

Representations of Religion in the Ontario Secondary School Curriculum

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Abstract

The Canadian province of Ontario has a long and complicated history with religion in its K-12 education system, culminating in a status-quo where public funding is provided to schools offering either a mandatory, confessionally Roman Catholic form of religious education or a non-mandatory, secular form of “education about religion”. In an effort to better understand the present state of religion-related instruction in Ontario public education, this study examines the representation of religion across relevant portions of the Ontario secondary school curriculum that are shared by both Roman Catholic and secular public schools. Content analysis showed that insofar as mandatory teaching elements are concerned, the curriculum engages with religion across a range of different subject matter contexts but also entirely within courses that Ontario high school students are not required to take. Of particular note is the representation of religion as having apparently no bearing on the principle thrust of Canadian history since 1945. Spirituality, as well as other matters which might reasonably be considered religion-adjacent, are represented as being integral components of Indigenous Canadian cultures, with the distinctive term “world view” frequently employed as an analogue for such topics in this context.

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Representations of Religion in the Ontario Secondary School Curriculum

The following curriculum study is an examination of the current state of religious education carried out by publicly funded schools in the province of Ontario. The overarching question that this study will seek to answer is: How is religion represented in the current Ontario secondary school curriculum? Three sub-questions will guide the investigation:

1. In what subject areas, if any, are issues of religion (including faith and spirituality) represented?
2. What is the relative distribution of references to religion across the curriculum?
3. When religion is discussed but is not the primary subject of a course, how is it discussed and what relevance is it considered to have to the course topic under examination?

This study was born out of the author's desire to explore and reconcile aspects of his own personal history. For most of my life, my identity and sense of self has been shaped by the intersecting forces of religion and education. Their impact on who I am as an individual has been greater than almost any other influence I can think of. Between the ages of 12-18, I was educated in privately funded, independent Protestant schools, with my out of school social life revolving around my family's church community. As such, some of the most formative years of my life were characterized by immersion in a particular religious sub-culture, that of Pentecostal¹ Christianity in the Ottawa Valley.

¹ As a close friend has pointed out to me in the past, this label is not entirely accurate. Though nominally Pentecostal, the church I grew up in and continued to attend until my late 20s was an independent Christian congregation whose practices and teachings were heavily influenced by the prosperity gospel, New Apostolic Reformation movement, and American evangelicalism more generally. While my religious upbringing certainly involved elements that were recognizably Pentecostal (e.g. speaking in tongues, faith healing), the full picture was more complicated.

When I graduated from high school and enrolled in pre-medical studies at the University of Ottawa, I entered an entirely different world. I had gone from an environment where faith and learning were deeply intertwined to one where they were not thought to have anything to do with each other. I found acceptance, but also a startling lack of curiosity among my new classmates about the sorts of questions that had grounded my view of life to that point. Is there a God? If so, what is he like and how could we know? What are we alive to do and how can we know the right way to live? Those who are familiar with Christian apologetic literature may recognize these as somewhat loaded questions, designed to lead into conversations about religious faith and the need for individuals to live a life centered on trust in Jesus Christ. They had, however, been the bread and butter of my spiritual development and formed the core of how I knew to approach the world in a thoughtful and intellectually serious way.

Over the next decade, I came to understand that for most people, things were both more and less complicated (with respect to religion) than they had been for me at that time. I never expected others to have the same answers as I did, but what I eventually learned is that people differ in the questions that they think they need to ask in life. One's sense of urgency and prioritization depends a great deal on who you are, where you have been, and where you understand yourself to be. As a result, what is of paramount importance to one person can seem irrelevant to another, and both for perfectly understandable (if not always mutually satisfactory) reasons.

Interacting with the more secular world I encountered at university highlighted the intellectual and social influence of religion, not only in my own life, but also in the lives of those around me. I have learned that many people live their lives apart from religion, and yet even then it shapes the societies and world in which they live. I have also learned that people cannot be

neatly separated into groupings of those who are “for” God/the Bible/faith/church/religion and those who are against, as the particular theology of my youth had taught me. Indeed, I know it from personal experience, as a non-believer² who is still coming to terms with the loss of his former Christian faith and identity. Religion is complicated, and so are people’s relationships to it.

In light of this complexity, it may be argued that a nuanced and empathetic understanding of religion and its influence on humanity is of considerable value for life in Canada today. This value is due not only to the multi-cultural/ethnic/religious makeup of Canadian society, but also to the powerful and persistent influence of religion in global affairs. Perhaps due to my history with religiously oriented schools, I am inclined to find it appropriate that religion should be examined and openly discussed in the course of obtaining a basic education. I am not alone in this inclination. This proposition, that is, that there is value in providing students with non-confessional (i.e. non-indoctrinating) instruction about religion as a standard component of their primary and/or secondary education, has received a fair amount of attention from academics (Moore, 2014; Nord, 2010; Prothero, 2008; Rosenblith & Bailey, 2007; Sears, 2013). However, it seems that somewhat less attention has been given to examining the specifics of how such instruction is actually carried out by the publicly funded education systems of Western countries. It is on the basis of these observations and sentiments that I pursued this research project, which is intended as a contribution to the literature on religious education in Canadian public schools.

When seeking to understand what or how schools are teaching with reference to a given subject, there are a variety of approaches that can be taken. Of particular importance are

² I use this label as a substitute for the term “agnostic”, which I associate (perhaps unfairly) as much with an unwillingness to take a position as with its literal meaning of “one who does not know”. While I am unable to say for sure that God does not exist, it is not a possibility that I feel the need to take seriously anymore.

classroom studies, which can help us to distinguish between what schools are supposed to be teaching and what is actually being taught. However, it is important to note that Canadian teachers do not educate in a vacuum. Their behavior is both directed and constrained by curriculum and policy handed down by provincial ministries of education. It is for this reason that I chose to perform a curriculum study – in addition to finding the exercise interesting in itself³, it was my sense that the results might provide useful contextual information that could inform further research on the subject of religious education in Ontario.

The study will begin with an examination of the relevant academic literature in Chapter One, laying a foundation for readers' understanding of religious education as a subject of academic inquiry and exploring its significance in the context of publicly funded schooling. Chapter Two will present a discussion of the specific methods used to conduct this study, which draws on a family of mixed methods approaches called Hermeneutic Content Analysis to analyze curriculum documents issued by the Ontario Ministry of Education. The study will then begin in earnest, commencing in Chapter Three with a review of the selected curriculum documents to identify initial datapoints that will shape the direction of subsequent analysis and providing an overview of engagement with religion across various elements of the examined curricula. Chapter Four presents the centerpiece of the study, a thematic analysis of mandatory curricular content expectations that highlights the primary ideas, concepts, and topics in relation to which the curriculum engages with religion outside of its explicitly religion-themed course offerings. Significant findings from each stage of analysis will then be summarized in Chapter Five,

³ My interest in this approach was inspired by Margaretta Patrick's comparative study of high school social studies curricula used in western Canada (2015a). I encountered Patrick's article early in my graduate studies and it was one of my inspirations for doing research into religious education in general. The present thesis was essentially an attempt to conduct my own version of Patrick's study, with a focus on my home province of Ontario.

answering the question of how the Ontario secondary school curriculum represents religion and discussing potential avenues for further research.

CHAPTER ONE: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

What follows is an examination of existing academic literature, intended to help clarify a series of issues that are raised by the research question that I have put forward. First, I will address what exactly is meant by the terms “religion” and “religious education”⁴, followed by an examination of the nature of curriculum. Second, I will explore the rationale for offering religion-related instruction in public schools, as well as the inherently political nature of the matter. Third, I will provide a brief political and legal history of religious education in the province of Ontario. Together, this will provide a helpful background for later discussion of the specific methods used to conduct this research study.

Terminology – Religion and Religious Education

A study on religious education presents some terminological issues that need to be worked out early on. In academic discussions about religion and education, the terms “religion” and “religious education” understandably show up a lot. However, these terms can each be understood in a variety of different ways. For the sake of conceptual clarity and simple readability, I will begin by establishing how I will use these terms in the context of the present study.

As sociologist Steve Bruce explains in *Defining religion: a practical response* (2011), much ink has been spilled over arguments regarding what constitutes a satisfactory definition of religion. According to Bruce, major perspectives on this topic can be organized into at least three groupings: functional, substantive, and post-modern. Functional definitions of religion frame it in

⁴ While preparing for this research project, I found that most of the conversations I had colleagues and friends about my topic involved the need to clarify that I was not studying forms of education designed to encourage students to accept the tenets of a particular religion. Perhaps understandably, this seemed to be the first thing that came to peoples’ minds when they heard the words “religious education”.

terms of its supposed consequences, with examples including Karl Marx's emphasis on religion as a tool of social oppression ("religion is the opium of the people") and Emile Durkheim's focus on religion as a mechanism of social cohesion. In contrast, substantive definitions attempt to establish the concrete nature of religion, explaining its essence as a phenomenon. An example of the substantive approach is Bruce's own view that religion "consists of beliefs, actions and institutions which assume the existence of supernatural entities with powers of action, or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose." (p. 112) Writing as a social scientist who has studied religion for over two decades, Bruce justifies his preference for a substantive definition on the grounds of its utility, in that it allows him to formulate theories that have the capacity to explain a broad range of phenomena.

