

# A Call for Teacher Professional Learning and the Study of Religion in Social Studies

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## Abstract

Religion is important to study in social studies because many religious individuals, groups, and movements engage with public issues and because countries are increasingly religiously diverse. In response, scholars are promoting education about religion in citizenship education. However, there remain few programs about religion in Canadian public schools and even less research about them. This article begins to address the gap by proposing three priorities for teacher professional learning and the study of religion for social studies teachers. The priorities are drawn from interviews with Alberta

teachers, whose beliefs about religion in the classroom can be divided into three categories identified by the authors as nominal, attentive, and integrated. If many teachers fall into one of these categories, then the professional learning priorities suggested here have wide-ranging application.

*Keywords:* teaching about religion, religion education, citizenship education, teachers' beliefs, teacher professional learning

## **Résumé**

La religion est un aspect important dans les études sociales parce que plusieurs individus, groupes et mouvements religieux s'engagent avec les problèmes sociaux et parce que les pays développent de plus en plus la diversité religieuse. Comme réponse, des intellectuels font la promotion de l'éducation sur la religion dans les programmes d'édu-cations publiques. Cependant, il y a peu de programmation sur la religion dans les écoles publiques canadiennes et encore moins de recherche à ce sujet. Cet article veut faire face à ce manque en proposant trois thèmes pour l'apprentissage professionnel des ensei-gnants d'études sociales. Ces thèmes viennent des entrevues avec les enseignants alber-tains, avec leurs opinions à propos du traitement de la religion dans la salle de classe divisées en trois catégories choisies par les auteurs : nominal, attentif et intégrant. Si la plupart des enseignants tombent dans une de ces catégories, l'apprentissage profession-nel des enseignants suggéré ici aura des applications étendues.

*Mots-clés :* l'enseignement relatif aux religions, l'enseignement religieuse, l'enseignement de la citoyenneté, croyances des enseignant(e)s, perfectionnement professionnelle

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## Introduction

Teaching about religion in today's classrooms is challenging. Media and entertainment caricatures of the narrow-minded and intolerant Christian, the submissive Muslim woman lacking agency, and the religious terrorist (Geddes, 2009; Media Smarts, n.d.) can interfere with serious examination. Parents representing different interpretations within a religious community may exert pressure on teachers and school boards to present their traditions in a particular manner (Kamat & Mathew, 2010). Teachers who do take on the task must navigate many tensions, from reconciling constructivist views of knowledge with immutable religious texts to celebrating religious discourses while stimulating critical thinking (Niyozov, 2010, p. 26).

Although the challenges are readily identifiable, there is little Canadian research outside Quebec and Ontario regarding the teaching of religion<sup>1</sup> in public schools, reflecting the lack of Canadian public discussion about such education (Beaman, Beyer, & Cusack, 2017; Bramadat, 2009, pp. 9–10). Beaman, Beyer, and Cusack (2017) hypothesize that “because religion qua culture is embedded in the Canadian discourse of multiculturalism, it frequently gets subsumed into broader issues” (p. 248) and thus marginalized in public discussions and policies. Furthermore, multicultural policies and programs, including those developed for education, tend to marginalize or ignore religion (Beaman et al., 2017; Salili & Hoosain, 2006; White, 2009). Regional roundtable discussions on multiculturalism held across Canada support this analysis, concluding that “religion is a dimension that current conceptions of multiculturalism are ill-prepared to handle” (Kunz & Sykes, 2007, p. 4). The marginalization of religion within multiculturalism, coupled with the removal of religious education from school curriculum in an effort to de-Christianize education (Seljak, 2005), has resulted in high rates of religious illiteracy among Canadians (Bowlby, 2001; Bramadat, 2009, p. 9; Sweet, 1997).

In contrast to the Canadian context, some jurisdictions teach religious literacy. For instance, many European countries offer some type of religious education (RE), although there is wide diversity throughout Europe regarding the offering of such courses,

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1 Naming programs that study religion is an ongoing debate. We follow Haynes and Thomas (1994) in defining “teaching about religion” as including “consideration of the beliefs and practices of religions; the role of religion in history and contemporary society; and religious themes in music, art and literature” (p. 97, fn1).

particularly whether they are confessional and obligatory (Jackson, Miedema, Weisse, & Willaime, 2007). European and South African educators have investigated the relationships among education, citizenship, and religious diversity (Jackson, 2003). In the United States, RE is not compulsory in any state, but Grade 9 students in Modesto, California, are required to take a world religions course (Wertheimer, 2015). Schools in other American locations, however, struggle to teach about religion because they encounter public and/or parental fears (Wertheimer, 2015). Despite such resistance, the National Council for Social Studies in the United States strongly supports education about religion (NCSS, 2014), and religion is increasingly present in national and state social studies standards (Douglass, 2000). In comparison, religion is marginalized in the social studies curriculum of several Canadian provinces (Patrick, 2015).

Yet numerous scholars are promoting education about religion, arguing that an educated citizen requires some knowledge and understanding about religion (Arthur, Gearon, & Sears, 2010; Byrne, 2014; Feinberg & Layton, 2014; Grelle, 2002; Jackson, 2003; Kunzman, 2006; Moore 2007, 2010; Noddings, 1993; Prothero, 2007, 2010; Sears & Christou, 2012; Seligman, 2014). As Noddings (2008) puts it, “Religion plays a significant role in the lives of individuals, and increasingly it is playing a political role that affects both believers and unbelievers. We cannot remain silent on this vital topic and still claim to educate” (p. 386).

