

Stories Alberta Social Studies Teachers Tell: Influences of Christianity, Liberalism, and Secularism

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This article examines how cultural and historical narratives influence the stories Alberta teachers tell about religion in their secondary social studies classrooms. The stories reveal the degree to which teachers are both thoughtful practitioners and shaped by their society. Study participants reflected this tension as the majority took religion seriously in all its complexity but also inadvertently re-inscribed secular liberal assumptions about religion that ultimately narrowed the stories. Particular attention is paid to teachers' definitions of religion, including its relationship with conflict, and the connections among religion, citizenship, and multiculturalism. Definitions are crucial, and when unexamined, they impact the stories teachers tell.

Cet article examine l'influence des récits culturels et historiques sur les histoires que racontent les enseignants albertains sur la religion dans leurs classes d'études sociales secondaires. Ces récits révèlent à quel point les enseignants sont à la fois des praticiens réfléchis et façonnés par leur société. Les participants à l'étude reflètent cette tension, car la majorité d'entre eux prennent la religion au sérieux dans toute sa complexité, mais réinscrivent aussi par inadvertance des hypothèses libérales séculaires sur la religion qui finissent par restreindre les récits. Nous accordons une attention particulière aux définitions de la religion par les enseignants, y compris sa relation avec les conflits, et aux liens entre religion, citoyenneté et multiculturalisme. Les définitions sont cruciales, et lorsqu'elles ne sont pas examinées, elles ont un impact sur les histoires que racontent les enseignants.

During the 2016–17 school year, controversy brewed in the southern Ontario school district of Peel over Muslim Friday prayers. In September 2016, the School Board restricted the prayers students could recite to six pre-approved sermons in English, and only under staff supervision. After parent and student protests the Board rescinded the changes, but by then, there was a larger debate over the very existence of prayer in schools, led by a group calling itself “Religion out of Public Schools” (Bascaramurty & Alphonso, 2017).

Conflicts surrounding the role of religion in public education are not limited to Ontario. In Quebec, tensions surrounding religious accommodations, including in education, prompted former Premier Jean Charest to establish the Bouchard-Taylor Commission in 2007 to study the matter. A law passed in 2019 now prohibits new teachers and other new public sector workers from wearing religious symbols when working (Shingler, 2019). Some parents in British Columbia objected to the introduction of mindful breathing practices because they thought it equivalent to teaching Buddhism (Jacquet & D'Amico, 2016) and a smudging demonstration in a classroom led

a parent in that province to take a school board to court for violating their children's religious rights (Lirette, 2020).

Despite such controversies, research regarding the teaching about religion in Canadian public schools is nascent. Some topics studied by Canadian scholars include the experience of Muslim students and parents in the education system (Guo, 2012; Niyozov, 2010), teaching about religion as a controversial issue (Khan, 2019), on-going Christian privilege (Knowler, 2017; Seljak et al., 2008), and religious literacy (Chan et al., 2019; Ghosh & Chan, 2017). Research regarding religion education is slightly more established in the United States (Feinberg & Layton, 2014; Moore, 2007; Prothero, 2008; Seligman, 2014), with some overlapping research in teaching civics (Journell, 2017b) and how political conservatism shapes (pre-service) teachers' beliefs and experiences (Journell, 2017a). Both religion education and research about such education are more developed in Europe (Dinham, 2015; Hunter-Henin, 2011; Jackson, 1997; Jackson et al., 2007). Beaman et al. (2017) postulated that in Canada religion tends to be subsumed under multiculturalism. However, several studies revealed that multicultural education remains largely silent about religion (Burke & Segall, 2017; White, 2009), although there are exceptions (Salili & Hoosain, 2006).

This article contributes to the research by examining how several Canadian educators teach about religion. Religion is a complex notion and is present in society in various ways. Teachers are gatekeepers in their classrooms (Van Arragon, 2018), and thus their views of religion are significant for student learning, from their understandings of religion to what they view as controversial to the current events they choose to highlight. Since education is a political and persuasive activity (Apple, 2013), how teachers represent religion has implications for Canadian civic life. Given the ubiquity of religion and ongoing contestations about its role in education, the research described in this article is relevant to anyone interested in education, regardless of country.

The data on which this article is based arises from a small study conducted with secondary social studies teachers in a large urban Alberta public school board. Exploring Alberta teachers' views of, and engagement with, religion in their religiously diverse classrooms offers insight into both the possibilities and challenges facing teachers who desire to teach about religion in school contexts that are ostensibly secular. Teachers are products of their society, as are all citizens, and their interpretations of religion and its roles in society help uncover the underlying worldviews and ideologies that undergird Canadian society and its institutions such as education. As will be demonstrated, these worldviews in turn impact the stories teachers tell in their classrooms.

To fully explore the teachers' stories and social forces underlying them, the literature review focuses on the definitions of "religion" and "secularism" and how the latter is interpreted as functioning in society. A description of the research project follows. The third section reviews two findings regarding: a) teachers' definitions of religion, including their understanding of the relationship between religion and conflict; and b) their teaching of the intersections among religion, citizenship, and multiculturalism. A final section discusses the findings considering the literature on religion and secularism.

Definitions and Their Significance

What is Religion?

The meaning of the term "religion" is contested, especially whether it is a *sui generis* phenomenon

(something irreducible and unique [McCutcheon, 2018]) or a social construction (Beckford, 2003). For its practitioners, religion can be comprehensive, impacting all areas of life, or something private, primarily influencing the affective areas of life. Insiders and outsiders can perceive it as something of ultimate importance or as dangerous. What is certain is that every definition and understanding has political and social significance.

