contrasting the difference between taking a smoke break and visiting one another by the water cooler. Over quite some

time, allowing employees to take smoke breaks became an accepted and acquired practice that employees were permitted to have as a benefit to cater to those with nicotine needs. A religious study (meaning no disrespect in comparing to smoking) is most definitely a more respectful and healthy way to take a break.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Law enforcement personnel can have extreme levels of stressors placed on them daily. In a religious study, those burdens of problems can help be identified, talked about and handled with care. A religious study is permitting intellectual and religious education within the walls of the workplace for employees to learn and develop coping skills and reduce disparity in treatment. Such education could be provided by a third party to allow outside individuals in this area of expertise to respond to a meeting place in the agency to allow for discussion, lecture, and study that will inevitably lead to stronger relationships filled with trust and empathy while fostering a positive environment. Getting rid of the potato sack is not reasonable, but the ability to know how to help one another carry the potato sack that is overflowing with potatoes will provide for a healthier mindset for the personnel. Socializing with fellow employees can be redefined and transformed from negative environments, such as bars where alcohol is promoted, to a suitable and positive environment where religious books are used as guidelines to a successful and respected form of conduct. The integrity and moral foundation of an entire organization can be solidified by a religious study. Appropriating a religious study in a law enforcement organization could catapult the law enforcement community into being uplifted to a superior moral standard that perhaps other organizations will follow.

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