Much of the renewed interest in religion is fuelled by the re-entry of religion into public life, if indeed it ever left (Berger, 1999; Casanova, 1994; Habermas, 2006), and the increasing religious diversity in many countries, largely resulting from immigration, although it is important to note that, in Canada, not all minority religious communities are comprised of relatively new Canadians. Jewish and Sikh communities, for instance, have long histories in Canada. Beyond the fact of religious pluralism, sociological indicators also suggest the need for some type of education about religion. Put simply, religion matters to many Canadians. Two-thirds of Canadians continue to self-identify as Christian (Statistics Canada, 2013) and up to 23% attend religious services monthly (Hutchins, 2015). Many immigrants cling to their religion as an important aspect of their identity and attend religious services more frequently than the average Canadian (Biles & Ibrahim, 2005, p. 165; Hutchins, 2015).

The current situation of low religious literacy, on the one hand, and calls for more teaching about religion in public schools, on the other hand, often places teachers in a

difficult situation. Researchers can help equip teachers to teach about religion by examining teachers' beliefs about religion in the classroom. Teachers' beliefs are important to study because teachers facilitate the development of "students' self-understanding and self-esteem, interactions between students, and students' world perspectives" (White, 2010, p. 41), as well as developing content knowledge. Teachers' beliefs about religion impact their students in myriad ways, from what is considered controversial to what resources are introduced to the students to the degree that religion or religious traditions are discussed in the classroom. Our research is a first step toward investigating the content of Canadian teachers' beliefs about religion in the classroom, an area of study that is significantly under-researched. This article is exploratory in that it describes the views of a small sample of teachers in order to begin mapping the terrain of how religion is taught in social studies classrooms in Alberta. Our findings led us to divide teachers into three categories based on their views of religion in the curriculum and classroom and to propose three priorities for teacher professional learning that focuses on religion. The latter emerged as being necessary to ensure an accurate and sufficiently complex presentation of religion to students. Identification of such professional learning is consistent with the recommendations for teacher learning included in the literature endorsing more teaching about religion in citizenship education (Barton, 2015; Barton & James, 2010; Grelle, 2002; Moore, 2007; NCSS, 2014; Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE], 2007).

The mapping of teachers' beliefs about religion impacts all areas of education. For example, all teachers should be concerned about the simplistic and often erroneous representations of religion found in the media and school textbooks (Jackson, 1997), as they easily result in negative stereotypes (Jackson, 2014, p. 61). Those studying multiculturalism will benefit from a deeper understanding of how religion is addressed in secondary schools as they work to ensure that all Canadians have equitable opportunities to communicate and advocate for the interests of themselves and their communities. If silence about religion marginalizes minorities (Keller, Camardese, & Abbas, 2017), then more education about religion may support multiculturalism and pluralism by deepening our understanding of our neighbours, and thereby building stronger communities.

We begin with an explanation of how we use the term "religion," followed by an overview of the literature advocating for more education about religion in citizenship education, which prepares diverse people to live together in public spaces, to dialogue about

important and complex issues, and to develop public processes and institutions. The third section provides a summary of the teachers' beliefs about and experiences with religion in their classrooms. Based on this summary, the final section proposes three priorities for ongoing teacher professional learning. Developing teacher professional learning based on teachers' beliefs follows Mansour's (2009) assertion that "an understanding of individual's beliefs can assist in the design of professional development sessions" (p. 40). The suggested professional learning will be presented as broad categories rather than a detailed plan because actual implementation depends on local contexts.

### **Understanding the Term "Religion"**

The term "religion" is a modern, contentious term that is intertwined with power and colonization (Asad, 1993; Chidester, 2003; Jackson, 1997). Given its political and cultural power in Western countries, Christianity was the measure of religion during the colonization period and beyond. As liberalism helped usher religion into the private sphere and as Western countries became increasingly pluralist in the second half of the 20th century, Western cultures de-Christianized. Concomitantly, the designation of "spiritual" arose as a critique of institutional religions and is today typically associated with such terms as "self-fulfillment, beliefs, transcendence, faith, connection with the divine or with the subject or any object of that spiritual faith" (Lefebvre, 2015, p. 186). While religion may be associated with hierarchical institutional power, and abuses of that power, and spirituality with a holistic view of the individual in community, Canadian law makers and policy makers, as well as various observers, caution against polarizing the terms given their multidimensionality and the cross-pollination between them (Hill et al., 2000; Lefebvre, 2015).

Lincoln's (2003) definition of religion is often a starting point for understanding religion as it includes the typical components many people ascribe to it: (1) a discourse transcending the human, claiming authority and truth; (2) they all involve practices; (3) communal identity; and (4) a regulating institution. The degree to which these elements are present in a particular religion varies significantly. Indeed, religious traditions are complex and internally heterogeneous. They are dynamic, interacting with each other and diverse cultures, and are variously practised (Jackson, 1997, pp. 6–8).

For the purposes of this article, religion refers to what are now transnational religious traditions. We recognize the history of colonialism involved in identifying these traditions as religious (Cavanaugh, 2009), but we wish to study what the public, including teachers, generally refer to as religion, which are the large religious traditions found around the world. We refrain from using the term “world religions” because the religions involved are quite dissimilar; for example, they do not all have transcendent deities or systematic belief structures (Barton, 2015; Chidester, 2003; Prothero, 2010; Sikka, 2015, pp. 118–121). Education about these religious traditions assumes religious diversity, and differs from “education into religion,” which seeks to induct students into a particular religious tradition (Byrne, 2014, pp. 16–17).<sup>2</sup>

## **Education about Religion in Citizenship Education**

While diversity is intrinsic to education about religion, it is equally important to citizenship education in many countries (Hébert & Sears, n.d.), including Canada, where cultural diversity is enshrined in constitutional law, multicultural policies, immigration history, and more recent recognition of Indigenous rights (Sears, 2010, pp. 191–193). Yet this does not mean Canadians escape the tensions associated with citizenship. They too lack consensus regarding the nature of a “good” citizen and the purposes of citizenship education. Each conception of citizenship education has political consequences (Osborne, 2000; Sears & Hughes, 1996; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), including their responses to diversity. As countries become more diverse, minority and marginalized groups press notions of citizenship to evolve beyond civic and political rights to include cultural and religious rights as well as account for multiple belongings (Hébert & Wilkinson, 2002; Ryder, 2008). Bramadat and Seljak (2013) assert that Canadian multiculturalism will not achieve its objectives if it ignores religion and its impacts on identity and community.