For example, current structures of religion reflect a custom of grouping many practices under one religious tradition. However, all religions are heterogeneous, raising questions about which voices or interpretations are officially sanctioned and how marginalized groups are protected. There are historical and power dynamics involved in designating some traditions as “world” religions. Sikka (2015) recounted how the traditions found on the Indian subcontinent differ profoundly from the Abrahamic ones of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Membership is often decided by birth, the boundaries between them are blurry as they can share practices and even sacred spaces, and religious identities are more about the “traditions and ways of doing things of a community rather than systems of correct doctrine about God and related matters” (p. 119). Yet definitions matter, as traditions and communities officially deemed religious are typically eligible for certain benefits and privileges, some of which extend to education (Hurd, 2015a). The European colonial practice of using the Abrahamic religions, particularly Christianity, as evaluative tools to measure encountered social and religious practices is now ubiquitous. Beyer et al. (2016) identified four such assumptions for measuring religion that continue to permeate research: religion is institutional; similar to one of the Abrahamic religions; singular in that a follower can belong to only one religion at a time; and evaluated on the basis of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, such as prayer, belief, and service attendance. Some constitutional scholars view case law regarding religious freedom as privileging “individual, private, and choice-based” religion that reflects a “protestant” understanding of religion (Berger, 2018, p. 115). Others highlight the judicial elevation of belief over practice (Imhoff, 2014; Sullivan, 2005). Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (2015b) linked Protestantism and liberalism, attesting how definitions of religion as belief prioritize the liberal values of choice and autonomy, are well-suited to a market economy, privilege Christianity, support authorized rather than lived religion embodied in ritual and disciplines, reinforce the secular state, and enable states to control religion. In doing so, they normalize some modes of living and exclude others.

Such portrayals of religion are evident in interpretations of current events involving religion, especially those concerning religion and violence. In the aftermath of the events on September 11, 2001, western political leaders separated “real,” that is peaceful, religion from violent religion, typically portrayed as “hijacked” by groups motivated by politics or economics rather than religion (Bramadat, 2009). Paul Bramadat (2009) identified such representations as liberal, in that they present religion as,

a matter of private choice. Thus essentialized as individualistic, apolitical, and perhaps finally a commodity subject to the vagaries of other individual choices, religion becomes a sweet but sometimes hapless hand-servant to the true master-forces of our society: the economy, politics, and culture. (p. 14)

Elsewhere Bramadat (2014) described the notion of separating religion from one’s economic, political, and social commitments as “a very particular cultural and historical trend” (p. 16), leading the secular elite in liberal democracies to misunderstand those who choose to hold their religious commitments comprehensively, as applicable to all areas of life.¹

Central to the discussion is the stability of religion as an independent factor, the degree to

which religion accounts as a sole motivating factor for action (Hurd, 2015a). Rather than present religion as *sui generis*, many scholars interpret religion as deeply embedded in all aspects of life. Religion and religious differences matter, and in some instances, they are significant, but at the same time they are rarely the only or ultimate factors in a conflict.

Religion as embedded practice is supported by the research into “lived” religion (McGuire, 2008), which starts with the individual rather than the institution, focuses on practices, mind, and body, and often draws from several traditions simultaneously. Practitioners may prefer the term “spirituality,” to denote a more individualist relationship with a vaguer notion of the transcendence than is found in the Abrahamic traditions. The term “spirituality” is, however, as complicated as the term religion, and can be deeply intertwined with religion. For example, Overstreet (2010) discovered in research with undergraduate students at an American Catholic university, that preference for the language of spirituality suggested a shift in understanding the nature of religion rather than a rejection of it. Furthermore, an individual may have multiple religious and/or spiritual identities, prompting reference to the postcolonial term of “hybridity.” Others prefer the term “ambivalence,” believing elements of judgement and Eurocentrism remain in the concept of hybridity (Nel, 2017).

The discussion surrounding religion has moved from the institutional and communal to the individual, reflecting the diversity or fuzzy nature of the term. It is now necessary to zoom back out to the larger group to study the role of religion in society, its relationship with other social institutions, especially politics and the state. This relationship impacts conceptions about citizenship, the nature of the public sphere and the type of reasoning permitted in it, and public education. Models of secularism create and maintain the borders between the spheres, thereby managing religion within a society.

Understandings and Functions of Secularism

The literature on secularism is vast and cannot be adequately summarized here. To limit the field and still provide coherence and relevance to the study at hand, two frameworks are presented, followed by several interpretations of how secularism functions in western societies. The various ways of functioning are reflected in the teacher interviews.

Just as there are Eurocentric, modernist, and normative assumptions embedded in the term “religion,” there are similar views entrenched in secularism given its relationship to religion as found in the religion/secular (politics) binary. Arvind-Pal Mandair and Markus Dressler (2011b) developed a *post-secular-religious* turn that critically engaged in the epistemologies and methodologies involved in the creation and function of both religion and secularism. Their overview of the debates surrounding secularism as found in their edited volume *Secularism and Religion-Making* (2011b) is used here as a frame for the concept.

Mandair and Dressler (2011a) denoted three strands of discourse engaging secularism. They identified the first strand as the philosophy of liberal secularism found in the work of Charles Taylor, John Rawls, and Jürgen Habermas. A second strand is the postmodern critique offered by the Radical Orthodoxy theologians and Continental philosophers. Although the scholars in the second strand are critical of liberal secularism, Mandair and Dressler insisted that they share with the first discourse commitments to religion as a cultural universal and articulate a universal self-consciousness that privileges (secular) critical thinking. These commitments, claimed Mandair and Dressler, enabled philosophers like Hume, Hegel, and others to compare and evaluate cultures based on the degree to which they were properly historical, or the degree to which they

had the European Christian capacity of self-critique and secularization.

The third discourse strand discussed by Mandair and Dressler (2011a) is comprised of scholars who follow Michael Foucault and Edward Said in examining genealogies of power, including those analyzing the construction of “religion.” Scholars in this strand reject both religion and secularism as universal categories and explore how modern liberal states produce and benefit from the construction of these categories. Talal Asad is a prominent voice in this discourse.