Post-modern definitions, which Bruce (2011) reviews in detail and is noticeably critical of, are represented in the work of such scholars as Timothy Fitzgerald and Talal Asad. As argued by Bruce, the post-modernist approach questions the validity of the very concept of religion, asserting that it is a modern construction and does not actually exist outside of historically specific social discourses (i.e. ways of talking about things in a particular time and place). Bruce dismisses this perspective with, among other counter-points, the amusing retort that "Newton's discovery of gravity was a 'historical product of discursive processes' but prior to its discovery people did not have trouble adhering to the earth's surface." (p. 108). Acknowledging the difficulties of establishing a universally agreed-upon definition of religion, Bruce argues that one is not needed in order for scholars to conduct good quality social scientific research. Provided that researchers follow the standard sociological practices of treating all beliefs (religious or otherwise) as human projections and of refusing to engage in questioning the ultimate truth or

falsehood of any given religion, common-sense definitions that can be effectively operationalized in a research context are more than sufficient.

Expressing similar views to Bruce, James Beckford (2003) argues for the adoption of a social constructionist perspective on religion. Though “social construction” can be understood in many ways, Beckford uses this term to describe a focus on understanding religion in terms of its embodiment in human social interactions. Beckford notes that “whatever else religion is, it is a social phenomenon” (p. 2) and does not exist independently of individuals, institutions, and the relationships between them. This characteristic of religion allows it to be studied scientifically, at least insofar as concerns its influence and activity in society.

Regarding the definition of religion, Beckford (2003) points out “the immense variation in the meanings attributed to the term in everyday life.” (p. 22) Beckford asserts that this variation stems from religion’s nature as a category of interpretation, which is linked to people’s understandings of meaning, value, and of how to act in society. As these understandings change, so does the understanding of what is meant by religion, and of what social phenomena can and should be considered religious. This variability makes it extremely difficult to pin down a universally acceptable conception of religion. By concentrating on what religion is understood to mean to people living in specific social contexts, academic researchers can sidestep what is likely an insoluble problem and keep their attention focused on what can be demonstrated by empirical evidence.

To conclude this brief discussion on the term “religion”, I consider an effort to provide a precise definition to be outside the scope of my study, as well as beyond my expertise as a student in the field of education. What I am interested in is how religion, as a category of social phenomena, is represented in Ontario’s secondary school curricula. That is, I do not want to

know what religion is in itself, but rather how it is understood and framed within a set of government documents. Given that I will be looking at religion as a socially constructed concept whose precise nature varies depending on the context in which it is discussed, I consider myself to be approaching this study with a social constructionist lens.

Just as there are several ways to understand the concept of religion, the term “religious education” can be taken to represent many different things. In its most general sense, religious education is any form of education that focuses on religion as its primary topic of concern. Such a definition, however, captures everything from a traditional Protestant Christian Sunday school class to a graduate seminar in religious studies taking place on the campus of a secular university. Distinguishing between varieties of religious education on the basis of their goals (i.e. what they are intended to achieve) and methods (i.e. how they set out to achieve them) is crucial to defining the substance of the term in any given instance.

One of the most important distinctions with respect to varieties of religious education is between those forms which aim to foster students’ embrace of a particular religious tradition and those which do not. This dichotomy is often expressed through the use of contrasting adjectives or phrases, such as “faith-based religious education” vs. “religious studies” (American Academy of Religion, 2010), “religious education” vs. “education about religion” (Van Arragon, 2015a) and “confessional religious education” vs. “non-confessional religious education” (Patrick, 2015a). While participants in discussions concerning religious education in certain parts of the world may exhibit a shared understanding of and preference for certain terms, there is no common vocabulary for expressing this particular distinction that is in use by scholars worldwide (Beaman et al., 2017). Regional differences seem to be less the result of rational disagreement over the appropriateness of terminology than they are attempts to express the relevant distinction

in ways that are appropriate to the social, cultural, and historical context of a given part of the world (e.g. the United Kingdom vs. the United States⁵). Though somewhat simplistic, the confessional vs. non-confessional, faith-based vs. secular distinction has considerable political significance when religious education is being discussed in relation to publicly funded schooling.⁶

Other typologies offer a more nuanced picture of the breadth of religious education as a concept. In her review of religious education research conducted in the United States, Mary Elizabeth Moore (2017) divides the academic literature into five categories, each representing a focus on a distinct purpose for providing religious education to American youth: personal and interpersonal formation, communal formation, acquisition and analysis of information, engagement with difference, and engagement with mystery. Moore notes the internal complexity of each of these “genres”, none of which can be associated exclusively with either religiously motivated or secular objectives. In contrast, the American Academy of Religion has provided a fourfold categorization of approaches (historical, literary, traditions-based, and cultural studies) to specifically non-devotional (i.e. non-confessional, secular) instruction about religion in its *Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States* (2010). In the United Kingdom, religious education scholar Robert Jackson (2004) has surveyed a series of different philosophical and pedagogical stances towards religious education that can be envisioned along a continuum, with the poles consisting of arguments that Christian indoctrination is an appropriate program for public schools (at the one end) and the view that

⁵ See Francis et al (2017) and American Academy of Religion (2010) for concise descriptions of the rather different historical policy contexts for religious education in the UK and US, respectively.

⁶ The question of whether or not to extend public funding already provided to Roman Catholic schools to educational institutions operated by other religious groups (e.g. Protestants, Muslims, Jews) is widely regarded as having determined the course of the 2007 Ontario provincial election (Sears, 2007; Van Arragon, 2015b).

contemporary society's deeply secular character makes any form of primary/secondary education about religion inappropriate (at the other end). Between these two extremes lie a multitude of other perspectives, including the relegation of religious education to privately funded religious schools, religious education conceptualized as religious literacy⁷, and Jackson's own interpretive approach⁸ to religious education (to name only a few).

The aforementioned categorization schemes illustrate how the term "religious education" can have multiple, even mutually irreconcilable definitions. Further, they clarify the way in which terms that may be used interchangeably in some situations could also have radically different meanings in other contexts⁹. Indeed, not all forms of ostensibly "secular" religious education are alike. This makes it important to clearly define what is meant by religious education within the context of the present study.

For the purposes of this study, I will be using the term "religious education" as a general term of reference for non-confessional (i.e. non-indoctrinating, non-proselytizing) forms of religion-related education. It will not be used to note any distinctions in philosophy or pedagogy among such approaches. That is, "religious education" will simply refer to forms of religion-related instruction that are designed to do something other than convert students into the practice of a particular religious tradition, unless otherwise noted through the use of appropriate adjectives (e.g. "confessional") or other qualifiers. Related terms such as "education about

⁷ Note that Jackson's discussion of religious literacy in *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality (2004)* addresses an approach to religious education that is conceptually distinct from the notion of religious literacy put forward by the American Academy of Religion in their *Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States (2010)*.

⁸ Described in Chapter 6 of *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality (2004)* and other works. Diane Moore, a prominent advocate for widespread (non-confessional) religious education in the United States, has provided commentary on Jackson's preferred pedagogical approach (2005), as well as put forward her own cultural studies model (2014). The latter approach is the same as was noted in the aforementioned guidelines put out by the American Academy of Religion (Moore chaired the task force that wrote them).

⁹ An example is "religious education" and "religious literacy", which I have observed being used as synonyms in many peer-reviewed articles.

religion”, “religious literacy”, the shortened form “RE”, and “secular RE” should be read as straightforward equivalents.

A Personal Note on Religion

Before proceeding with further exploration of the literature on RE, I would like to provide some clarification regarding my personal views on religion. In doing so, I am motivated both by the nature of my research topic and because my experience of graduate school has been strongly influenced by my personal religious history. When I began my graduate studies in the autumn of 2015, I considered myself a devout Christian. My religious identity and relationship to the church community in which I had grown up were strained, but otherwise intact. Over the course of the next few years, however, my understanding of the world and of myself changed quite dramatically. By the time I submitted the proposal for the present study to my thesis committee in early 2020, I considered myself a skeptic and lived with no established relationship to any religious community.

One of my objectives in studying religious education at the graduate level was to give myself an opportunity to come to terms with aspects of my religious upbringing. While it would be inaccurate to suggest that my graduate studies were the cause of my effective deconversion from Christianity, it is likewise quite foolish to think that the two experiences had nothing to do with each other. The acceptance and compassion that I received from my professors, which they offered despite the fact that many of their opinions differed from my own, gave me the sense of security that I needed to examine my own history in progressively finer detail. A major turning point was my reading of Alan Peshkin’s ethnography *God’s Choice: The Total World of a Fundamentalist Christian School* (1986), which my thesis supervisor Joel Westheimer recommended and lent to me.