Canadian academic discourse regarding religion and education is often linked to multicultural policies and, in some cases, is prompted by judicial rulings. A review of legal decisions involving religion in education revealed that courts adjudicate relevant cases on the basis of the educational mandate to produce good citizens (Beaman, Forbes,

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2 Increasingly, education about religion includes study of non-religious worldviews.

& Cusack, 2015). Court-identified values of a good citizen include “tolerance, equality, respect, fairness, understanding, democracy and an appreciation of diversity” (Beaman et al., 2015, p. 175). As important as these values are, they are not teacher guidelines and educational goals. The absence of guidelines and goals can result in unclear expectations being placed on teachers and on frustrated students and parents of minority religions when they encounter religious illiteracy amongst educators (Guo, 2011; Zine, 2001). However, Niyozov and Pluim (2009) argue that studies focusing on these frustrations often lack teachers’ perspectives. They point to other research involving teachers’ voices that suggests teachers are empathetic to the challenges facing students belonging to religious minorities.

Research with teachers highlights the need for more teacher resources about religious complexities so they in turn are able to better teach about multiple perspectives and the internal heterogeneity within religious communities and traditions (Niyozov & Pluim, 2009, pp. 668–669). Eidoo et al. (2011) reflect the same concerns for religion in global citizenship education, which they insist must involve “creating space for conflicting voices and perspectives; learning how to manage social conflict;...and engaging across difference to identify and act on shared visions for a just society” (p. 70). Engagement with diversity and conflict for the purpose of a just society reflects Bickmore’s (2005a, 2005b) research on “difficult citizenship,” defined as “critical, engaged citizen participation for social change toward justice” (Bickmore, 2005b, p. 2). Those who promote difficult citizenship view with concern education policy documents that “reduce equity and diversity to individual skills and superficial celebrations” (Pashby, Ingram, & Joshee, 2014, p. 15). Difficult citizenship can be developed in all aspects of the curriculum, and Galczynski, Tsagkaraki, and Ghosh (2015) do so by highlighting various forms of privilege embedded in current events. They desire to facilitate students’ understanding about power inequities not only in the current event but also in the students’ own lives and settings. With regard to religious privilege, Galczynski et al. (2015) discuss the “inflammatory secularism” of Quebec’s proposed Charter of Values, which would have banned provincial employees from wearing conspicuous religious symbols, including head and face coverings. (The Charter was defeated in the 2014 provincial election.) Their follow-up questions ask students to consider whether there is equity for all religious and non-religious students to express their perspectives and how descriptive labels like “extremist” or “devout” are used.



Acknowledging the conflict and messiness involved in studying diversity begins with avoiding simplifications, and here the American context is helpful given the inclusion of religion in the curricula (Douglass, 2000; Haynes, 2011), although Grelle (2006, p. 464) acknowledges that further theorizing about the place of religion in K–12 schools is required. Simplifications are unjust toward religious individuals and communities and do not prepare students “to meet people and ideas in their life that they don’t understand, and possibly don’t agree with” (Byrne, 2014, p. 26).

Feinberg and Layton (2014) are concerned about a common simplification in religious education they see embedded in a form of understanding as empathy that involves an identification of oneself with a perceived other. The approach is problematic, they argue, because “the cost is that most all of the differences between religions, including important frictions, must be smoothed over. Thus the picture that the students get emphasizes some ideal of a religion harmonized with other religions and divorced from conflict and engagement” (p. 133). Prothero (2010) finds this phenomenon to be the result of religious tolerance morphing “into the straitjacket of religious agreement” (p. 4) in an effort to make all religions peaceful and the world safer. In his rejection of this “pretend pluralism” (p. 5), Prothero insists on recognizing religion as a force of both great evil and great good (pp. 9–11).

While overemphasizing uniformity and thereby ignoring conflict is one form of simplification, another is overstating religious conflict. Hartwick, Hawkins, and Schroeder (2016) found that the American social studies standards for civics tend to portray religion “through the lens of inciting or contributing to conflict” and thus they appeal for more inclusion of the positive functions of religion (p. 257). Cultivating critical thinking skills, they assert, includes teaching about the contributions of religion to both conflicts and humanitarian achievements. Barton (2015) similarly traces how teachers’ disregard for the social and political contexts of religion can result in simplified understandings of religious conflicts and erroneous views of religion as inevitably conflictive.

Avoiding these simplifications places additional burdens on social studies teachers, who must also be aware of the assumptions embedded in language. For example, phrases like “the Muslim world” ignores the Muslim minorities living in China and the United States as well as the minorities living within Muslim-majority countries (Barton, 2015, p. 67). Teachers must also become aware of how concepts of tolerance, individual freedom, and political liberties may be unconsciously used to position the religious

“other” as deficient and threatening, particularly if religious minorities offer political critiques of the state and/or its fundamental values based on specific religious and cultural commitments (Abu El-Haj, 2010).

As detailed above, the perils of superficial approaches to citizenship and simplistic representations of religion are numerous. Religions are complex, as are the communities in which they are practised. Teacher professional learning is an important tool with which to support teachers. Given that religions operate within specific cultural, geographic, and political systems and spaces, teacher education should be developed by listening to teachers and learning what is actually happening in local, provincial, and national classrooms.

