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Religion in the classroom | Education Canada Magazine

by: Erin Reid, Dr. Crystena A. H. Parker-Shandal, Dr. Alice W.Y. Chan ⁝ 17-22 minutes

Diversity, Equity, Teaching

It's not just a can of worms

While many Canadian teachers believe that religion does not belong in the classroom, the authors argue that religion already *is* in the classroom. Therefore, developing our own and our students' religious literacy is an important aspect of multicultural education.

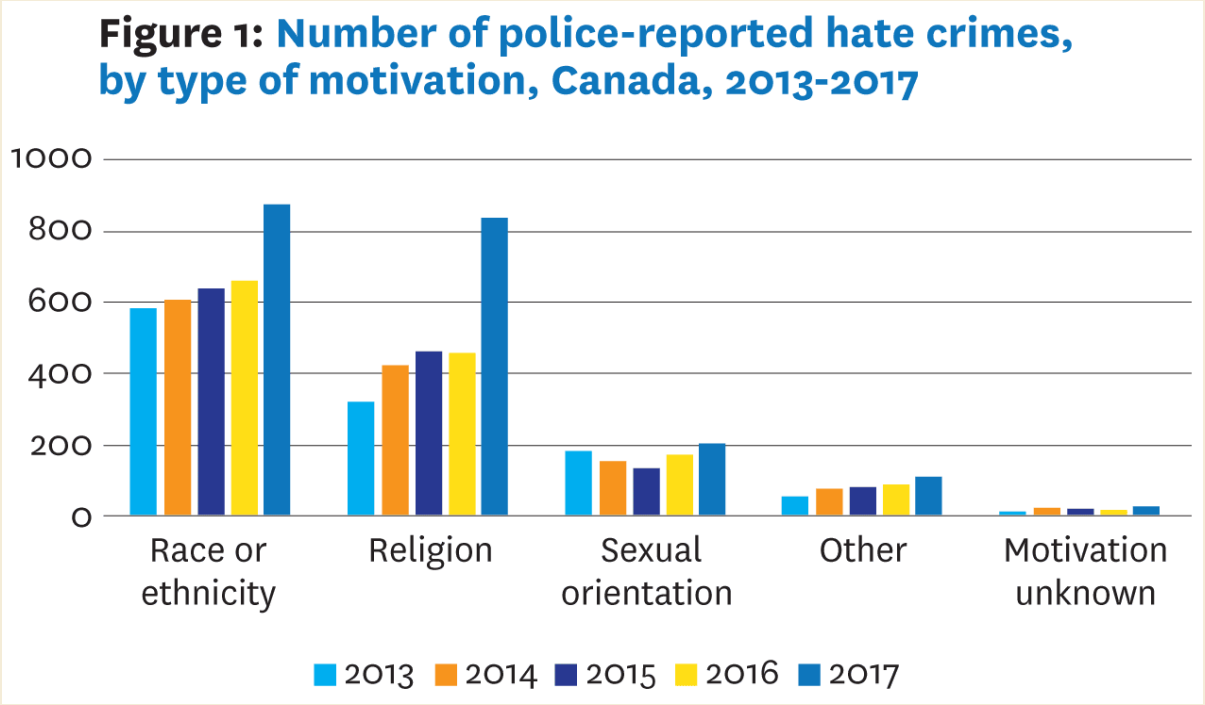
"If you ask me, religion is just a can of worms that you don't want to open in the classroom." This comment from a well-intentioned and well-educated colleague was met by nods of agreement by other teachers in the staff room, many offering up anecdotes about how problematic religious issues are and swapping strategies for shutting down these conversations. This seasoned teacher's comment is a common view, one that we've heard repeatedly in our careers as educators: *Religion just doesn't belong in the public school classroom.*

Yet, religion *is* in the classroom. It is in the curricular content students engage in, it is brought into the classroom through current events, and it is represented among the diverse student body. Religious diversity in Canadian classrooms is growing, and so is the potential for thoughtful, deliberate discussion and reflection about religion. Due to a range of factors that include growing Indigenous populations, increasing immigration, and rising numbers of those who identify as non-affiliated, Canada's contemporary (and future) classrooms include a greater range of religious and non-religious worldviews than ever before. A recent study suggests that by 2036, the number of people in Canada who practice a non-Christian religion could almost double, with numbers reaching up to 16 percent of the population. This is a dramatic increase compared to 2011, where non-Christian religious practitioners represented only nine percent.[1]