As I read Peshkin's meticulously fair and sympathetic study of a fundamentalist Christian school in 1970's America, I found a great deal of what he described to be eerily familiar. There were times when I knew what Peshkin was going to say before he finished saying it, because I had walked through hallways and sat in classrooms just like those of the students and teachers he was writing about. The book helped me to recognize, for the first time, that there were elements of my religious upbringing that were clearly inspired by the views and practices of Christian fundamentalists. This realization disturbed me and opened my mind to the possibility that there could be something quite wrong with how I had been brought up to think.

At present, I understand religions to be historically conditioned systems of thought and action, through which humans have often structured their individual and communal lives with respect to questions of meaning and value. These systems, as well as the concept of religion itself, are socially constructed, with an existence that is perhaps more meaningfully understood in functional terms (i.e. in how they shape human behavior) than by descriptions of material features such as specific collections of laws, doctrines, or rituals (though these may be quite important). I am aware that this definition may overlap with the domains of other important concepts in the humanities, such as culture, ideology, and philosophy. In that sense, it is insufficiently precise and probably vulnerable to a good deal of criticism from those better educated on such matters than I am¹⁰. That being said, I believe that ideas are best thought of as tools – their value is not found in how perfectly they model the world, but in how they can help us to act in and engage with it. I find that, at least for now and in the context of my personal life, this understanding of religion works for what I need it to.

¹⁰ Though perhaps not as much as I might worry about. Diane Moore, founder and director of the Harvard Divinity School's Religious Literacy Project, has noted that "religions are collections of ideas, practices, values and stories that are all embedded in cultures and not separable from them." (2014, p. 382) It is not unusual for things which are treated separately in abstract conversation to be interconnected in reality.

The Nature of Curriculum

That education should be regulated by law and should be an affair of state is not to be denied, but what should be the character of this public education, and how young persons should be educated, are questions which remain to be considered.... The existing practice is perplexing; no one knows on what principle we should proceed—should the useful in life, or should virtue, or should the higher knowledge, be the aim of our training; all three opinions have been entertained. Again, about the means there is no agreement: for different persons, starting with different ideas about the nature of virtue, naturally disagree about the practice of it. There can be no doubt that children should be taught those useful things that are really necessary, but not all useful things. (Aristotle, 1941, p. 1305-1306)

What should schools teach? Curricula are practical manifestations of one or more answers to this question, laid down by political authorities for application within a given jurisdiction at a particular moment in time. The curriculum is an object of central importance in both the study of education systems and the field of education more broadly, representing “the organizational as well as intellectual center of institutionalized education” (Jung & Pinar, 2015, p. 29). In its simplest form, a curriculum represents the official position on what students should learn (Walker & Soltis, 2009). Political authorities (such as provincial ministries of education in Canada) often publish their curricula in the form of detailed guidelines for classroom instruction and course planning.

Such documents usually contain both general goals and specific learning objectives and may explicitly or implicitly support a set of specific learning practices. It should be noted, however, that curricula are not restricted to this form. In many schools, lesson plans and

homework assignments are closely tied to the use of textbooks, making such documents a central part of the school's curriculum (Apple, 2008). Indeed, a comprehensive analysis of the nature of curriculum must necessarily include far more than authoritative texts (e.g. standards, guidelines, and textbooks) handed down by governments to school boards and teachers. At its most sophisticated, the concept of curriculum includes "the broadest experiences of teachers, parents and students as the work of curriculum is developed, expressed, and implemented." (Ayers et al, 2008, p. 310). The term can thus be understood to potentially encompass everything that the experience of schooling is about, or any aspect thereof. Though the present study will focus on curriculum as expressed in official government teaching standards and guidelines (henceforth referred to as the formal curriculum), it is important to note that such documents are not in themselves a comprehensive account of what is being taught (or learned) in a given school or school system.

The content mandated by a formal curriculum is not necessarily the same as what is being taught in classrooms operating under its authority. Many studies have demonstrated a rather loose relationship between the prescribed curriculum and what is actually taught (Cohen & Spillane, 1992; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Walker, 1982), with the inherent difficulties of drawing clear causal links between a curriculum's implementation and specific outcomes in particular schools adding to the ambiguity. As such, "it is widely accepted that the direct influence of formal curricula on teaching practice is at best uncertain." (Westbury, 2008, p. 46) Nevertheless, the formal curriculum plays a key role in the governance of education systems, influencing the form and substance of everything from teacher education to inspection standards. At the level of educational leadership, it has the power to "signal priorities, and thus set agendas for administrative action." (Westbury, 2008, p. 57) The formal curriculum can thus be seen as a

collection of administrative incentives, which influence which matters schools will take seriously and which they will de-prioritize and set off to the side. The formal curriculum is a mechanism by which political authorities “steer” school systems’ internal conversations and decision-making processes. It also has considerable symbolic influence, in that it represents official state-sanctioned knowledge – a statement of what is considered fact, what is worth knowing, and what is worth talking about.

It is also important to note that formal curricula are the products of perpetual cycles of contestation and (re)negotiation. Indeed, the crafting of curriculum must be understood as an unavoidably political process, if for no other reason than that “in those public arenas... where issues of [curricular] content are debated and 'settled', the interests, in terms of career, status or access to resources, of particular groups may be at stake.” (Ball & Goodson, 2012) That is not to say that the views of ostensibly objective educational experts and academics (who are themselves not immune from political or self-interested motivations) do not matter in the curriculum development process. It is simply that theirs are not the only views that do. It is also true that curriculum decisions may be made in the context of larger discussions about the broader public good (e.g. secularism and the place of religion in the province of Quebec; reconciliation with Canada’s Indigenous peoples in the aftermath of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission), which insert additional priorities and considerations into the curriculum development process. These realities have important implications for how the question of the representation of religion in public school curricula is understood.

Even if we were to find widespread, fervent support amongst the academic community for the practice of religious education in public schools, this does not mean that implementing it would be feasible within the context of any given school or school system. There simply are

other factors that must be considered, not least of which is the fact that the number of worthwhile topics of instruction will always be greater than that which can be effectively taught as part of a basic education. A failure to include discussion of a worthy subject in the curriculum does not in itself diminish the potential value of that subject, nor does it necessarily imply any vice on the part of curriculum decision makers for not including it. As was noted by Aristotle, it is not enough for a topic to be thought of as useful – there are still choices that must be made.

Education about Religion – Why Do It?

Given the complexities of curricular development expressed above, why try to incorporate education about religion into the framework of a publicly funded basic education? What is the value proposition that would justify such an effort? To begin with, it must be acknowledged that most North American public schools already provide some manner of religion-related education, whether associated with a formalized RE curriculum or not¹¹. But what is it about secular RE that makes it a worthwhile endeavor in the first place? Scholars in the field tend to answer this question in one of two ways.

The first is to argue that RE is an important means of facilitating students' intellectual and existential development. One way of expressing this is to say that studying religion is a necessary part of a liberal education, which equips students to be self-reflective, to question received wisdom, and to think for themselves. In this vein, American RE scholar Warren Nord (2010)¹² emphasizes that a liberal education requires exposure to and consideration of religious

¹¹ According to the American Academy of Religion's Religion in the Schools Task Force (2010), religion is embedded in the state and national curriculum standards for several non-religion subjects taught in American public K-12 education. Its presence is most prominent in the disciplines of social studies and English. Patrick (2015a) notes that the high school social studies curricula of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba all discuss religion, although she is critical of their overall degree of engagement with the subject of religious diversity.

¹² *Does God Make a Difference? Taking Religion Seriously in Our Schools and Universities* was published shortly after the author's death and can be considered a summary of Warren Nord's thoughts on religious education (he

as well as secular ways of making sense of the world. He advocates for a religious literacy education that cultivates a critically minded appreciation for how particular religious viewpoints can be a “live option” for making sense of one’s life in the present day. Nord also points out that since religions are a source for both violence and peace and the beliefs they articulate often have direct implications in the areas of politics and economics, religion remains a powerfully influential force in the world that students should be learning about.

A related approach is to point out the utility of religion as a launching point for classroom discussions of philosophical, existential, and social questions that are relevant to students’ lives. Approaching RE from this angle, American educational philosopher Nel Noddings (1993) asserts that the topic of religion not only presents educators and students with a rich repository of cultural inheritance to explore, but also with an abundance of opportunities to engage in critical inquiry. Noddings argues for an education about religion that “faces the common doubts and commitments squarely and honestly” (p. 245) and asserts that this should be accompanied by a “sensitive, appreciative debunking” (p. 247) of unintelligent religious belief. While not opposed to religion per se, Noddings does not think educators should pull any punches with respect to the negative impact of some religious beliefs on human behavior and societies, both historically and to the present day. To her mind, criticism of religion must be openly entertained and positions critical of religion explored, with students becoming as well acquainted with non-religious worldviews (e.g. secular humanism) as with religious ones.