## **Methodology**

### **Teacher Participants**

To examine the beliefs of selected teachers, we used the qualitative approach of phenomenography. Qualitative research is well suited to studying teachers’ beliefs (Olafson, Grandy, & Owens, 2015, p. 128), particularly the phenomenographic approach, which studies the perceived understandings or experiences various people have of a phenomenon (Khan, 2014, p. 35; Marton, 1981). In our research, phenomenography enabled us to examine the conceptual variations among teachers regarding the nature and role of religion in their teaching and in their classrooms.

We sent invitation letters to approximately 80 social studies teachers in 20 public junior and senior high schools throughout a large urban Alberta school district. Since Alberta permits school boards to implement faith-based programming (for example, a Christian Logos stream in selected elementary and junior high schools where numbers and family demand warrant it) and include faith-based schools as alternative schools, we chose non-faith schools with no religious programming. Given the unresolved role of religion in Canadian education and a Canadian intellectual consensus to privatize religion (Bramadat, 2009, p. 9; see also Gaye & Kunz, 2009), the letters stated that we would not ask teachers about their personal religious beliefs. By doing so we hoped to encourage greater teacher participation. The letters were given to the principal (either directly

or through the school secretary) to place in teachers' mailboxes and interested teachers were invited to contact the first author (M. Patrick) to set up an interview. Ten teachers responded; their names (pseudonyms) and teaching biographies are outlined in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Participants' names and teaching biographies

Junior High Teacher Names (Grades 7–9)*	Years of Teaching Experience	Years of Teaching Primarily Social Studies
Kim	28	28
Robert	20+	8
Will	5	4
Senior High Teacher Names (Grades 10–12)**		
John	34	20
Arthur	32	32
Charles	25	25
Mack	17	8
Alex	11	8
Kathryn	3	3
Audrey	3	2

\* School populations ranged between approximately 350 and 450 students in 2015–16.

\*\* School populations ranged between approximately 1,000 and 2,000 students in 2015–16.

## Data Collection, Analysis, and Limitations

The semi-structured individual interviews were conducted by the first author and lasted approximately one hour. They were recorded, transcribed, and emergently coded using the qualitative data program, Atlas.ti. Given the absence of similar research in Canada, all three of the authors had no preconceived ideas of what patterns of beliefs existed among teachers regarding religion in the classroom. As the interviews proceeded, it became clear there were different conceptions of religion animating teacher beliefs. To evaluate these differences, we followed the methods of analysis used by Peck and Sears (2005) and Beaty (1987) in that we read the transcripts as one document, and “[picked] out all the differences of meaning in relation to the concept” (Beaty, 1987, p. 344).

Discerning the differences led us to identify three categories of teacher responses to religion in the classroom: the *nominal* group, whose members incorporate little education about religion into their teaching; the *attentive* group, who desire to discuss religion with their students, primarily through historical and current events (especially the latter); and the *integrated* group, who weave religion almost seamlessly into the curriculum they are teaching. To ensure trustworthiness of representation, the first author re-read each transcript after ascribing and describing the groups to ensure accurate representation of each teacher. It is important to note that this article does not address the degree to which these teachers' practices are congruent with their beliefs. Research reveals complex relationships between beliefs and practice (Buehl & Beck, 2015; Evans, 2006), involving a variety of internal and external factors (Mansour, 2009, pp. 33–35). We have conducted classroom observations with a select group of these teachers to investigate the correspondence between stated beliefs and practice, but issues of practice do not affect the purpose of this article.

Data analysis began by reading each transcript in order to identify themes. The use of a constant comparison method highlighted both unique and general themes (Schwandt, 2015). These themes provided the initial codes for the first transcript, which was independently coded by the first and second authors (M. Patrick and V. Gulayets), who subsequently met to discuss the adequacy of the codes, identify which codes required adjustment, and the emergence of new codes. The remaining transcripts were then emergently coded by the first and second authors. Upon completion of coding, they examined the teachers' references to, and descriptions of, religion when discussing how they taught about it in their classroom. The themes of conflict, lack of attention paid to internal heterogeneity, and general faith in tolerance were identified as areas requiring further teacher professional learning. At this point, the first author met with the third author (C. Peck) to review the findings.

Given the small sample size of our study, we recognize that our descriptions and findings are more illustrative than representative. The categories are not generalizable, as all the teacher participants taught in urban schools in one city that is increasingly multicultural and multi-religious. Nor do we suggest our priorities for teacher education are suitable for all Canadian social studies teachers. Instead, the categories provide some initial indications of what the Canadian landscape regarding education about religion might look like, and the priorities suggest first steps in the development of teacher professional

learning. As we share our findings, we also call for further collaboration and research between scholars and practitioners to investigate this topic more fully.

## A Categorization of Teacher Beliefs

### 1. Nominal Group

This group contains two teachers. Kim's familiarity with religion was primarily with Christianity and she supported teaching about the history of religions, but only in senior high. She thought such education would need to be "controlled" in order to (1) prevent teachers from indoctrinating students, and (2) monitor students' maturity level. "Because," she said, "you don't know what they would do with the little knowledge you give them. It's scary" (1:155).<sup>3</sup> She believed education about religion did not belong in junior high because students are not intellectually ready. Their teachers "have lot[s] of power on those kids. And that's why talking about religion is, I don't think it's a good idea" (1:113). If religion were introduced too early, Kim worried students might change their perceptions of their friends once they became more aware of their religious differences.

When Kim recounted how she taught about historical events involving religion, she sharply distinguished between teaching the "history of religion" and teaching religion. In the Protestant Reformation unit, for example, she stressed issues of money (indulgences), biblical interpretation, and illiteracy among the population. She concluded her narrative by saying, "There's so many massacres, and I said we still have wars because of religion. And I said if people were that religious or spiritual, they wouldn't kill each other trying to control somebody else" (1:44). Kim summarized her approach by saying, "So we do not teach them religion but where it happened, the change" (1:46).