Another framework for understanding the debates surrounding secularism is to distinguish the concepts of “the secular,” “secularism,” and “secularization.” Asad (2003) differentiated between “the secular,” an epistemological category, and “secularism,” a political doctrine, and explained how “the secular” is conceptually prior to secularism (p. 16). “The secular” involves attitudes of the human body, “ways of training, cultivating, and structuring the senses, and grounds operative conceptions of the human” (Scherer, 2010, para. 5).² And it has a history. In medieval Christendom, “secular” identified clergy who worked outside an ecclesiastical order. Charles Taylor (2011) traced what he saw as a profound internal shift in the meaning of the term, so that it now refers to a situation where social life can only be imagined in secular terms. For Taylor, elements within Latin Christendom made the shift possible by privileging belief—seen in the boundaries between inner and outer, mind and world, and agents and forces—elevating personal religion, and contributing to disenchantment.

The political process of secularism whereby this occurred in the West is complex and also has a narrative, described by Calhoun et al. (2011) as mythmaking. The myth centres on the religious wars following the Protestant Reformation, which were resolved by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, often portrayed as the triumph of rational secularism over irrational religion, in which states established the right of princes to decide the religion of their kingdoms. (An alternative portrayal described the Treaty as “enforced religious conformity” [Calhoun et al., 2011, p. 15]). Enlightenment philosophers, especially John Locke, contributed the ideas of religious freedom based on tolerance arising from privatized and individualized religion and institutional differentiation, particularly between the church and state (Kateb, 2009). Although there is little disagreement with the separation of church and state, the resulting separation of religion and politics is contentious, especially the degree to which religious reasoning is permitted in the public sphere (Calhoun et al, 2011; Cavanaugh, 2011; Habermas, 2006).

Calhoun et al. (2011) and McDougall (2020) asserted that most of the academy accepted the secularism myth with few reservations until the events of 9/11 shattered the illusion that religion had successfully been privatized. But several scholars had already identified problems with the myth. In 1962, Wilfred Cantwell Smith questioned the singular concept of religion. Three decades later, José Casanova (1994) critiqued the widely accepted secularization theory. Theorized by Peter Berger (1990/1967) and others, the secularization theory proposed an inevitable process of religious decline, privatization, and differentiation in modern societies due to technology, Christianity, especially the Protestant Reformation, and bureaucratic rationalism. (Berger [1999] later recanted his prediction about the inevitable decline of public religion.) In his rebuttal of some aspects of the theory, Casanova (1994, 2011) documented the ongoing relevance of religion in the public (though not political) sphere, demonstrated how decline and privatization are not necessary conditions of modern societies, and insisted that the boundaries between religion and secularism are fuzzy and porous, meaning states relate to religion in a variety of ways. Indeed, Martin (1978) had already developed a typology of western secularisms based on a country’s historical relationship with Christianity. Cavanaugh (2009) would later question the myth of religious violence during the wars of the 16th century, providing examples of how Protestants and

Catholics had worked together. Cavanaugh argued that a focus on religious violence hid the violence committed by liberal states.

Today secularism is enacted along a continuum between what has variously been labeled benevolent/moderate/passive secularism on the one hand and hostile/hard/assertive secularism on the other (Ahdar, 2013). In Canada they are often referred to as open and closed secularism. In broad terms, open secularism requires a non-confessional, religiously neutral state that does not impose beliefs on its citizens (religious or otherwise) but creates the space for all to exist equally and freely, both as individuals and in groups (Ahdar, 2013). Closed secularism seeks to exclude religion from the public sphere by requiring religious citizens to separate their religious convictions from their public, and especially political, engagements (Bramadat, 2009). Examples include French *laïcité*, Turkey's Kemalist state, and contemporary Quebec (in 2019, Bill 21 declared Quebec a lay state).

Different types of secularism thus ascribe to religion different roles in society and create the boundaries between religion and politics/the state in diverse ways. Below are several interpretations of how the borders are understood to function, with several illustrative examples from Canada. The functions are identified and then critiqued, mainly, but not exclusively, from within the discipline of religious studies. Many religious studies scholars study the public representations of religion and the role of religion in both public and private life. However, it has been noted that although various theorists critique aspects of secularism, many wish to reform rather than jettison it (Ahdar, 2013; Bhargava, 2013), particularly those who are within the secular liberal and postmodern discourse strands identified by Mandair and Dressler (2011a).

Secularism as a Worldview or Ideology

Some view secularism, especially its open version, as a political principle to ensure equality in a diverse society rather than an ideology. Rex Ahdar (2013) disagreed because secularism by its very definition structurally separates religion from the state. For this reason, Ahdar claimed, secularism is a political philosophy, and as with all philosophies is not neutral, contrary to the claims of liberal political philosophy.

Casanova (2011, pp. 68-69) thought states reveal a secularist ideology the moment they seek to define religion. For Casanova, even states that view religion as a moral good can be ideological, because in their desire to separate religious and political authorities they are managing the boundaries between religion and politics. Casanova believed such decisions are the result of the political arrogating to itself an absolute sovereign character and/or the secular representing itself as rational and universal in opposition to irrational and intolerant religion.

Western Secularism as Christian

Several Canadian religious studies scholars describe how Christianity continues to operate below the surface in structural ways to inform public life. Their work highlights the legacies of the pre-Confederation "shadow establishment" era, when the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Presbyterian churches informally operated as established churches. In their analysis, Canada and other western countries are comfortable with a certain type of religion, one that resembles individualized, privatized, liberal Protestantism. They are uncomfortable, however, with religions that require a public presence or communal orientation (Selby et al., 2018; Seljak et al., 2008). Some of these states struggle to adequately protect the rights of religious minorities, do not

provide sufficient resources to address inter-religious domination, and/or are hostile towards non-liberal religions (Beaman, 2012; Bhargava, 2013).

In response to religious diversity, various Western states and/or citizens are reasserting Christian hegemony (for a review of the European discussion, see Pew, 2018). Until recently, successive Quebec governments portrayed Christian symbols as cultural rather than religious while at the same time attempting to limit non-Christian religious symbols in the public sphere (Beaman, 2017b). Those belonging to the non-Christian religious traditions continue to report on their experiences of Canada as a Christian country (Selby et al., 2018). Beaman (2017b) suggested that contests about public religion are less about removing Christian symbols and more about the “reconfiguration of presence” (p. 9).