Religiously motivated hate crimes are also on the rise. Internationally, the recent religiously motivated attacks in New Zealand, Pittsburgh, and California are stark reminders of how religious minorities are increasingly targeted. Unfortunately, this trend is also apparent in Canada, where religiously motivated hate crimes have risen dramatically in the last five years alone. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1

(A compiled graph of data from Statistics Canada)



The current popular strategy among many educators of ignoring students' religious identities has consequences. First, the failure to acknowledge or address students' religious identities forms part of a "hidden curriculum" and may suggest that this aspect of student identity is not valued. This risks further marginalizing religiously identified students, especially those belonging to religious minorities, and encouraging religious bullying.[2] In teaching children to respect diversity, we cannot simply omit those aspects that make us uncomfortable. Doing so perpetuates a cycle of ignorance: teachers don't understand religion well or are uncomfortable with it, so we don't want to discuss it or acknowledge it in the classroom. Students then complete schooling with very little understanding of religious differences and/or with the perception that religious identities are unimportant. This lack of understanding can lead to greater polarization of views.

However, a wide body of research tells us that many K-12 teachers are apprehensive about addressing or acknowledging religion in the classroom. Some fear that acknowledging the religious identities of students paves the way for conflicts with parents who may have strong views, either for or against addressing religion in the classroom. Research suggests that many teachers feel ill-equipped to deal with religious issues because they themselves lack religious literacy. (As described below, religious literacy is an understanding of the diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews held by individuals and communities.) Others may believe that because their own school district is not religiously diverse, considering religious identities has little relevance in their classrooms. Still others may have their own belief systems, either atheistic or religious, that impact their views on the place of religion in the classroom. This article unpacks each of these concerns, ultimately arguing that religious identities deserve consideration, now more than ever, and offers concrete suggestions for doing so.

1. What if there is parental backlash?

This is a common and realistic concern. We suggest considering both preventive and responsive approaches to dealing with parental concerns.

At the beginning of the year or term, get to know your students' parents.

It sounds almost impossible at some schools, but we've encountered many teachers who do this every term. For instance, one teacher called each parent to introduce herself and describe her teaching approach. This built rapport and gave the parents a chance to see their concerns addressed before their fears arose in class. Realistically, we all know that this is good practice for any type of teaching. It is exceptionally helpful in paving the way for controversial topics.

Listen to parents' concerns and speak with them one-on-one, ideally in person, and in a manner appropriate to your usual school and/or district protocol.

Concerns about religious issues can be addressed like other parental concerns, but it may require a greater degree of empathy because beliefs and values are exceptionally personal to some individuals. Parental concerns may be based on personal experiences of discrimination or fears of religious influence, so the more you understand their position, the better chance you have of resolving the issue. Take a deep breath and try to understand what is driving their concern.

Protect yourself legally and understand your professional rights and boundaries under your local human rights code.

This will help you and your administration confidently create the space to discuss and teach about religion. In Canada, there are territorial and provincial terms and guidelines for teachers to follow (see "Teacher Resources," below).

To understand the root of a concern or to empathize in the discussion, teachers need to think from a parent's perspective first. For further support, we encourage you to contact your school district's equity and inclusive education coordinator, who will be familiar with the culture of your district and school community.

2. What if I don't have knowledge about (different) religions?

It's unrealistic to expect K-12 teachers to be experts in religion. However, there are considerations that can help all educators approach religion in the classroom.

Understand that diversity exists in and between religious, spiritual, non-religious, moral, and other worldviews, and among individuals, groups, and traditions.

This helps us recognize that a worldview may be experienced differently by each person. For example, just because you have a Jewish student who believes that keeping Kosher is essential to their religious identity, you should not assume that all your Jewish students will place importance on this practice.