John is in this group for different reasons. He identified some curriculum topics as involving religion, such as imperialism and Indian Residential Schools, but thought the curriculum glosses over religion and described his own approach as "brushing over"

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3 In the references to teacher quotes, the number before the colon refers to the interview number and the number after the colon refers to the line number in the particular interview.

it. He said he felt uncomfortable discussing religion in the classroom, in part due to the “political correctness” he perceived in society. At the same time he expressed support for students who wish to talk about their religious experiences/involvement in class. He distinguished between “issue” and “religious” class debates, claiming he sought the former and not the latter, even when addressing such religiously charged issues as abortion. After referring to some reading he had done about the offense some atheists take at “anything religious,” he wondered, “So you’ve got an atheist in your classroom and you’re talking about...[how] Canada was built on Judeo-Christian values. Well, who knows who I’m going to offend saying that?” (7:220). Like Kim, John saw little connection between religion and citizenship, and described student volunteerism through their church as “just part of serving the community and being a good citizen” (7:54). Although he did not acknowledge religious motivations for civic engagement, John was the only interviewee to mention the volunteer/service aspect of religious communities. Despite his own hesitation to teach about religion, John thought religion should be a greater part of the curriculum because it might prevent the anti-Muslim acts that occurred in Canada following the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris for which the unrecognized Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, claimed responsibility. The attacks were in retaliation for French airstrikes in Syria and Iraq against ISIS positions.

These two teachers minimized teaching about religion in their classrooms and both acknowledged it was a personal decision, saying other teachers could make different choices. Kim limited her teaching about religion as a means of avoiding potential conflict or indoctrination. Her desire to avoid conflict is linked to her beliefs about junior high students’ developmental abilities and her views of religion as personal and family based. At the time of Kim’s interview, a Muslim woman in Ontario was being denied the right to take her citizenship oath while veiled, but Kim thought the event “too touchy” and stated that “it’s best if we don’t...talk about those things” (1:94, 96). John minimized his teaching about religion because he understood it to be largely irrelevant to social studies.

## **2. Attentive Group**

Will, Charles, Mack, Alex, Kathryn, and Audrey comprise this group of six teachers. Will’s inquiry approach led him to focus his teaching time on “the skills and processes of exploring and reflecting upon the worldviews of people” (8:23) (Alberta’s Grade 8 social

studies curriculum focuses on worldviews). Charles claimed to be the most comfortable discussing Christianity and Islam, in part because he decided to investigate them after the events of 9/11. Mack's concern over bias prompted him to adopt a self-described "clinical" or "statistical" approach to religion when discussing it in class. Alex said he lectures about Judaism, Christianity, and Islam when teaching about the Middle East, an area of the world he believes should have greater prominence in the Grade 11 social studies curriculum. Kathryn professed her "fascination" with religion and had recently read the Qur'an so she could speak more knowledgeably about Islam. Audrey viewed religion as part of the story of history and the context of current events. Both Kathryn and Audrey had taken at least one university course in world religions.

All six of these teachers thought it was important to educate students about religion to some degree and indicated a few barriers to doing so. Their primary approach was to refer to current events, although they also taught about religion in variously identified content outcomes such as identity, the Holocaust, colonialism, imperialism, globalization, the French Revolution, religious nationalism, and Indian Residential Schools, to name the most frequently stated examples. Teacher comfort levels with diverse religious traditions varied, depending on their personal knowledge, whether they had taken a university course in world religions, and the nature of the curriculum they taught. While they recognized the internal heterogeneity of religious traditions, they did not teach about it in any depth. Rather, they incorporated some "basics" when establishing a context for an issue or topic.

These teachers provided a variety of rationales for teaching about religion. Alex emphasized the role of religion in identity as well as its role in world events, including conflicts in the Middle East, while Mack, Kathryn, and Audrey thought some knowledge of religion could expand conversations about diversity, understanding, peace, and respect. More specifically, Charles and Audrey discussed how conversations about religion enable students to see themselves in the curriculum. Kathryn linked religion to the curriculum's focus on multiple perspectives, saying that "multiple perspectives in our world often can fall from multiple religions, and I don't think people have the vocabulary or the ability to do a really good job of that" (5:58). Taking a slightly different approach, Charles spoke of the need for knowing the contexts and beliefs of others in order to make decisions and address "enormous problems."

While teachers highlighted the public roles of religion, it was the role of religion in conflict that drew the most attention. Kathryn wondered whether the association of religion with conflict in stories involving terrorism, the “horrible” acts Christians committed in Africa in the name of God, and the Rwandan war of 1994 might lead students to avoid talking about religion. Mack agreed that most examples of religion in social studies involve conflict rather than agreement. His stated objective was helping students understand the power of religion in potentially shaping people’s identity and as a reason for conflict. Although he believed understanding is the best path to tolerance and peace, he thought religious leaders and groups often use religion “as motivation to get more support for their cause” (4:42). As a result, “the actual religion” can be manipulated or marginalized, as occurred during the Crusades in the Middle Ages and today with ISIS. Charles took the same position, based on his belief that most so-called religious conflicts are actually about politics, adding that he does not “see any reasonable argument or evidence from anybody of any faith that would justify violence or carnage” (6:105). Regarding ISIS, he thought that since the events of 9/11, and given increased immigration and international travel, “all of us understand a little bit better...the difference between lunatics and real faith and religion” (6:41).