Secularism as Tolerance

In *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, Locke advocated for private religion and secularism as a political doctrine to promote religious tolerance. If the state refrains from imposing beliefs on its citizens, then they are free to pursue whatever vision of the good life they choose. Religious minorities are free to worship as they choose and the individual freedom of conscience is protected (Kateb, 2009).

Wendy Brown offered one of the strongest critiques of political discourses of tolerance in *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in an Age of Identity and Empire* (2006). Although recognizing the role of tolerance in reducing some violence and developing some habits of civic cohabitation, Brown rejected its “aura of pure goodness” (p. 10) by exposing the power resident in tolerance discourses. Such discourses, Brown argued, construct the difference about which they then tolerate. Furthermore, they depoliticize injustice by replacing political redress with (mere) behavioural practices and reduce political conflict to culture, as ontological, thereby naturalizing difference as essential to the group. Cultures deemed illiberal and intolerant, such as those refusing to privatize religion and culture or ascribing to individualism, are deemed ineligible for tolerance and violence against them is justified to liberalize them. Thea Renda Abu El-Haj (2010) witnessed such violence against Palestinian students in a large American high school.

Secularism as State Neutrality

Described by Casanova (2011) as statecraft doctrine, this model separates church and religious authority on the one hand from political authority on the other hand to maintain state neutrality regarding all religions and to guarantee freedom of conscience. It has replaced secularism as tolerance in the legal jurisprudence of many countries for obvious reasons: it depoliticizes the relationship between religion and the state and positions the state as beyond religious conflicts (Berger, 2014). Although Berger (2014) initially found state neutrality to be good policy, he warned that neutrality, or even-handedness, could not extend to civic life, where he believed liberal and democratic states have a duty to promote justice, human dignity, rights, freedom, equality, and respect for difference.

But four years later Berger (2018) took his critique a step further, noting that this view of secularism assumes a particular view of religion. State neutrality is successful only if religion is interpreted in private and individual terms. If, however,

one understands religion as a normative and cultural system that produces claims about ethics, has

implications for conduct, and advances a vision of a good society, religion will have much to say about matters of broad public policy import. The state's inescapable adoption of positions on such matters will thus involve position-taking on matters of deep religious interest (p. 117).

Ultimately it becomes difficult, if not impossible, for the state to be neutral about religion and to exist beyond religious conflicts. This is especially true for those who believe their religious commitments are comprehensive.

Secularism as Managing Religion

In the post 9/11 world, public discourse in many western countries focused on religion as both a source of public good and of violence. States turned to “managing” religion in order to nurture its positive contributions and soften or even discipline its “exclusionary edges” (Hurd, 2015a, p. 110). One method of management in Canada is “the duty to accommodate,” a legal requirement borrowed from labour law. Academics have critiqued how reasonable accommodation protects the status quo, places minorities in the position of requesting the right to practice, and publicizes their religion (Beaman, 2012; Selby et al., 2018).

Reasonable accommodation enforces certain secular assumptions as normative, such as the belief that religion is personal and private, against which individuals and groups must request accommodation. A recent study conducted with Canadian Muslim women revealed how equations of secular with gender equality and sexual expression subtly divides women into two groups—those who are secular and emancipated and those who are religious and lacking in freedom (Selby et al., 2018).

Secularism and Education

How these aspects of secularism manage the boundary between religion and politics/the state have profound implications for education, as documented by a rich body of research. Scholars have chronicled parental objections to what they believe is a form of secular humanism pervading public education (Berger, 2014; Seljak, 2005), documented the Christian roots of education (Baker, 2019), or ongoing Christian privilege (Blumenfeld, 2006; Burke & Segall, 2017; James, 2015; Knowler, 2017), and studied the impact of Christian beliefs on teachers' professional beliefs (Hartwick et al., 2016; Häusler et al., 2019; James, 2010; Mansour, 2008; Sensoy & Ali-Khan, 2016). Clearly public education continues to reflect its multiple philosophical and religious roots, particularly Christianity and secularism. The particular manifestations often depend on the interpreter.

Leo Van Arragon (2018) elaborated the point in his call for educators and educational systems to be aware of their definitions of religion, especially if the definitions and views regarding the intersections of religion and education are seen as common sense. Common sense perceptions are often unexamined, leaving educators vulnerable to practicing indoctrination. When definitions of religion are more subtext than explicit text, they are masked but nevertheless “powerful in their effects” (p. 86). For example, how one views the relationship between religion and science is impacted by whether one juxtaposes science, seen as rational, secular, and modern, with religion, presented as irrational and traditional, or views the two as “different and complementary ways of knowing the world” (p. 93). As another example, Van Arragon suggested religious values can be positioned in opposition to “Canadian values,” particularly with respect to gender equality.

Citizenship loyalties may then be questioned, when the real issue may be less about behaviour and more about ways of engaging in civic discourse. How and whether teachers present such nuances and understandings is significant.

Van Arragon highlighted the complexity of teaching about religion, but also underscored the dangers of not taking seriously the challenges religion poses for liberalism. Some religions by their nature cannot separate the private from the public. This inability challenges the political discourse of tolerance often employed by liberal states and taught in their educational systems. To date there are few resources to support teachers as they address these dilemmas, and many believe there is little room to pursue such issues as their curricula documents are already overflowing with material to teach. The research project described below offers some description and analysis of what is occurring in classrooms as a first step in discovering what knowledge, resources, and practices teachers require to teach this vital yet incredibly challenging aspect of the curriculum and society.

Project Description and Methodology

The purpose of the research project was to probe whether and how public school secondary social studies teachers in a large urban school board in Alberta teach about religion and the degree to which they reflect the academic and/or popular conceptions of both religion and secularism. Social studies was chosen because it is the researchers' area of expertise and because religion is both explicitly and implicitly included in Alberta's current secondary social studies curriculum. Students in grade 8 examine worldviews, focusing on the Edo and Meiji periods of Japan, Renaissance Europe, and the conflict of worldviews between the Aztecs and Spanish. Additionally, teachers may choose to include religion in the grade 9 review of issues facing Canadians (e.g., immigration), the grade 10 topic of globalization, the grade 11 theme of nationalism, and the grade 12 examination of ideologies. The front matter of the social studies curriculum references religion and spirituality as factors of both citizenship and identity (Alberta Education, 2005, para3). In Alberta, social studies is mandated through grade 12.