The second, more prominent approach to justifying the value of secular RE is to argue that it is an important, even necessary element of modern citizenship education. There are several

wrote several other works on the subject). In the forward, his colleague Charles C. Haynes describes how Nord pushed himself to finish the book despite being engaged in a months-long battle with leukemia, submitting the final edits just eleven days before he died.

ways in which the provision of religious education in public schools is alleged to support the development of good citizens. One is that RE encourages social tolerance and inclusion, which it can accomplish through such things as building students' capacity for nuanced and empathetic understanding of the religious other (Rosenblith & Bailey, 2008) and by openly and explicitly acknowledging the significance of religious identity in many people's lives (Patrick, 2015a; Sweet, 1997). Another is that RE builds students' social awareness, helping them to make sense of the influence of religion in their local communities and in global affairs (Sears, 2013). A third is to say that the cultivation of a widely held awareness of religious diversity helps to combat ignorance and public misrepresentations of the religious other (Patrick, 2015a; Sikka, 2014), which would otherwise leave society vulnerable to "unjustified fears, stoked by sensationalist and distorting media coverage as well as political demagoguery." (Sikka, 2014, p. 336)

Advocates of RE as personal development and RE as citizenship education both place a common emphasis on the importance of cultivating students' capacity for informed, critical reflection about religion. It is worth noting that the two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, Canadian philosopher Sonia Sikka has provided an interesting example of how they can be combined, and in a manner which speaks directly to the Canadian national context. In *Liberalism, Multiculturalism, and The Case for Public Religion* (2010), Sikka examines the tendency of certain political frameworks to encourage a generalized avoidance of critical public discussion about religious viewpoints. She explains that in societies characterized by the co-existence, or overlap, of political liberalism and a policy of multiculturalism (e.g. Canada), people are able to advance legal claims on the basis of belief and identity without having to justify the substance or "truth" behind them. Such claims are taken to be legitimate (provided they are made in good faith) because the person making the claim considers them legitimate, at

which point the question becomes how to balance their rights with the rights of others making similarly grounded claims. In other words, such a framework does not require, and indeed deliberately avoids the need for, individuals' critical reflection on the content of their beliefs and identities (whether cultural or religious) when pursuing desired outcomes in relation to the state.

While this shielding of a claimant's ideas from critical scrutiny is done to maintain state neutrality and thereby support a just political order, Sikka (2010) points out that "any demand requiring people to adopt a particular form of reasoning in one central social sphere is sure to have an influence upon others." (p. 590) One of the consequences of an overlap between liberalism and multiculturalism, Sikka asserts, is that individuals are discouraged from developing the intellectual habit of reasoning about the traditions that shape them and out of which they live. This effect is concerning because the cultivation of citizens capable of self-reflection, of open-minded and reasoned engagement with criticism emanating both from within their own traditions and from outside of them, is widely regarded as an end appropriate to modern democratic societies. Emphasizing the unintentional and practical nature of the phenomenon she is describing, Sikka argues for education about religion in public schools as part of a corrective strategy. In her view, the goal of such education is "not merely to learn about religious systems of belief, whether one's own or those of others, nor is it to learn that people with mutually irreconcilable views on this subject can nonetheless get along within the same political system. It is, rather, to develop the skills and habits of thought required for reflective deliberation about the content of religious beliefs." (2010, p. 602)

The notion of religious education as a contributor to the broader social good has been the focus of several major initiatives in recent years. For example, in 2010, the American Academy of Religion published its *Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the*

United States. The product of three years of work by the organization's Religion in the Schools Task Force, its contents are explicitly grounded in the premises that "illiteracy regarding religion 1) is widespread, 2) fuels prejudice and antagonism, and 3) can be diminished by teaching about religion in public schools using a non-devotional, academic perspective, called religious studies." (American Academy of Religion, 2010, p. 1) In 2015, religion scholar and educator Diane Moore (who chaired the Religion in the Schools Task Force) became Founding Director of the Religious Literacy Project (RLP). Based at the Harvard Divinity School, the RLP strives to advance the public understanding of religion using workshops, webinars and courses (among other means), offers religious studies training to high school and community college educators, provides K-12 educators with open access resources on religion, and conducts research on education about religion in American public secondary schools (Religious Literacy Project, n.d.).

Another notable initiative is the REDCo project. Standing for "Religion in Education. A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in Transforming Societies of European Countries?", REDCo was a large-scale research project conducted in the late 2000s, whose main objective was "to establish and compare the potentials and limitations of religion in the educational systems of selected European countries." (Weiss, 2011, p.113) Here, religious education was examined for its potential contribution to citizenship education across Europe as a whole, with a total of nine universities from eight different European countries participating in the research. Though the project's findings are too numerous and detailed to discuss here¹³, REDCo concluded that integrating and enhancing the study of religion in public school curricula can help foster better interpersonal relations amongst Europeans and produced policy recommendations in line with this view.

¹³ See Weiss (2011) for a summary of the resources produced.

The scale and publicly funded¹⁴ nature of the REDCo project is notable in that it suggests a pronounced interest within the European sphere in the promotion of interreligious understanding (Weiss, 2011, p. 112-113), as well as a recognition that religious education may have a valuable contribution to make and is therefore worthy of serious examination. This presents something of a contrast with the situation in Canada, where there is a noticeable comparative lack in both public discussion and academic research on the subject of education about religion in public schooling (Beaman, 2017; Patrick, 2015a). Even so, included among the 94 Calls to Action published by The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada¹⁵ (TRC) was the recommendation that “all levels of government that provide public funds to denominational schools...require such schools to provide an education on comparative religious studies, which must include a segment on Aboriginal spiritual beliefs and practices” (TRC, 2015, p. 239). While focusing specifically on the need for religious schools to educate students about more than just a given school’s own affiliated religious tradition (e.g. Roman Catholicism), the TRC regarded a lack of familiarity with multiple religious/spiritual viewpoints as leaving students ill-equipped to understand or respect the distinctive spiritual perspectives of Aboriginal peoples. As such, the TRC stated its belief that “religious diversity courses must be mandatory in all provinces and territories.” (2015, p. 238)

While RE as a contributor to citizenship education seems to be the more prominent approach to justifying the value of religious education, there are reasons to be cautious with this

¹⁴ The project received 1,188,000 Euros in funding over three years from the European Commission.

¹⁵ A landmark event in recent Canadian history, the TRC was established in 2008 to provide Canadians with a comprehensive picture of the history and continuing legacy of Canada’s Indian residential school system, as well as to provide a roadmap for the future of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. Among the Commission’s findings was the determination that over the course of the nation’s history, Canada had engaged in a deliberate policy of cultural genocide towards its Indigenous peoples, attempting to destroy the social and political institutions that allowed them to exist as “distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada” (TRC, 2015, p. 1).

line of thinking. First, how do we know that it works? In a study of students aged 13-15 who attended non-religiously affiliated schools in England, Francis et al (2017) found that those who took RE as an examinable subject¹⁶ felt greater respect for and acceptance of religious diversity. As encouraging as that might be, however, what ultimately matters is how and whether positive attitudes “translate into everyday interaction” (Beaman et al., 2017, p. 253), something that is by no means easy to demonstrate empirically.

There is also the question of whether deliberate and focused discussion of religion is necessary to foster patterns of behavior that are tolerant of religious diversity. In Canada, conversations about diversity often take place through the lens of multiculturalism, which is both an important dimension of Canadian national identity and an official state policy. In this context, elements of human diversity that might otherwise be considered “religious” in nature can be discussed in relation to broader notions such as culture and ethnicity, with the concept of religion itself taking something of a backseat. This aspect of Canadian diversity discourse might explain some of the aforementioned lack of public discussion and academic research concerning education about religion – Canadians do talk about religion, but not necessarily as religion. There is thus some question as to whether directed, explicit forms of RE (such as those intended to build students’ “religious literacy”) are an optimal solution for all contexts. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that Canadian youth hold generally positive attitudes towards religion and religious diversity, despite having a relatively superficial knowledge of the major world religions (Beaman et al., 2017).

¹⁶ This term refers to a school subject on which a student will be tested as part of their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams, a series of qualifying examinations that constitute an important component of secondary education in the United Kingdom.

It is also important not to assume that RE, as a kind of citizenship education, is at worst a harmless enterprise, posing no greater hazard than the potential for wasting time and other resources (which in any case would be no small thing). Indeed, some scholars have highlighted the potential dangers associated with providing instruction about religion for what are essentially political purposes. For example, if RE can support citizenship education by correcting common misconceptions about religion and religious adherents, it may also propagate distortions of its own by overemphasizing those aspects of religion which are judged to be the most politically salient at a given moment in time (Patrick, 2015b). There is also the risk that RE will be used as a tool in partisan politics, promoting understandings of the relationship between religion and society that play well into specific political narratives and marginalize those who hold alternative viewpoints (Boisvert, 2015; Van Arragon, 2015a).

These areas of concern notwithstanding, what should be clear is that there are rational arguments (revolving mainly around purported contributions to citizenship education) for why RE belongs in public education. Whether one agrees with these arguments or not, they have prominent advocates within academic circles and in any case, what schools teach and how is not a matter for abstract, scholarly discussion alone. As was suggested earlier, the inclusion of a given subject within the formal curriculum, as well as the manner of its inclusion (i.e. when, to what extent, and how it is taught), is the result of a complex decision-making process involving multiple voices and interests. This brings us to a discussion of a key characteristic of religious education – its connection to politics.