Kathryn questioned whether the involvement of religion in conflicts might lead some teachers to refrain from addressing religion in their classroom because they did not have the requisite tools (e.g., knowledge) and thus feared offending students. In such scenarios, Will felt religion was merely the trigger, and that the underlying fear was insecurity and teachers falsely believing that the curriculum does not give them permission to address certain topics. Although the teachers did not say that fear prevented them from talking about religion, it appeared to occasionally affect their pedagogical choices. For example, when Audrey discussed the proposed Quebec Charter of Values with her class, she framed the discussion around the question of whether governments should be secular. She recalled “a fear in me. I didn’t necessarily want to have a big, huge debate about this with them ’cause again the sensitivity” (10:113). Sensitive to students with strong religious convictions and not sure where the conversation would go, Audrey limited the discussion.

The teachers in this group were attentive to religion for a variety of reasons, including their desire to recognize all students in their classes. They attended to religion in history, current events, and identity formation. However, the tendency to equate religion



with conflict is problematic, as is the subsequent claim that in cases of conflict actual or true religion is subverted by politics, because it essentializes religion as apolitical.

### **3. Integrated Group**

Members of this group include Robert and Arthur, distinguished from the attentive group by the depth to which they portrayed religion as infused within the subject matter of social studies. As Robert stated, the study of religion “needs to be completely integrated into the content of every aspect” (2:20). His deep knowledge of religions had been developed in both formal and informal study. Arthur believed one could not teach history without discussing religion and insisted teachers have a responsibility to remain neutral about their own religion and their views regarding the place of religion in society. When Arthur discusses the theological and political heterogeneity found within religious traditions, he says students often indicate this is new information for them.

Robert brought religion into the classroom by inviting students to speak about their religious traditions. If a student had been absent from school for a religious holy day, Robert asks them if they would like to share their experiences with the class. When discussing religion education, he insisted that religion can never be taught in isolation from the existing curriculum, because then schools would be encroaching on the ground of religious institutions. Instead, he believed religion should be taught “historically and how it applies historically” (2:36) and “be embedded in the identity of decisions of culturalness” (2:124). By this he meant religion is present in the cultural elements of beliefs, value systems, and ideologies because “culture[s] are all religious-based foundations. All of them” (2:65). To help students access the religious components of culture, Robert said he asks probing questions. For example, when discussing religious holidays, he poses such questions as, “Where are all these things coming from? How did they become the way they are?... What is your identity if you take this day off?” (2:77). He stressed the importance of preparing teachers for this approach, particularly in the area of objectivity. In an attempt to avoid bias, Robert said he introduces a plethora of events and (religious) perspectives into class discussions.

When asked about the relationship between religion and multiculturalism, Robert described multiculturalism as a tolerated but failed policy because meaningful social interactions tend to be limited to those who are similar to each other. This interpretation

led Robert to value the study of cultures and their religious foundations in school. When teaching about tolerance, he noted the absence of a clear definition and connected it with power, saying class examinations usually conclude “that if one group gets their way, they’re usually not tolerant of the other group” (2:48).

Arthur’s reflections followed a different path. He averred that education about religion can make a student’s faith stronger, as long as “it’s a faith that’s founded on sound principles, and I think some of the faiths are and some of the faiths aren’t” (9:177). His stated objectives were not to change students’ beliefs but to (1) help them think by examining different views, and (2) encourage students to reflect on their values. He described how he re-enacts sections of the biblical story of Moses receiving the 10 Commandments, the law governing the Israelites’ way of living, to prompt students’ thinking about Marx’s argument that religion was created to control the masses. He follows this lesson with a critique of Marx. Arthur further described how he begins Socials 30 (Grade 12) with a study of freedom, including religious freedom and an examination of some cults. He insisted responses to cults, or religious actions more generally, must be influenced by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms as well as scientific and rational thought. He recognized the tensions inherent in a globalizing world, asking, “How do we tolerate things that go on in other nations, and when do we step in, and how complicated that is, right?” (9:93). After noting that Canada draws “lines in the sand” concerning acceptable behaviour emanating from religious belief, he mused that citizenship education could support the respect of religions and tolerance.

Robert and Arthur did not claim to imbue religion into every lesson. What set them apart were the deep and extensive links they made between religion and the curriculum, and the thought they had given to its inclusion, some of which will be discussed below as examples to develop the proposed PD content.

## **The Groups and Their Challenges**

The distinction of three different approaches to teaching about religion outlined above illustrates the unsettled nature of religion in Canadian public education and the varying conceptions teachers have about religion, particularly whether it is primarily private, public, or both. While we present three groups (and there is some heterogeneity within the groups), eight of the 10 teachers thought it important to include some education about

religion in their classes, and to varying degrees did so, prompted by the desire to have students see themselves in the curriculum. These teachers were aware of the challenges involved in teaching about religion, such as bias and indoctrination, and addressed those challenges in various ways, ranging from the adoption of a clinical, statistical approach to religion to introducing students to a variety of religions.

Developing a common approach among all teachers is neither desirable nor possible, but addressing misperceptions and simplifications about religion is necessary. The primary simplifications that arose in this study involve the relationships between religion and conflict. Given the involvement of religion in many historical events as well as many controversial and current events, and the importance of religion to the identity of religious students, it is important for teachers to present accurate and thorough portrayals of religion. Teacher professional learning will provide teachers with the tools to avoid simplifications and thus better prepare their students to engage in the diverse and complex world in which we live.

## **A Call for Teacher Professional Learning**

Several of the teachers involved in this study stressed the need for professional development (PD) and resources about religion. In fact, Mack said he had discussed the need for PD about Islam with his department chair just prior to our interview, while Robert, Kathryn, and Audrey highlighted the significance of the world religion courses they had taken in university. Robert and Arthur insisted teachers who address religion in class require both religious knowledge and strong discussion skills in order to navigate challenging classroom conversations and avoid bias. Based on our research with these teachers, we propose that the areas suggested below can contribute to the development of such knowledge and skills in all teachers.