The methodological approach of phenomenography enabled the researchers to discern how various teachers perceived the phenomena of religion in the classroom. First developed by Swedish educational researchers to investigate variations in student learning, one of its early pioneers described the qualitative research method as examining the variations in how people experience, conceptualize, and understand phenomena in the world (Marton, 1986). Semi-structured interviews are the most common method for data collection in phenomenographic studies as they invite participants to focus on their experience (Han & Ellis, 2019). Analyzing the data is an iterative process with analysis focused on collective meaning rather than individual responses and the identification of variations among the participants (Han & Ellis, 2019).

To solicit participants, the researchers initially selected 10 geographically representative junior and senior high schools throughout the school division. Given the policy in Alberta permitting public school boards to include faith-based schools as alternative programs, only schools with no religious programming were selected. Invitation letters were distributed to social studies teachers via principals or school secretaries and interested teachers contacted the author to set up an interview. After a slow uptake, the study expanded to 10 additional schools, for an estimated pool of 80 teachers. The invitation letters assured teachers that their personal religious commitments were not part of the study. Given the highly privatized nature of religion in Canada we wanted to remove as many barriers as possible to teacher participation.

Ten teachers agreed to be interviewed. Pseudonyms and basic information about each teacher at the time of the interviews is provided in Table 1.

Semi-structured interviews occurred throughout the 2015-16 school year. Current events included the fall federal election pitting then Prime Minister Stephen Harper against the Liberal party's Justin Trudeau. A dominant election issue concerned Zunera Ishaq and whether she could wear a niqab while taking the Canadian citizenship oath. Another common news story was the rise of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The average interview lasted one hour. One of the early questions in each interview asked teachers whether and how they distinguished between the terms "religion," "spirituality," and "worldview," all terms in Alberta's social studies curriculum documents (Alberta Education, 2005).³ In the coding process, we coded all additional comments related to descriptions of religion, given the importance of such definitions for understanding teacher perceptions about the nature of religion, its role in society and public institutions such as education, and the relationship between religion and conflict.

All interviews were transcribed and then emergently coded by a student researcher using the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti. The author co-coded the first interview to help identify emerging themes and then reviewed all coded interviews after their initial coding by the student researcher.

Data interpretation began with the author and student researcher reading through all the transcripts as one whole to discern differences among the participants regarding understandings about religion (Beaty, 1987; Peck & Sears, 2005). One additional theme is highlighted in this article. Participants were asked whether some form of teaching about religion might impact their teaching about two central social studies themes: citizenship and multiculturalism (Alberta Education, 2005). Teacher responses are outlined in the findings section and then analyzed in the discussion section below.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonyms	School Type	Years Teaching	Years Teaching Social Studies
Alex	Grades 10–12	11	8
Arthur	Grades 10–12	32	32
Audrey	Grades 10–12	3	2
Charles	Grades 10–12	25	25
John	Grades 10–12	34	20
Kathryn	Grades 10–12	3	3
Kim	Grades 7–9	28	28
Mack	Grades 10–12	17	8
Robert	Grades 7–9	20+	8
Will	Grades 7–9	5	4

Note. The same group of participants, with a different research focus is discussed in: Patrick, M. L., Gulayets, V., & Peck, C. L. (2018). A call for teacher professional learning and the study of religion in social studies. *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue Canadienne De l'éducation*, 40(4), 603–637. <https://journals.sfu.ca/cje/index.php/cje-rce/article/view/3111>

Findings

Teachers' Conceptions of Religion

Teachers discussed religion in both its functional and substantive aspects. Functional approaches highlight what religion does whereas substantive approaches focus on what religion is. The most common functional references described religion as a system of meaning answering ultimate human questions and as an aspect of national and individual identities. In their substantive descriptions seven teachers focused on beliefs and institutions. These statements were mentioned in passing and not unpacked. Three of the seven added the descriptors of private and personal and six of the seven referenced the comprehensive nature of religion, especially its capacity to shape worldviews.

Two of the ten teachers did not create much space in their courses for any type of education about religion. Reflecting on the grade 12 content on ideology, John explained how “liberalism, it doesn’t involve religion. It’s about secularism and the separation of church and state ...”. When thinking about the relevance of religion to the various strands of social studies, John contended that religion had little to do with economics, except perhaps the contribution of “the Christian work ethic.” As for Kim, she avoided overt conversations about religion, teaching about the Crusades, for example, from a purely historical approach. “I’m not saying who was right, who was wrong,” she insisted. If students wanted to know more about the religious elements of the curriculum, Kim instructed them to talk with their parents.

Although John and Kim separated religion from the rest of life and education, the remaining eight teachers connected religion to such curricular outcomes as current events, the exploration of multiple perspectives, residential schools, the Holocaust, Crusades, French Revolution, and imperialism, just to mention a few. As a specific example, Mack pointed to the debate raging at the time about Quebec’s ultimately unsuccessful *Charter of Quebec Values*, introduced to prohibit public employees from wearing religious symbols. Despite the provincial government’s claim that the *Charter of Quebec Values* protected a secular society, Mack interpreted the secularism argument as a mask for discrimination against non-Christian religions.

Although these eight teachers said religion per se rarely appears in the curriculum outside of grade 8, most understood religion as nevertheless embedded in the curriculum because religion is often central to identity and historical events. As Audrey explained, religion is part of, and adds complexity to, the stories social studies teachers tell. Audrey, Kathryn, and Robert had taken at minimum one university course each in world religions, with Audrey declaring it one of the best courses she had taken. In the previous year, Kathryn had read the Quran to expand her teaching beyond a Eurocentric, Protestant perspective and to better understand the current events of the time.