The Inherently Political Nature of Religious Education

The practice of RE in public schools is situated within wider public conversations concerning the place of religion in society and the status of religion in the broader public

consciousness. As mentioned earlier, formal curricula handed down by government authorities represent official state-sanctioned knowledge – statements of what is considered fact, what is worth knowing, and what is worth talking about. A curriculum’s approach to religion-related instruction, therefore, necessarily involves making statements (whether directly or in a symbolic sense) about how religion should be understood, including whether and how it should be thought to matter. While not always at the forefront of public awareness, these are contentious questions with a tendency to generate strong opinions and, often enough, a willingness to advocate for one’s views through political activism and/or litigation. This reality is of great significance for understanding religious education at the primary/secondary level, where public opinion has the power to shape curriculum and policy decisions.

As religious education scholar Geir Skeie (2015) has pointed out, the broader issue of religion in education involves questions of “the political sensitivity of the issue, the relationship to national cultural heritage, the role of religious and non-religious interest groups and the role of experts in religion and religious education.” (p. 127) Speaking from his experience studying RE in Norway and other northwestern European countries, Skeie notes that the purpose of religious education in primary/secondary schools and in universities is not entirely the same. A crucial distinction between the two types of institutions is that the work of primary/secondary schools involves a general socialization aspect that is not part of the mission of universities. While both types of institutions will incorporate the views of educational authorities (e.g. academics, instructors) into the construction of their religious education curricula, primary/secondary schools must take into consideration the views of religious and non-religious community interest groups as well. This distinction can result in different kinds of educational approaches to the study of religion, with different sources of information being drawn on and prioritized in the

construction and selection of curriculum and pedagogy. Indeed, there is something to be said for how the manner in which one understands religion (and articulates it before a classroom of students) has a lot to do with what one is attempting to understand it *for*.

In the case of Canada's most prominent contemporary example of secular RE, the "for" was, among other objectives, to assist in the systematic dismantling of religious influence over public education in Canada's second largest province. At the time of its implementation in 2008, Quebec's Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) curriculum was the latest step in a decades-long project of secularizing the province's school system following a long history of overtly religious (predominantly Roman Catholic) control. This transitioning process, often referred to as deconfessionalization, demanded a rethink of Quebec's approach to religion-related instruction in elementary schools and high schools. The result was a curriculum whose content is mandatory across all years of primary and secondary education in both public and private schools, all across the province.

According to religious studies scholar Donald Boisvert, the use of the expression "religious culture" is indicative of the ERC's grounding in a neo-Marxist and distinctively French academic perspective on the study of religion. The term denotes "an explicitly non-theological, non-theistic approach to religion... understood as an eminently human cultural phenomenon, on a par with other cultural productions such as art or the legal system." (Boisvert, 2015, p. 383) The ERC's stated core objectives are to promote students' *recognition of others* (i.e. their value, dignity, and individual differences in worldview and self-understanding) and *pursuit of the common good*, defined as "the search, along with others, for common values; the promotion of projects that foster community life; and respect for democratic principles and ideals specific to Québec society" (Ministry of Education, Leisure and Sport (Quebec), 2008, p. 296)

The emphasis on “ideals specific to Québec society” is one of many expressions of the curriculum’s explicitly political intent, as is the statement (found on the very same page) that the ERC’s objectives “contribute... to encouraging the construction of a truly common public culture.” The guiding aims of developing students’ capacity for reflection on ethical questions, to demonstrate an understanding of religious phenomena, and to engage in dialogue with others mark the ERC program as a form of citizenship education.

Public reaction to the ERC program was decidedly mixed and it is interesting to consider the breadth of the objections levied against it. Mireille Estivalèzes (2019), a scholar of religious education, has noted three broad groupings in the public criticism directed towards the ERC. One is grounded in a communitarian religious outlook that emphasizes the rights of parents and religious communities to insist their children be provided with an education that faithfully transmits (or, at least, does not compromise their faithful transmission of) their values and convictions. This viewpoint found expression in legal cases brought before the Supreme Court of Canada (SCC) in *S.L. v. Commission Scolaire Des Chênes* (2012) and *Loyola High School v. Quebec (Attorney General)* (2015), where appellants sought to challenge the government of Quebec’s denial of their requests for various exemptions from the mandatory curriculum. In *Des Chênes* (2012), a Roman Catholic couple sought to prevent their children from receiving instruction under the ERC, arguing that the presentation of facts about other religions and the program’s relativistic outlook would undermine the parents’ ability to effectively pass on their faith. While the SCC accepted the sincerity of the couple’s belief in their religious obligation to transmit their faith to their children and noted the relevance of such sincerity in cases concerning the possible infringement of a person’s right to freedom of conscience and religion (which the couple claimed had been violated), the court dismissed the appeal on the grounds that the couple

failed to objectively prove that an infringement of their rights had taken place. The SCC was careful to note its openness to the possibility that some element of the ERC program or its manner of implementation might prove to be a violation of a person's rights, including those of freedom of conscience and religion; it was simply that in this case, the evidence presented by the couple had been insufficient to meet the legal standard required for the court to find in their favor.

A rather different conclusion was reached in *Loyola High School v. Quebec (Attorney General)* (2015), which concerned a private Catholic high school that sought approval to replace the ERC curriculum with an equivalent alternative that would be taught from an explicitly Catholic perspective. The Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports had denied the school's initial request, objecting that the proposed course could not be considered equivalent to the ERC as long as it were taught from a Catholic viewpoint. As the case moved through the appeals process, Loyola modified its proposal such that it would present material about the doctrines and practices of non-Catholic religions in a neutral fashion, in keeping with the ERC program's requirement that teaching on such matters be objective and impartial. However, Loyola still wanted to teach about the Roman Catholic religion, as well as specifically the ethics of other religions, from a Roman Catholic perspective.

The SCC held that the Minister's insistence that no part of Loyola's proposed alternative be taught from a Catholic viewpoint imposed an excessive limitation on the school's freedom of religion and ordered the proposal returned to the Minister for reconsideration. However, the court was split quite dramatically in its understanding of the extent to which Loyola's freedom of religion had been unnecessarily restricted, as well as on what constituted an appropriate remedy for the SCC to provide in response. A four-member majority argued that while it was

unreasonable to require an institution with an explicitly Roman Catholic mission and mandate to deny its identity when teaching about its own religious tradition, allowing the ethics of other religions to be taught from a Catholic perspective “contradicts the ERC Program’s goals of ensuring respect for different religious beliefs.” (2015, p. 618) In contrast to this view, the remaining three justices (including then Chief Justice Beverley McLaughlin) argued that there was no inherent incompatibility between the ERC Program’s objectives and a religious instructional approach and that the court should have used its authority to grant Loyola’s request for an exemption outright, dubbing such an action “the only constitutional response” (2015, p. 621).

Another category of public criticism of the ERC is grounded in a nationalistic outlook that views the program as promoting ideas that are detrimental to Quebecois national culture. According to Estivalèzes (2019), some have argued that the ERC was conceived to push an ideology of cultural accommodation and multiculturalism, the latter concept being understood to diminish the significance of the majority culture within Quebec society. In this view, we see a concern that is similar to that animating the aforementioned religious communitarian critique, in that it is grounded in anxiety concerning the ERC’s supposedly relativistic outlook (although of a cultural rather than religious variety in this case). Estivalèzes refutes this view by asserting that the ERC, with its emphasis on recognition (rather than erasure) of individual differences and its focus on the majority Christian religious history of Quebec, exhibits a comparatively greater affinity for the principle of interculturalism¹⁷, which seeks to bring people of diverse backgrounds together in the pursuit of a single common culture.

¹⁷ For a discussion of interculturalism and Quebec’s difficult relationship with the concept of multiculturalism, see *Building The Future: A Time for Reconciliation* (2008). This was the final report of the Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences (2007-2008), more commonly known as the Bouchard-Taylor Commission.

Strong secularist convictions and anti-religious sentiment provide the basis for Estivalèzes' third grouping of public criticism of the ERC, which is grounded not in considerations of collective identity but in concerns about religion itself. Criticism of this variety has included denouncement of the ERC's religious culture component as a mechanism for the continued integration of Roman Catholicism in Quebec's public school system, along with arguments for the continuing inclusion of only that material which concerns the philosophical foundation of ethics. The ERC has also been attacked for its failure to confront discriminatory aspects of religious history, doctrine and practice (particularly as concerns the status and treatment of women), prompting calls for criticism of such elements to be incorporated into the program. The notion that religion-related education should be critical of religion and not just seek to describe it in a morally neutral fashion is not unique to commentary on the ERC, having been argued with respect to secular religious education in general at least as far back as Nel Noddings' 1993 work *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief*.