### **1. Avoiding Two Simplifications about Religion and Violence**

To present religion as hijacked by political interests when it becomes engaged in conflict or turns violent is to risk rendering it apolitical. In such instances, religion is essentialized in particular modern Western terms as “a benevolent personal force relating one to the universe and perhaps to one’s ‘higher self’” (Bramadat, 2009, p. 14).

Accordingly, religiosity is then interpreted in liberal terms as autonomy and authenticity rather than, say, attachment to a religious group, familial loyalty, or obedience to a text (Bramadat, 2009, p. 14).

When claiming political implications for religion, one is rejecting the privatization of religion and recognizing the complex historical and contemporary relationships between religion, politics, and the state (Hurd, 2015). Charles correctly pointed out that religiously inspired violence is linked to material conditions, and it is linked in myriad and complex ways (Appleby, 2000; Cavanaugh, 2009; Juergensmeyer, 2003; Kakar, 1996; Lincoln, 2003). But religious conflicts cannot be reduced solely to the material and/or political for at least two reasons. First, those who view religion as comprehensive do not extricate religion from everyday life, and thus, “*religiously experienced and articulated* feelings of despair and rage [may] emerge for some when everyday life is patently unjust” (Bramadat, 2014, p. 16, italics in original). Second, political grievances and sectarian differences are often conflated, as they are in the current Iraqi and Syrian conflicts (Esposito, 2015, p. 1076).<sup>4</sup> These arguments must be held in tension, however, with Cavanaugh’s (2009) reminder that there is no genus of religion of which Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and so on are species. Cavanaugh’s larger point is that examinations of violence reifying religion as a category separate from politics and economics portrays religiously inspired violence as something particularly dangerous while ignoring the violence perpetrated by secular ideologies and states.

If the depoliticization of religion is one simplification, then another is to essentialize religion as conflictive and problematic, which occurs when religion is primarily addressed through current events. This is an example of the unstated curriculum, which Kathryn and Mack noted. If religion is discussed only within the contexts of the Crusades, the reaction of the Roman Catholic Church against the Renaissance and Reformation, Indian Residential Schools, and ISIS, students may come to view religion as only a tool for repression. This can be avoided if teachers also provide examples of religious

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4 Bramadat (2009) provides another example in which religiously inspired violence cannot be reduced to political motivations. While the riots that occurred in France during 2005 were protests against French secularism and policies on immigration and employment, they “must also be understood in light of struggles within post-colonial Algeria regarding the role of Islam within that state’s society, and a sense within the global ummah that France is a kind of test case for the way a modern secularist liberal state might (or might not) integrate Muslim citizens” (p. 20, fn13).

organizations working together to promote peace and justice (Appleby, 2000), engaging in inter-religious dialogue (Rasmussen, 2007), and being a force for good (Prothero, 2010, pp. 9–11). This, in turn, will help students to come to more complex understandings of the place of religion in society.

## **2. Religions Have Internal Political Diversity**

Closely connected to the problems of simplification is the issue of political diversity within religious traditions. When religions are portrayed largely in terms of current events and conflict, students tend to learn only about the conservative elements of religious traditions. As John indicated, he discussed with students how certain religious groups seem to be conservative or have conservative moral traditionalism. In the interviews, teachers did not refer to the contributions of liberal interpretations of religious traditions to social justice, their critiques of rampant capitalism, or their participation in ameliorating human-induced climate change (Veldman, Szasz, & Haluza-Delay, 2013). Arthur was the only teacher who said he discussed the political spectrum within Christianity and Islam, describing how he taught about the variety of Christian responses to gay rights.

Given the negative portrayal of conservative religions in current events, it is unsurprising that teachers reported how those students who hold such commitments do not speak about them in class. One teacher illuminated the issue by inadvertently equating the public voicing of conservative views with “dissing” others. Responding to minority values is challenging, as is the task of mentoring all students, including those who engage from a position of “religious certainty,” in the skill of building dialogue with diverse “others” (Kunzman, 2015). Arthur specifically addressed this issue in the interviews. After observing how students viewed religious conservative perspectives as “weird” and how conservative Muslims were reluctant to speak in class, he described how he spends “a lot of time defending conservative[s], just to try and let them know that there are some philosophical foundations that we have in Christianity and Judaism” (9:115). Teacher education might help teachers feel more comfortable addressing and interrogating the participation of both conservative and liberal religious adherents in the public sphere.

### **3. Religious Diversity Requires More of Citizenship Education than Mere Acceptance and Toleration**

The language of tolerance, acceptance, and understanding is present in the talk of these teachers. They invoke the Charter of Rights and Freedoms as a mandate for tolerance of religious diversity and promotion of understanding. Yet the concept of tolerance is a doubled-edged sword. As Brown (2006) elucidates, tolerance can reduce violence and develop habits of civic cohabitation, but it can also be used to incorporate marginalized groups without changing the hegemonic norms that marginalized them in the first place. Brown charges tolerance with political practices that construct identity and cultural norms and that mark as inferior the subjects of tolerance. These political practices depoliticize conflicts by casting them as personal issues or as natural, cultural, or religious issues. For Brown, the equity and justice issues involved in a conflict are ignored and instead political leaders either call on individuals or groups to shed their prejudices or they essentialize the identities involved and thereby suggest that the cultural, ethnic, and religious differences themselves are inherently conflictive.