Despite their openness to religion, there were boundaries to these teachers’ ability and/or willingness to teach about religion. Most wanted to avoid teaching about the components of religious traditions and were especially cautious to teach about religious beliefs. Robert took a slightly different approach, insisting that once religion is studied outside of its contexts, then education has moved into the role of a religious institution. Instead, public schools must limit themselves to studying religion within the contexts of individual and collective value systems, beliefs, and/or ideologies, which are all within the purview of education. Will taught about religion indirectly by focusing on the thinking skills of exploration and inquiry and the composite elements of worldviews, such as religion, art, and economic and social structures. Mack stressed the role of

religion in society, wanting to avoid explaining religion, and was cognizant of the dangers of (religious) indoctrination.

The fear of indoctrination led two teachers to question the ability of either faith-based schools or religious/spiritual teachers to be objective and value-neutral in their teaching. Arthur questioned whether faith-based schools could teach tolerance in a context of what he suggested were all like-minded students. He thought such schools polarize, and in contrast public schools teach tolerance because they have students with diverse backgrounds. Robert worried that teachers in Logos programs (a Christian program offered in select Alberta elementary and junior high public schools) teach from a theological ideology rather than “a historical factual biblical context” and had similar worries as Arthur about faith-based schools. In terms of his own teaching, Robert said he tried to bring in a plethora of viewpoints to avoid being biased, although he recognized the “Anglo-Saxon viewpoints” embedded in Canadian history and politics.

Religion and Conflict

Two teachers reflected the post-9/11 political framing of religion, especially when speaking of ISIS and religiously inspired violence. Charles claimed a Marxist approach of attributing religious conflicts to socio-economic forces. Both Charles and Mack told students that no religious scriptures advocate killing, with Charles adding that ISIS is not Islam.⁴ Charles and Mack distinguished “real,” “legitimate,” or “actual” religion from “hijacked” religion by saying the latter is concerned more with politics or violence than religion.

Kim’s references to religious violence were not linked to the events of 9/11 or ISIS, but to the divisive nature of religion generally. In concluding her description of how she teaches about the Crusades, Kim recalled telling students, “There’s so many massacres, and I said and 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.” Later Kim contrasted her perception of religion as divisive and dangerous with the openness she saw in the concept of toleration.

So if we can keep bringing up our kids in accepting people for what they are, for who they are and not for what they believe in ... no I don’t believe in somebody coming here and trying to kill us because we don’t have the same religion

Mack shared Kim’s concern about religious violence, but the concern led him to advocate for more education about religion in schools. Because religion is such a defining aspect of some people’s identity, and thus an element (though not sole reason) of many conflicts in the world, Mack maintained that its role in society and history should be studied. Kathryn and Audrey also referenced the relationship between religion and conflict. For instance, when responding to a question about whether teachers need to teach about religion for students to understand current events in the Middle East, Kathryn said, “students need to understand that this is a religious conflict. Like, it’s not just people don’t like each other. It’s about having different belief systems and disagreeing with how the world should be, you know?” Kathryn did not think this level of student understanding required them to learn about specific beliefs.

Religion, Citizenship, and Multiculturalism

When asked how education about religion might impact the teaching of citizenship and

multiculturalism, three teachers referenced the legal aspects of citizenship, such as respecting the law and voting, and eight linked citizenship to multiculturalism, with its acceptance or toleration of difference. Six of the eight plus an additional teacher addressed the relationship question by extending multiculturalism, acceptance, and tolerance to include religious differences or the support of religious freedom. Charles' response captured the sentiment well in saying, "I think probably it manifests itself in understanding and acceptance of different religious beliefs and that's part of what being a citizen is in a school or in a city."

Several teachers stated how the requirement for toleration is embedded in the Canadian constitution. Thus, Kathryn celebrated the curricular emphasis of reasonable accommodation and recounted how students found then Prime Minister Harper's attempts to prohibit women from taking the citizenship oath while wearing a face veil as discriminatory. For the students, "... it's more about either you've accepted someone's religion is different, or not, and like I said ... the curriculum is all about, you know, we have reasonable accommodation in Canada ... Like you have to accommodate certain religions under our constitution." Mack identified tolerance as a Canadian virtue derived from the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (hereafter the *Canadian Charter*), but preferred the term understanding over toleration because the latter term has a negative connotation, such as "I tolerate my little sister." Mack's preference stemmed from his belief that "empowerment comes through knowledge," a message he said he frequently tells students.

As teachers spoke about tolerance and accommodation, six celebrated the diversity of their students and how they respect and accept each other across their differences. The only teacher to mention student experiences with discrimination was Alex, who noted that at times Sikh students discussed their struggles with wearing a turban because they desired to blend in and/or did not want to be misidentified as Muslim.

Several teacher responses bear further examination for their diverse views from the others. John and Kim most strongly separated religion from citizenship. John supported students sharing in class their volunteer work through religious institutions, but insisted such work was not religion. Rather, "that's just part of serving the community and being a good citizen." He later questioned, "When you have separation of church and state, should religion come into that discussion of what a good citizen is?" Similarly, Kim equated being a good citizen with obeying the law and respecting one's country. In contrast, religion is personal and "not part of being a good citizen."

Robert's conception of multiculturalism was unique among the participants. He considered multiculturalism a failed policy because it does not successfully integrate diverse peoples. In recounting how grade 9 students study the *Canadian Charter* and discuss tolerance, Robert said many students conclude "that if one group gets their way, they're usually not tolerant of the other group. No matter what culture you're in." He stressed the complexity involved in tolerance, noting a lack of tolerance for those who disagree with minorities and contemporary intolerance for Christian viewpoints that disagree with other positions.

Robert was also the only teacher to observe historical links between religion, government, and democracy. Arthur did the same, although he took longer to get there. He brainstormed about the relationship between religion and citizenship in the following manner.