In January 2020, several media outlets reported that the ruling CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec) government had announced its intention to replace the ERC program. The new curriculum, which was not in place at the time the present study was completed¹⁸, would cover material related to “citizen participation, democracy, legal education, sexuality, interpersonal relationships, ethics and eco- and digital-citizenship” (Marchand, 2020). The decision was billed as a response to “years of relentless criticism from Quebec nationalists and committed secularists” (Valiante, 2020) and seems likely to relegate discussion of religion to the sidelines of

¹⁸ An internet search in July 2021 showed no new media reports related to the replacement of the Ethics and Religious Culture curriculum, with the Quebec Ministry of Education website continuing to present information on the ERC as though it were a live program. Though the reasons for the delay are unclear, one might speculate that the Quebec Ministry of Education has had its hands full dealing with matters stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Quebec public education. In light of these developments, it is interesting to revisit analysis given by religious studies scholar Donald Boisvert (2015), who excoriated the ERC for presenting a view of religion which (contrary to the opinions of those who now appear to have won the argument) seemed as likely to minimize religion's public importance as it was to reinforce it. Noting how the ERC program's design privileged the interpretations of academics and (interestingly) played rather well into the politics of Quebec nationalism, Boisvert questioned whether the program might not itself serve as a mechanism for restraining the influence of religion in Quebec society. He writes:

Quebec still struggles seriously with its religious past. Religion is often described and talked about as something dangerous or overwhelmingly oppressive. Was something similar subtly at work in the elaboration of the ERC programme? I mean by this a deliberate framing of religion as little more than a cultural fact and artefact; something that needed to be firmly regulated and controlled; something that must remain safely academic; simply a cultural manifestation without real impact on the public sphere or on the collective life; an alienation and diminishment of the religious experience; and, in a word, a closing of the collective imagination. (p. 388)

However one views the ERC, the reality is that the implementation of a compulsory religious education program, spanning all years of primary and secondary schooling, constitutes a government's taking a public stance on the significance of religion in society. In the case of a secular RE curriculum like the ERC, that stance is a bold insistence that religion matters and needs to be talked about with openness and a degree of academic rigor if Quebec is to get on as a society. There are those who may find the content of such curricula threatening, disruptive of important religious narratives which they feel responsible for instilling in their children and

promoting within their communities. Others may see a given secular RE curriculum as advancing cultural norms that are contrary to deeply held political views, with the details of what is taught about one religion or another being almost beside the point. And yet still others may view the simple act of dedicating publicly funded class time to a concerted discussion of religion (no matter how secular or objective its framing) as deeply problematic, not just in spite of attempts to teach the subject neutrally but perhaps because of them. Canada's recent history has been one of moving away from the confessionally-based school systems (and accompanying confessional religious education models) of the past (Beaman et al., 2017; Ginn et al., 2020), but it would be a mistake to assume that the adoption of any one of a number of ostensibly "secular" approaches will automatically render RE acceptable to either the believing or non-believing public. Being non-confessional in nature does not make religious education any less political, or in itself any less apt to produce controversy.

Religion and Ontario Public Education

It is generally prudent to begin discussions of Canadian education policy with an examination of foundational legal realities, if for no other reason than to remind American readers that theirs is not the only Constitution worth talking about. The *Constitution Act, 1867* (originally and for most of Canadian history known as the *British North America Act*) places matters of education under the near-exclusive jurisdiction of provincial governments, making Canada unusual among federal democracies in that it does not have a national department of education. Aside from a small number of exceptions which are nevertheless politically significant¹⁹, the federal government neither has nor can have any involvement in Canadian

¹⁹ These include funding for scholarships given to post-secondary students, education in schools on indigenous reserves, and education in Canada's northern territories (authority over which is nonetheless wielded by territorial governments, but as a result of devolution rather than constitutional right).

education policy other than with the express consent of one or more of the provinces, which possess independent legal authority under the Canadian constitution. Religious education policy in Canada, therefore, is a matter of provincial policy and politics, as well as of Canadian constitutional law.

As one might expect of circumstances surrounding the founding and development of a nation's self-governance, the history of these issues is complex. Suffice it to say that the constitutionally entrenched dominance of the provinces in educational affairs was a measure put in place to protect regional cultural and religious identities in mid-19th century Canada (Hoverd et al., 2015). To this end, the *Constitution Act, 1867* also circumscribed provincial authority regarding denominational (i.e. religiously affiliated) schools, specifying that provincial governments must maintain any legal rights or privileges which a particular group had with respect to such schools at the time that the province joined Confederation. Though provincial legislatures were free to augment existing denominational schooling rights and even extend them to new groups, they could not diminish or interfere with what had already been granted at the time that their province became a part of Canada. The sole means by which such arrangements could be undone was through a constitutional amendment, which some Canadian provinces (e.g. Quebec, Newfoundland & Labrador) have used over the years to divest themselves of their denominational schooling obligations (Ginn et al., 2020).

The province of Ontario, however, is unique in having not only maintained its pre-Confederation commitment to supporting the denominational schools of one particular religious group (Roman Catholics), but in simultaneously refusing to extend similar support to any other faith groups. Since 1984, the government of Ontario has provided full public funding for K-12

education offered by two²⁰ categories of schools - Roman Catholic schools and public (also known historically as “common”) schools. The former provides an educational environment that is explicitly Roman Catholic in orientation, although enrolment is not restricted to students from Roman Catholic families. The latter operates according to an ethos that is intended to be inclusive of the whole of society, but which was nonetheless explicitly Protestant Christian in character up until 1990. This framework of two distinct and institutionally separated models for publicly funded religious education, with all other comers left to fend for themselves in terms of funding²¹, is a defining feature of the educational landscape in Ontario.

The phrase “education about religion” is of special significance in Ontario, as it was the language chosen to embody a judicially mandated paradigm shift in the public school system’s approach to religion-related instruction. In the 1990 decision *Canadian Civil Liberties Assn. v. Ontario (Minister of Education)*, also known as *Elgin County*, the Ontario Court of Appeal declared that the presence of Christian religious instruction in the standard curriculum of public schools violated Section 2 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*²². It was thus held to be unconstitutional, despite the fact that 1) provisions existed for parents to exclude their children from public school religion classes and 2) similar policies, when practiced by publicly funded Roman Catholic schools in Ontario, would continue to be permissible due to their virtual

²⁰ It should be noted that Ontario schools are also categorized according to language of primary instruction (i.e. English or French), with public and Roman Catholic school boards existing for both language groups.

²¹ There are a limited number of exceptions to this rule, such the Protestant separate school board which operates one publicly funded school in Penetanguishene, Ontario.

²² Introduced in 1982 as part of Canada’s updated constitution, the Charter is the centerpiece of Canadian human rights law and an important, though not uncontested, symbol of Canadian national identity. The relevant section states:

Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms:

- (a) freedom of conscience and religion;
- (b) freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication;
- (c) freedom of peaceful assembly; and
- (d) freedom of association.

immunity from Charter challenge, granted by the Charter's own Section 29²³. Van Arragon observes how in *Elgin County*, the court made a distinction between "religious education" (the approach of the past) and "education about religion" (the constitutionally permissible way forward), with an oft quoted segment of the decision stating that:

- The school may sponsor *the study of* religion, but may not sponsor the *practice of* religion.
- The school *may expose* students to all religious views, but may *not impose* any particular view.
- The school's approach to religion is one of *instruction*, not one of *indoctrination*.
- The function of the school is *to educate* about all religions, not to *convert to* any one religion.
- The school's approach is *academic*, not *devotional*.
- The school should *study what all people believe*, but should not *teach a student what to believe*.
- The school should strive for *student awareness of all religions*, but should not press for *student acceptance of any one religion*.
- The school should seek *to inform the student about* various beliefs, but should not seek to *conform him or her* to any one belief. (2015a, p. 38-39)²⁴

Education about religion was thus placed in binary opposition to religious education (Van Arragon, 2015a), leaving public schools free to engage in the former while being prohibited

²³ Section 29 states: "Nothing in this Charter abrogates or derogates from any rights or privileges guaranteed by or under the Constitution of Canada in respect to denominational, separate or dissident schools."

²⁴As a copy of the original 1990 decision by the Ontario Court of Appeal proved difficult to obtain, this quotation is itself a copy of a quotation from *Elgin County* found in Van Arragon (2015a) and is referenced as such.

forthwith from engaging in the latter. The Ontario Ministry of Education (1990) responded with the publication of Policy Memorandum 112, specifying that going forward, all religion-related instruction carried out by public school boards must be non-indoctrinating in character and structured so as not to give primacy to any one religion. It also rendered education about religion an entirely optional practice at the primary level (grades 1 through 8), to be conducted at the discretion of individual school boards, and noted that secondary schools could continue with their existing practice of offering optional world religions courses, which were already structured so as to meet the court's requirements. These parameters constitute the same basic arrangement that continues to the present day, as embodied in section 28 of the general regulation for the operation of schools in Ontario:

28. (1) A board may provide in grades one to eight and in its secondary schools an optional program of education about religion. R.R.O. 1990, Reg. 298, s. 28 (1).

(2) A program of education about religion shall,

(a) promote respect for the freedom of conscience and religion guaranteed by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*; and

(b) provide for the study of different religions and religious beliefs in Canada and the world, without giving primacy to, and without indoctrination in, any particular religion or religious belief. R.R.O. 1990, Reg. 298, s. 28 (2).