Brown (2006, p. 16) avers that students who are asked to tolerate diversity are typically asked to tolerate difference without any education about how those differences are constructed and negotiated and how power is involved in those constructions and negotiations. This depoliticization of tolerance tends to be accompanied by what Brown identifies as emotional solutions in which sensitivity and respect replace a search for justice. Such reduction of justice and complexity is insufficient for citizenship education in a diverse society (Molina-Girón, 2016). Rather than “mere” tolerance, students need to learn about the historical injustices committed against minorities, examine how power operates, and parse out who benefits from decision-making processes (Molina-Girón, 2016) and definitions of religion (Hurd, 2015).

Teachers in the nominal and attentive groups rightly acknowledged the benefits of tolerance but for the most part stopped there (although Mack stressed his preference for the term “understanding” rather than tolerance because it suggests that “empowerment comes through knowledge” [4:194]). In the interviews, the teachers did not pursue the ways in which religions, nations, and citizens are constructed, the power involved in discourses of tolerance that create the “other” and that then require toleration, and the manner in which liberal states require everyone to privatize religion and culture, elevate

the individual over the group, and value personal liberty (Abu El-Haj, 2010; Brown, 2006). They were very aware of the damage inflicted on Canadian Indigenous communities by the Indian Residential Schools, and if asked may have placed the schools in a larger context of power, but they rarely analyzed the situations of their minority students (or their communities) beyond celebrating their ability to get along. Teachers were hesitant to teach about religious differences in any depth and did not discuss Christian privilege in school structures (e.g., holidays) or the ways in which structures and attitudes may be subtly discriminatory (Abu El-Haj, 2010; Neilsen, Arber, & Weinmann, 2017). This is not to say teachers did not discuss historical controversial issues involving minority religious communities, such as Sikh students who fought for the right to wear a kirpan under their clothing, or Baltej Singh Dillon, who fought for the right of Sikhs in the RCMP forces to wear a turban instead of the traditional Stetson hat. But few teachers mentioned student experiences with discrimination as the result of their religious identity. Alex referenced these experiences most explicitly, but the students' experiences did not prompt him to question the efficacy of tolerance.

Teachers in the integrated group ventured into the area of critique. Robert referred to issues of power and privilege in his discussion about tolerance and Arthur noted how Canada draws some "lines in the sand" regarding religious behaviour. The next step would be to have students struggle with such questions as: Who draws those lines and under what circumstances? Teacher education would encourage teachers to address religion in the opportunities that arise. For example, Audrey (from the attentive group) said her students discussed their concerns about terrorists entering Canada with the influx of Syrian refugees. Although Audrey said the conversation was not primarily about religion, the conversation presented an opportunity to have students examine the origin of their concerns, to ask why they thought terrorists might be hiding among the Syrian refugees, and how religious stereotypes might have provoked their concerns.

### **Reflections of These Priorities in International Contexts**

The need for teacher professional learning about religion and the specific priorities discussed here are not unique to Canadian teachers. For example, the American National Council for Social Studies (NCSS, 2017) recently added a supplement on teaching about religion to its *College, Career and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State*

*Standards.* It provides student learning indicators for religious studies, highlights the internal diversity and dynamic nature of religious traditions, and notes the need to resist common misunderstandings about religions because of their negative real-world consequences. In order to teach this material, teachers will need to be knowledgeable about the relationships among beliefs, behaviour, and belonging and employ a critical inquiry approach that assesses power, albeit described in the document as political and social prominence and marginalization.

The priorities for teacher professional learning identified in this article are also identified in European research. One study in England entitled “Religion and Religious Education” documented similar concerns about teacher presentations of religious conflict as those elucidated above (Miller & McKenna, 2011), and a large three-year research project across Europe from 2006 to 2009 studied the religious education of 14- to 16-year-old students in eight countries and was titled “Religion in Education: A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries” (REDCo) (Jackson et al., 2007). REDCo researchers found that the students’ expressed support for tolerance was not necessarily enacted in their daily lives (REDCo, 2009) and that students required assistance if they were “to deconstruct stereotypical representations of religion and culture” (Jackson, 2011, p. 199). The researchers further recommended educators counter religious stereotypes and represent religion in more of its complexity (Jackson, 2014, pp. 51–53; REDCo, 2009), while a report from the Council of Europe recommended educators reconceptualize their views of conflict arising from religious differences and be aware of the power differentials operative in the classroom (Jackson, 2014, pp. 51–53). Canadian youth and teachers live in similar situations of religious plurality, and the social studies classroom is an ideal space to teach about the internal heterogeneity that yields diverse representations and counter the stereotypes students will inevitably encounter. The teacher education priorities outlined here will help teachers ensure students have an accurate and nuanced understanding of religion, a complex factor in local, national, and global events.



## Conclusion

Education about religion is difficult, but its complexity should not lead to its marginalization in the curriculum. Marginalization and silence result in stereotypes and simplifications, which in turn can be discriminatory (Seljak, Rennick, Schmidt, Da Silva, & Bramadat, 2007). Since teachers' beliefs impact student experiences and understandings, teacher portrayals of religion must be accurate and reflective of its complexity. Teachers can engage in such teaching by employing the social studies skills of multiple perspectives and critical thinking. Avoiding simplifications about religion and conflict, teaching about political and religious heterogeneity, and discussing issues of power and positionality are steps toward critical thinking and develop the tools needed to teach about multiple perspectives in all aspects of social studies, including religion. But they are process-intensive and cannot be achieved in a one-time PD opportunity. If teachers are to acquire the necessary pedagogical content knowledge to teach about religion in the context of citizenship, school administrators and boards must invest in ongoing professional learning for teachers. The priorities identified in this article are places to start the learning since they emerge from teachers' views. However, if teachers are to invest the time and energy required to engage in this professional learning, they must be part of the planning and implementation processes. A school-based approach to teacher professional learning will most likely elucidate a greater number of categories than the three described here and further reflect the complexity of religion in the public sphere.

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