So how does religion play into citizenship? I don't know if religion does. I think being respectful of religions does, right? Tolerance for others, but I'm not sure where it would be, unless you were to talk about, like, so the foundation of our laws, are the foundations of our laws with the Greeks and Romans,

or are they with Christianity and human dignity? Like, that's kind of how I see the Christianity thing, the human dignity that we—that—and that is a very democratic kind of notion, I think. Like, that would be my take on it, that Christ and Muhammed, I would argue, weren't elitists ... so they did believe in the dignity of all. Judaism as well.

Arthur indicated that he was discussing the relationship more deeply in the interview than he did in class but said he occasionally contrasted the hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic Church with the Protestant individual interpretation of scripture and ties Protestantism with citizenship. He mused,

... I'm not sure the mystical should be ruled out, and I'm not sure the logic and reason guys should be ruled out. There are examples for both, and you bring them in. Right? And that's one of the foundations of citizenship.

But he concluded that his classroom teaching about citizenship emphasized the “Greek, Roman, Magna Carta, French [Revolution, and] Constitution of America” roots. Later he once again juxtaposed religion with logic and reason.

Discussion

Representations of Religion

Kim and John viewed religion as personal and private with little social and public import. Kim's comments at times took an anti-religious stance, but John's approach mirrored a traditional secularist view that religion no longer matters in a modern and diverse society. In contrast, the other teachers adopted a view of religion as comprehensive, impacting an individual's worldview and, especially in the past, a society. They offered thoughtful insights about a topic not generally discussed in Canadian public conversations or in Canadian teacher preparation programs. When asked to define religion, they tended to emphasize beliefs and institutions, which reflect the prevailing western and Christian conceptions of religion. Yet their understandings of the internal heterogeneity within traditions and the fluidity of religious traditions across time and cultures revealed a more complex view of religion than commonly encountered. The impact of university coursework for three teachers may be an explanatory factor, as could the personal research and “ear to the ground” learning by Mack and Arthur. Although no teacher talked about lived religion, their recognition of comprehensive religion supports the development of such a conception of religion. Further, acknowledging comprehensive religion and recognizing that many religious adherents are unable to separate religion from the other aspects of life may counter the liberal impulse to privatize religion.

That social studies teachers acknowledged the comprehensive nature of religion is perhaps unsurprising, as they teach about historical and contemporary events involving religion. Yet their discussions implicitly revealed several challenges involved in teaching about religion. First, the desire of some teachers to protect their orthodox students, those with strong religious identities, led them to limit some class discussions involving religion. To be clear, most participants noted the importance of having conversations about religion, but some were more limited by fears and hesitations than others (Robert, Arthur, and to a lesser degree Kathryn were less encumbered by fears when explicitly planning for class discussions about religion). The limitations inadvertently led to the privatization, or separation, of religion from other spheres of life. In professional

practice, then, privatization is often the chosen means with which to protect students and ensure peace. Second, an inconsistent recognition of comprehensive religion pervaded the interviews, demonstrating the tensions inherent in the public/private binary of secular liberalism. On the one hand teachers identified both private and public examples of the functional aspects of religion. When discussing the substantive aspects, they spoke of beliefs as both personal and private as well as comprehensive. On the other hand, some viewed comprehensive religious identities as dangerous and easily manipulated. This representation was not limited to the current events of the time, as teachers inadvertently stressed the negative involvement of religion or religious institutions in public life. Beyond the barbaric practices of ISIS, teachers said they included religion in their teaching of the Crusades, the non-democratic Roman Catholic Church, especially before the European Reformation and during the Counter-Reformation, the troubles in Ireland, and the role of churches in residential schools, to mention a few examples. The issue is not that these stories about religion are untrue, but that they are partial.

Furthermore, the teachers' reliance on tolerance and accommodation as the primary means of protecting religious freedom reinforces a negative view of religion and limits its societal role because in each case the assumption was that the state and "we" are tolerating the religious other. Such questions as who is tolerated and who does the tolerating were not discussed. Would toleration be required if some of the religions were not deemed unacceptable in the first place, in part because they do not privatize religion or elevate the individual? Additionally, tolerance too easily takes on a "live and let live" approach that does not promote engagement with the other and their differences. It does not invite citizens to evaluate what it means to live well together and what multiculturalism might ask of societies.

Few teachers identified how comprehensive religion challenges toleration and accommodation as responses to religious diversity. Instead, in various ways they reflected the social and political commitment to privatization. John's insistence that youth projects organized from a house of worship was not religion but citizenship limits religion to emotions and internal dispositions and overlooks its potential to inspire actions of citizenship (Berger, 2007, p. 313). Kim similarly reduced religion when she insisted religion is so divisive that it must be privatized and in her suggestion that who people are can be separated from what they believe. Charles' use of a Marxist approach to explain religious conflict and Mack's representation of religious violence as hijacked religion both separate religion from other spheres of life. Kathryn avoided the depoliticization problem, but perhaps overly politicized religion in emphasizing the religious nature of the struggles in the Middle East to such a degree that the economic and political issues disappeared.

As students listen to these narratives of religion, they can learn several inaccuracies about religion that stem from secular liberal interpretations. First, they could conclude that "true" religion is apolitical and that interpretations of scripture can be conducted in isolation from history, culture, economics, etc. Second, students might assume that the "hijacking" of religion occurs elsewhere and in particular types of conflicts. "Hijacking" references were limited to non-western contexts and teachers did not discuss how western leaders hijack Christianity for their political purposes. Third, Mack's belief that religion can be manipulated because it is comprehensive and thus influential for identity might lead students to conclude that comprehensive beliefs are irrational and dangerous. Fourth, elevating a privatized and depoliticized religion could leave students with an incomplete understanding of how religious actors participate in public spheres, engage in civic discourse, and can contribute to both justice and injustice in diverse societies. Fifth, students are not taught how to assess conflict more

generally. Conflict (as opposed to violence) in and of itself is not necessarily negative, as social change often arises out of conflict (Bickmore, 1993). Indeed, conflict can be seen as foundational to the human condition (Schmid, 2017) and endemic to democracy (Blaug & Schwarzmantel, 2016). Sixth, when conflict is primarily related to religion, state violence is masked. Finally, when religion is viewed as a problem, students do not learn about the myriad examples of how religious diversity is daily and successfully navigated at the scale of daily lived experience (Beaman, 2017a).