Develop an awareness of how we all tend to judge another's worldview through our own worldview lens.

For example, for someone from a Judeo-Christian faith, it may be difficult to understand the eclectic nature of some Eastern traditions such as Buddhism (as practiced in some areas) or Hinduism. So, although a student may identify themselves as Buddhist, they may also engage in practices from other traditions, or even identify themselves as belonging to multiple traditions, perhaps as Shinto or Daoist – or both! Another example: while we may find it inconvenient when students are absent because of a non-Christian religious holiday, we tend to forget that our own Saturday/Sunday weekend is based on respecting the Christian holy day.

Recognize that any discussion of spirituality must include Indigenous spiritualities, and that we should work to understand the specific Indigenous communities where we live and teach.

Canada has over 600 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, with great diversity in beliefs. So if you teach in Southern Alberta, for example, first learn about Blackfoot spiritual beliefs and practices.

Recognize that all individuals associate or affiliate to a tradition based on belief, belonging, or behaviour.[3]

This means that some students identify with their tradition mostly through belonging and behaviour, not belief. Asking them to explain their beliefs or speak on behalf of their community's beliefs can be very uncomfortable for them. *Always avoid singling out a student to serve as a representative of a particular tradition.*

Recognize that individuals have multiple identities at the same time, but that some individuals face more social harm than others.

For example, a black Muslim girl who wears a hijab in your class is of a minority race and religion and has a higher probability of being discriminated against due to this intersectionality of identities and her hijab, compared to a white atheist man. She is a minority within a minority. Understanding how social inequity exists within students' intersectional identities allows teachers to gain insight into the complex issues facing these students.

3. What if my students are not religiously diverse?

Teachers may feel that because their own classrooms are relatively homogenous, there is no need for them to be concerned about religious issues. However, there are a number of reasons why religious literacy should be a tool in all teachers' toolkits.

Students don't need to be personally attached to different religions to learn about difference.

Religion comes up in many places in the classroom: in stories, in contemporary and historic events, in the arts! In these instances, drawing attention to religion instead of ignoring it opens up the possibility for expanding one's worldview, such as learning how Judeo-Christian traditions and Indigenous spiritualities inform Canadian history. Inviting this dialogue supports students' development of religious literacy, their understanding of world events and their social development.

Learning about different religions is useful to all students because it opens up the possibility for civic dialogue and engagement.

When students are engaged in questioning and even constructively debating various philosophical and moral dilemmas connected to religious perspectives, they may reflect on their own and others' perspectives more deeply, creating the possibility for civic dialogue.

4. How do I handle discriminatory aspects of a religion that could negatively impact another student(s)?

A more complicated issue arises when it comes to the question of discriminatory aspects of religions. Every religion has within it great internal diversity and part of this diversity may include religious beliefs or practices that do not uphold the values of a liberal-democratic society. This can be a delicate situation because of the various stakeholders involved: children, parents, community, and school.

It's important to check our own biases before rushing to judgment about the nature of a religious belief or practice. For example, while there are those both outside and inside the Muslim community who maintain that head coverings are a sign of female oppression, there are also many from both sides who argue it is not. But what if a religious practice or belief is genuinely discriminatory and infringes on the human rights of another student? For example, a student may express the view that homosexuality is a sin, which may be very harmful to LGBTQ2+ students in your class. What should a teacher do in these difficult situations where human rights are at the heart of the issue? Each case will need a unique response, but there are some general principles that can be followed:

A. Communicate between all parties.

Teachers should discuss the situation with school administration to understand what school policies are in place and what their legal responsibilities are. Open communication with the parents to understand why a particular issue is important to that family. Finally,

teachers should always discuss the incident or request with the student/s involved to understand their perspective.

B. Balance the need to create a culture of acceptance and belonging for all students with the right to freedom of expression and freedom of belief.

Creating class guidelines for a safe learning environment that respects *everyone's* human rights should be done in collaboration with students at the beginning of the year to set the right tone. And if a student does express a discriminatory view, instead of just shutting down the student, a teacher might say, "Well, that may be one perspective, but that is a view that doesn't respect the Canadian Charter of Human Rights, which tells us to value diversity and show every person the same amount of respect." Depending on the grade level, it may be appropriate to use it as an opportunity to remind the class that there is great diversity of opinions within traditions, thus not everyone who practices that faith will hold that belief.