One of the more striking elements of the Ontario Ministry of Education's response to *Elgin County* was the shift from religion-related instruction being a mandatory component of the overall Ontario curriculum to being entirely optional across all grade levels. Prior to *Elgin*

County, the study of religion was a dedicated component of a basic education in Ontario. After the publication of Policy Memorandum 112, however, this was no longer the case, despite the fact that the *Elgin County* decision did not prohibit public schools from providing education about religion on a mandatory basis. When the Ministry of Education modified its policy approach to comply with the Court's ruling, it did not simply change how religion was taught in public schools. It made it possible for recipients of a publicly funded education in Ontario to graduate from both primary and secondary school without receiving dedicated instruction on the topic of religion. This state of affairs led journalist and religious affairs columnist Lois Sweet²⁵ to describe the government of Ontario's response as "a dangerous, and blind, overreaction." (Sweet, 1997, p. 36)

An alternative interpretation, however, is suggested by the work of religious studies researcher Leo Van Arragon²⁶, who has written extensively on the politics of religious education in Ontario. Van Arragon notes that, prior to the *Elgin County* decision in 1990, Protestant Christianity provided "a common language for public discourse, civic values and personal morality." (2015a, p. 38) Ontario common schools strove to be inclusive, but for much of the province's history, the overwhelming majority of the population were Protestant Christians (those who weren't were likely to be Roman Catholics, for whom separate schooling was available). As such, talking about values, ethics, and the promulgation of a common civic ethos using a distinctively Protestant Christian framework made a great deal of sense. A highlight of

²⁵ Sweet's book *God in the Classroom: The Controversial Issue of Religion in Canada's Schools* (1997) is a seminal work on religious education in Canada. Investigating the issue from a national perspective and examining international policy arrangements for contrast and comparison, it is an excellent introduction to the general topic in spite of its age. The fact that it is written from a journalistic, rather than academic, perspective gives it the added advantage of being quite readable.

²⁶ A former doctoral student of a member of my thesis advisory committee (Dr. Lori Beaman), Leo completed his PhD at the University of Ottawa around the same time as I was beginning my M.A. Years earlier, I had known him as "Mr. Van Arragon", the principal of the independent Christian high school that I attended.

Policy Memorandum 112 was the way it asserted a notion of “Canadian values” in place of Christianity, replacing it as the dominant ethos of public education in Ontario:

This permanent policy and the forthcoming amendments to *Regulation 262* are to be understood within the context of the long-established vision of the public elementary and secondary schools as places where people of diverse backgrounds can learn and grow together. The public schools are open and accessible to all on an equal basis and founded upon the positive social values which, in general, Canadians hold and regard as essential to the well-being of our society. These values transcend cultures and faiths, reinforce democratic rights and responsibilities and are founded on a fundamental belief in the worth of all persons. (1990)

What Sweet characterized as an overreaction, therefore, could also be viewed as a realization that an overt emphasis on religion-related instruction was no longer necessary to achieve the civic goals that stood behind the practice of mandatory confessional religious education in Ontario public schools. That a civic education grounded in Protestantism was no longer an option was clear; however, it should not be assumed that a revised general religious studies program (one incorporating study of a range of beliefs, practices and perspectives) would necessarily have constituted a viable or effective alternative. Whatever the case may be, a fundamental distinction between public and Roman Catholic schools in Ontario today is the optionality of religion as a topic of dedicated study. It is not simply a matter of the approach being taken (i.e. confessional vs. secular), but of whether students are expected to engage in a focused study of religion at all.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

Despite their differing stances towards the issue of religious education, both public and Roman Catholic secondary schools in Ontario use the same core curriculum that is approved by the provincial Ministry of Education. This curriculum offers non-confessional education about religion in the form of two world religions courses, which can be taken by students at the Grade 11 level (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). These two courses, one of which is structured to prepare students for further study in post-secondary and the other simply for general interest, are the only courses in the shared, standard Ontario high school curriculum where religion is the primary subject under examination. They are also optional in nature, which is to say that while courses taken in world religions do contribute towards a student receiving their Ontario Secondary School Diploma, they are part of a collection of subjects from which students are free to pick and choose. That being said, special provisions in Ontario education policy permit Roman Catholic secondary schools to teach a limited number of mandatory²⁷, explicitly Roman Catholic (i.e. confessional/denominational) religious education courses (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 77), in addition to what is contained in the standard curriculum. At present, this supplementary Roman Catholic religion curriculum is produced by the Institute for Catholic Education²⁸, with the most current edition having been published in 2016.

In examining how religion is represented in the current Ontario secondary school curriculum, therefore, one is presented with several possible approaches. One is to examine the content of the supplementary Roman Catholic religion curriculum, which is taught in Roman

²⁷ I use this term loosely, as while such courses are a normal and required part of the curriculum in Roman Catholic schools, exemptions for individual students are possible.

²⁸ This organization develops and publishes curriculum material for specifically English-language Roman Catholic schools and does so on behalf of the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario. A reference to the most recent edition of the supplementary Roman Catholic religion curriculum can be found in the References section under "Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, 2016".

Catholic schools but not at all in the public system. Another is to analyze the upper-year world religions courses in the standard curriculum which, although optional, are still offered by Ontario high schools and taken by some of their students. A third possibility is to examine those portions of the standard curriculum (both compulsory and optional) which are not explicitly focused on religion, but in which the topic might reasonably be expected to come up (e.g. history, social studies). It is this third option that I selected to guide my approach to the present study.

My interest in examining the representation of religion in courses not explicitly intended as religious education came out of my exposure to the work of two Canadian education scholars (Margaretta Patrick and Allan Sears), both of whom have published work asserting the importance of talking about religion in the context of social studies education. To put it simply, I found their arguments convincing and was curious to know whether and how Ontario schools educate about religion in contexts where the subject might be considered pertinent but is not the primary focus of the discussion (i.e. understanding religion in the context of studying another subject, such as history or global politics). Patrick's (2015a) engaging critique of the deficiencies of various western Canadian social studies curricula on this point was one of the early inspirations for my decision to compose a thesis about religious education. While I have not attempted to imitate the more critical aspects Patrick's study, I was nonetheless curious to see in the context of which topics and conversations the writers of the current Ontario secondary school curriculum considered religion to be worth bringing up. It was also true that in analyzing those parts of the standard curriculum which are not explicitly geared towards education about religion, I would be examining a wider range of material to which a correspondingly larger proportion of Ontario high school students are likely to be exposed over the course of their

secondary school education. As such, this general approach seemed best suited to my interests as a researcher, as well as more comprehensive in scope.

In its current form, the Ontario secondary school curriculum consists of over two dozen discrete curriculum documents, which are organized by grade level across 18 subject blocks (e.g. English, Computer Studies, Mathematics, Science, etc...). While a thorough and comprehensive assessment of all these documents with respect to representation of religion would have been ideal for the purposes of this study, the full curriculum runs at several thousand pages. Such a volume was simply beyond my capacity to properly examine within a reasonable timeframe. Therefore, I chose to examine only those sections of the curriculum to which discussion of religion is most obviously relevant; that is, those subjects which are principally concerned with educating students about the realities of human social life. Each of these sections of the curriculum were examined in their current editions, which is to say those mandated for use by Ontario secondary schools at the time this study was conducted.

In the Ontario high school curriculum, most of the “society-focused” subjects are neatly organized under the two subject blocks of “Canadian and World Studies” (i.e. geography, history, politics, economics and law) and “Social Sciences and Humanities” (i.e. equity studies, family studies, general social sciences, philosophy, and world religions). There is also an additional subject block which I thought it would be prudent to examine, that being “First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies”²⁹. The current editions of curricula under each of these three categories, covering all applicable secondary school grade levels and together comprising approximately 1,500 pages, consist of the following documents:

²⁹ The rationale for including this subject block in my analysis was that the curriculum material would necessarily include some discussion of spirituality and culture; two categories which, in practice, can exhibit some degree of overlap with the category of religion.

The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 and 10: Canadian and World Studies (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2018)

The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 11 and 12: Canadian and World Studies (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015)

The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 to 12: Social Sciences and Humanities (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013)

The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 to 12: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019)

Since Canadian secondary school curricula are official government documents, a form of document analysis was required in order to study them. Zina O’Leary (2014) defines document analysis as the “collection, review, interrogation, and analysis of various forms of written text as a primary source of research data.” (p. 250). Both quantitative and qualitative approaches are possible when analyzing written texts, but in the case of this study, a combination of both offered the opportunity to paint a more complete picture of the representation of religion across the selected curriculum documents. As such, I chose to employ a variation on a family of mixed methods approaches which Bergman (2010) refers to as Hermeneutic Content Analysis (HCA). HCA is characterized by a three step, qualitative-quantitative-qualitative format, with the first step consisting of the researcher’s immersing themselves in their data set, making notes on its structure and contents, and identifying features pertinent to the performance of a subsequent quantitative analysis in step 2. Step 3 involves a second qualitative analysis that “interprets” (hence the use of the word “hermeneutic” in HCA) the results produced by the quantitative step, adding an additional layer of detail to the overall analysis. The precise nature of the quantitative and second qualitative steps in an HCA can vary, allowing for some degree of adaptation to the

needs of the particular research question or data set under consideration. In the case of the present study, the quantitative and second qualitative steps consisted of a frequency distribution analysis and a thematic analysis, respectively.