Impacts of Secularism

Scholars frequently note how citizenship is often misrepresented as a secular concept (Arthur et al., 2010; Calhoun, 2011; Sears & Herriot, 2016). The reduction ignores a complex relationship between citizenship and religion, in which religious actors have aided democracy and human rights on one hand (Künkler & Leininger, 2009; Peetush, 2003; Spencer, 2016; Stepan, 2016), and restricted citizenship and rights for some on the other (Hemming, 2011; Juergensmeyer, 2010). It ignores how leaders within the Sikh community expanded Canadian human rights to include non-Christian groups (Nayar, 2013), how religious women are peacebuilders in conflicts around the world (Hayward & Marshall, 2015), the existence of inter-religious dialogue for the promotion of peace (Rasmussen, 2007), and how religion forms and nourishes many social movements. This is not to deny the many ways religion contributes to conflict and even violence, but to insist that conflict is not the only story about religion that should be told in classrooms. Rather than being an object of citizenship and multiculturalism, religion is a constitutive element of them.

It is in this area of citizenship and understanding the state that the influence of secularism was most pronounced. Teachers presented the state and its institutions as logical, unbiased, capable of being objective, and tolerant, with religious institutions and adherents as illogical, sometimes dangerous, and biased. Religion was presented as comprehensive, but generally within the context of the individual. The nation-state was seen as separate from and above religion, reflecting the success of the secularization myth. Citizens are capable of, and must, engage in secular critical thinking, which is universal and above religion, an understanding common to liberal and postmodern discourses of secularism as outlined by Mandair and Dressler (2011a, 2011b). The state, citizenship, and education all evaluate religion, but the relationship is unidirectional. Religion has little if anything to offer contemporary educational thinking, citizenship education, and the state.

When discussing citizenship, most teachers presented the state as worthy of allegiance and loyalty, the guarantor of rights and freedoms via the *Canadian Charter*. Except for Robert, teachers did not question any state mythology or use/abuse of power. It is religious indoctrination that is to be feared, but indoctrination by the state and education is so embedded as to appear common sense. In their portrayals of the state teachers re-inscribed two functions of secularism: as toleration and as state neutrality.

Arthur discussed the relationship between citizenship and religion in similar ways to Robert, but then revealed his ultimate commitments to a secular narrative of the state and citizenship. When Arthur contrasted Roman Catholic hierarchy with Protestant individual interpretation of scripture and then linked Protestantism with citizenship, he subtly reinforced the privatization of religion advocated by secular liberalism.

All the teachers except Robert celebrated multiculturalism and highlighted how it enabled diversity in their classrooms. They did not, however, probe the issues of positionality and power

imbalances, which de-politicizes citizenship (Nabavi, 2010). For example, they did not question whether non-Christian groups and those who view their religious commitments comprehensively are positioned and politically “managed” differently than those who are comfortable with privatizing their beliefs and practices. There was little conversation about how the secular school system might impact students with religious identities, especially those from non-Christian traditions.

Limitations and Areas of Future Research

Although the small sample size of our study permits us to view our findings as illustrative rather than representative, it suggests the immense power of secular liberalism and how public education is used to manage comprehensive religion. Future research opportunities would involve interviews with more teachers specifically targeting beliefs on religion and secularism, classroom observations to check for consistency of beliefs and classroom practice, and greater diversification of views, broadening the research to include students, administrators, and parents.

Conclusion

Teachers are by their profession reflective practitioners, as evidenced in the participants’ thinking about religion. Yet they are also products of their culture and reflect, if not re-inscribe, the secular assumptions about religion. Of the teachers in our study, some reified religion as a distinct and separate category of life, others de-politicized religion in the stories they told, and still others presented citizenship as a secular concept, all while consistently elevating the state. Most defined religion largely in terms of beliefs and institutions and although they thought religion was an important aspect of education, they were more comfortable discussing religion than teaching about it.

The argument presented in this article is that the liberal secularism of Canadian life limits the stories students hear about religion. There are exclusionary tendencies within secular liberalism (Van Arragon, 2015), and how liberal states define religion is one tool of exclusion. Western states adopted a liberal Christian conception of religion that is easily privatized. But this conception is not shared by all students in a classroom. Increased teacher awareness of the contingency of western definitions of religion will enable teachers to better understand their world, their curriculum, and their students.

Imagining more fulsome understandings of religion is perhaps easier for those teachers who have lived in countries with alternative religion-politics relationships. But since most teachers are still White westerners, education about religion is essential in undergraduate programs, teacher preparation programs, and ongoing professional learning. For instance, the three teachers who had taken a world religions course in university and had undertaken additional personal study recognized the import of such courses and demonstrated deep knowledge about religion. Such education is complex but necessary if school systems wish to avoid the exclusionary tendencies of exclusive secular liberalism and equip citizens to fully engage their neighbours and the issues arising from a multicultural and religiously diverse society.

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Notes

1. Bhargava (2013, p. 30) made a similar point in his rejection of a type of liberal secularism that restricts religious reasoning from the public sphere. “A religious life is not just a life of personal and whimsical attachment to a personal God but one in which one submits to his commands and lives obediently by them. This may be a nightmare for a standard liberal but gets the constitutive features of most religions rather better than liberal secularism does.”
2. For a critique of Asad, see Smith, J. K. A. (2005). Secularity, religion, and the politics of ambiguity, *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, 6(3), 116–121. <https://jcert.org/archives/06.3/index.shtml>
3. Given the slippery distinctions between “religion” and “spirituality” discussed above, it is not surprising that several teachers struggled to distinguish between the two terms.
4. In reference to a large study of fundamentalism, Appleby described how all scriptures and traditions have ambiguities when it comes to the justification of violence. See Appleby, S. (2011). Rethinking fundamentalism in a secular age. In C. Calhoun, M. Juergensmeyer, & J. Van Antwerpen (Eds.), *Rethinking secularism* (pp. 225–247). Oxford University Press, Inc.

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