C. Educate yourself.

Although teachers can never be fully prepared to deal with every tension that may arise in their classes – including those related to religious views – they have a responsibility to educate themselves about their own rights and responsibilities and those of all their students. A basic level of religious literacy will go a long way in building understanding of religiously diverse students, just as understanding your legal responsibilities as an educator will give you confidence to address discriminatory views in your class. And finally, developing skills in civic dialogue and debate is a cornerstone to creating an equitable classroom that is inclusive of all forms of diversity.

As a group of scholar-educators with a keen interest in the intersection of religion and education, we are well aware that dealing with religion in the K-12 classroom can present unique challenges that may not always have simple solutions. However, we strongly believe that developing religious literacy is a first step to building teachers' confidence to address students' religious identities, and any subsequent conflicts that may arise related to religion in the classroom. As noted earlier, we cannot expect K-12 educators to be religious experts, but we can offer tools that will contribute to building a healthier and safer classroom community.

Developing religious literacy may seem like a daunting task. Remember that as educators, we are lifelong learners, and becoming religiously literate is just one more step on our learning journey. By a) developing an awareness of the religious and non-religious perspectives and intersectional identities of our students and ourselves, b) teaching the discussion and deliberation skills needed to create openings in our classrooms for real dialogue, and c) equipping ourselves with a sound knowledge of our legal responsibilities as educators, we can begin to create classrooms that are truly welcoming of religious and non-religious diversity.

Teacher resources

Provincial guidelines:

- Yukon
- NWT
- Nunavut
- British Columbia
- Alberta
- Saskatchewan
- Manitoba
- Ontario: link 1, link 2
- Quebec
- New Brunswick
- Nova Scotia
- PEI
- Newfoundland and Labrador

Teaching about diverse religious traditions:

- The Religious Literacy Project at Harvard Divinity School has created a set of guidelines for teaching about religion in K-12 public schools. Note that these are developed for the US context.
- RLP also has a series of excellent videos for teaching about religious diversity.
- The Tannenbaum Centre has a wealth of resources including this page of websites, videos, and handouts for teaching religious diversity.
- Pluralism Project at Harvard University.
- The United Religions Initiative has created lesson plans for teaching about religious traditions.

Teaching about religion in the public sphere:

- http://www.religiousfreedomcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Living-with-Our-Deepets-Differences-Religious-Liberty-in-a-Pluralistic-Society.pdf

Teaching about controversial subjects/civic dialogue:

- http://www.voicesintoaction.ca/Learn
- https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/lessons

Teaching about Indigenous spirituality:

- http://www.fourdirectionsteachings.com/

- The University of Saksatchewan has an Indigenous Studies research portal with many links to resources about Indigenous spirituality.
- Provincial teacher's federations may have excellent resources, such as Learn Alberta's Guiding Voices.

Teaching about Humanism or other non-religious beliefs:

- https://understandinghumanism.org.uk/themes/

Professional development opportunities:

- https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/for-educators/summer-institute

Understanding intersectionality:

- https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality?language=el

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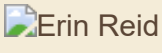
Notes

1 Jean-Dominique Morency, Éric Caron Malenfant and Samuel MacIsaac, "Immigration and Diversity: Population Projections for Canada and its Regions, 2011 to 2036," *Statistics Canada* (2018).

2 Alice W. Y. Chan, "Educating Against Religious Bullying: Considering one root to the issue of religious extremism," *Religious Education and Security* (Blog) (2016). https://blogs.mcgill.ca/religiouseducationandsecurity

3 Benjamin Marcus, "Six Guidelines for Teaching About Religion" *Education Week* Blog (2016). www.edweek.org

Meet the Expert(s)



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Erin Reid is a PhD candidate and educator with more than 15 years of teaching experience, as well as a researcher with an academic background in Religious Studies (MA, McGill) and in ...

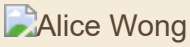
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