I began by immersing myself in the selected curriculum documents in order to identify a series of key terms (or “references”) which, when searched for via an electronic document search function, would serve to identify all sites within the documents where religion and religion-adjacent³⁰ discussions could be found. I also identified key organizational features of the curriculum documents that would inform the structuring of my quantitative frequency distribution analysis. I then ran the key terms through an electronic search function to identify all relevant discussion sites, mapping the frequency and distribution of key term references (both individually and collectively) across the selected documents. Organizational features identified in my initial review of the documents were taken into account at this stage in order to provide a meaningful comparison of key term frequencies between different parts of the curriculum documents (e.g. specific content expectations vs. general policy statements). I also filtered out any key term references emanating from world religions courses (the curricula for which were included within my data set), in order to maintain the focus of my study on course material where religion was not the primary subject matter under consideration.

Based on the results that my analysis produced up to this point, I then isolated those key term references that were located within portions of the curriculum documents representing content expectations (i.e. material that teachers are required to communicate to students taking a given course, as opposed to policy statements or content-related examples offered as non-

³⁰ In the context of this study, I use the term “religion-adjacent” to describe that which could reasonably be characterized as strongly overlapping with (or otherwise bearing a meaningfully close relation to) the topic of religion.

mandatory suggestions). These references served as the data set for the second qualitative step of my HCA, a thematic analysis examining how religion was being discussed within parts of the curriculum where it was not the primary subject of a course and assessing what relevance it was considered to have to discussion of other subjects within the curriculum. The sites were coded for interesting features, with particular attention paid to identifying the ideas, concepts, and topics in relation to which religion and adjacent subjects were being brought up and discussed. The codes were then developed into themes which, in combination with the results of the preceding frequency distribution analysis, were used to describe how religion is represented in the current Ontario secondary school curriculum.

The overall approach can be laid out as follows³¹:

³¹ Table 1 and the procedural structure it presents are an edited version of that found in Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 87), which is an explainer on the use of thematic analysis in qualitative social science research.

Table 1
Summary of Research Method Used in This Study

Phase	Description of process
1) Familiarizing myself with the data	Reading and re-reading the selected curriculum documents, noting down initial ideas on how to analyze in view of structural elements, identifying and selecting key terms that reliably indicate sites of discussion of religion and religion-adjacent topics within the texts
2) Frequency distribution analysis	Running a search for occurrences of the selected key terms, noting their number and distribution across the selected documents, comparing frequency of occurrence in relation to pertinent curriculum structural features identified in Phase 1
3) Generating initial codes	Systematically coding interesting features of key term sites emanating from content expectations (excluding world religions curricula), collating data relevant to each code
4) Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, reviewing notes to gather all data relevant to each potential theme
5) Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to their associated codes and the entire data set (i.e. the curriculum documents), generating a thematic “map” of the analysis
6) Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme
7) Producing the report	Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, incorporation of insights derived from frequency distribution analysis, relating back of the overall analysis to the research question

With respect to the qualitative aspects of my research method, it should be noted that there are some similarities between the approach I used here and certain forms of discourse analysis, which is a category of research approaches used to assess how language is being used in particular contexts. For example, in the doctoral dissertation *We Educate, they Indoctrinate*,

Van Arragon (2015b) uses critical discourse analysis (a variant that focuses on revealing and interrogating power relationships embedded in the manner in which a given topic is discussed) to explore the representation of religion in political debates over the role of religion in public education in Ontario. There are some similarities between our respective research methods in that both involve the careful reading and coding of a set of written documents, followed by organization of the coded words and phrases into themes. In keeping with the spirit of discourse analysis, however, Van Arragon focuses on subtleties in patterns of word usage, whereas my analysis was more concerned with the brute identification of topics and ideas with which religion was being associated, however they happened to be expressed within the data set. As such, I consider my approach here to have been a content (rather than discourse) analysis because it focused on what was being said (content), rather than how it was being said (discourse) (O’Leary, 2014, p. 315). However, given that the way we speak about a subject (e.g. phrasing, commonly used terms, established connections between key ideas) plays a significant role in defining our understanding of that subject, the distinction between content and discourse in a study concerned with representation of a concept (i.e. how the concept is being presented) is arguably a thin one. This is simply to say that although I am confident that the approach I chose was both methodologically appropriate and likely to produce interesting data (which in fact it did), there was more than one way I could have gone about this study. An approach grounded in discourse analysis was one such alternative.

In addition to the above comments, there were at least two substantial limitations to the design of this study that are deserving of note. First, it is something of a truism among education scholars that the official curriculum is not the taught curriculum. In choosing to pursue my research question solely through an analysis of official curriculum documents, I simultaneously

chose to exclude from my analysis any relevant data which might have been acquired through observation of actual classroom instruction. Given that the classroom is where representation of religion to students actually occurs, I left myself unable to account for matters such as how teachers frame the relevant material or how that framing might differ between educators working in either public or Roman Catholic schools.

While an analysis of how religion is represented in curriculum documents (which set the agenda and preliminary subject-matter framing for teachers as they develop their course plans) was by no means irrelevant to an investigation of the research question at hand, its results could not help but paint an incomplete picture of that which I desired to know. It should be noted, however, that this is a negative only if the present study were intended to provide the final word on the representation of religion in Ontario secondary schools. It is not – in fact, the scope of what is required to properly study the question became clearer to me over the course of the present work’s design process. In this sense, the uncovering of limitations was part of the learning.

A second methodological limitation concerned the selection of the curriculum documents that served as the data set for this study. I have already mentioned how, due to time limitations, it was impractical for me to examine representation of religion across the whole of the Ontario secondary school curriculum. I therefore selected those segments of the curriculum to which discussion of religion seemed most obviously relevant (i.e. parts consisting of subjects which were principally concerned with educating students about the realities of human social life). While examining these documents in particular mitigated the risk of leaving meaningful instances of representation of religion in the overall curriculum unaccounted for, the reality is that social studies and related subjects are not the only ones wherein conversations about religion

can occur. Though I was (and remain) somewhat skeptical of educational philosopher Nel Noddings' (1993) suggestion that a discussion of Rene Descartes' proofs for the existence of God could be held as students are being introduced to his contributions in the history of mathematics, I could easily see a discussion of spirituality, faith and the supernatural taking place in relation to the works of Shakespeare (e.g. English literature). The possibility that some such content might exist and not be incorporated into my analysis was simply a hazard of subjectively pre-filtering my data set in the way that I did, however justifiable the decision to do so might have been.

There was also the issue of my decision to exclude the Ontario secondary school curriculum's two Grade 11 world religions courses from my thematic analysis. As a course subject, "world religions" exists for the express purpose of teaching students about religion, so it would seem rather natural to include it in a study examining curricular representation of religion. This was especially so given that the current world religions curriculum is located within one of the documents that was selected for this study (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013) and which would otherwise be analyzed in its entirety. However, I determined that the inclusion of this content might not be as useful as it first appeared. For one thing, it seemed reasonable to expect that there would be a much higher incidence of religion-related language in the curriculum documents of world religions courses than in those of any other course type found within the data set. The difference in quantity of key term references (not just between world religions and any other subject, but between world religions and multiple other subject areas put together) might very well be large enough to skew the analysis towards an undue emphasis on themes consistent with representation of religion by the world religions courses in particular. This was concerning given that a rough analysis of enrollment data made public by the Ontario Ministry of

Education suggested that less than 15% of Ontario high school students actually take a world religions course³². Simply put, there was a danger that the world religions curriculum would exert an influence within the analysis that was quite disproportionate to its real-world impact.

In addition to the above, I had a significant personal reservation about including world religions course curricula in the analysis; that being a strong sense that I did not possess the expertise required to analyze it properly in relation to my research question. While the term “world religions” may be familiar to some as a kind of generic expression for the practice of non-confessional RE, it is actually a specific pedagogical model that has been subject to past criticism for its inadequacies on precisely the point that I was studying – how it represents religion (Owen, 2011; Sikka, 2015). Coming at this study as I did from the perspective of a student of education, with no prior training in the social scientific study and categorization of religious phenomena (i.e. religious studies), there was a certain methodological awareness required to appropriately analyze such material which I considered myself to lack. One might be tempted to point out that this is a critical flaw for a researcher whose topic of interest involves the intersection of religion and education – I could not agree more.

³² I arrived at this result by comparing course enrollment and grade enrollment data over the three most recent academic years for which province-wide data on all publicly funded Ontario secondary schools (public and Catholic combined) was available (i.e. 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019). For each academic year, the combined number of enrollments in the two Grade 11 world religions courses were tallied (representing the total number of students who took a world religions course in a given academic year), followed by the combined number of students enrolled in Grades 11 and 12 (representing the total number of students eligible to take a world religions course in that year). Three-year averages were calculated for both figures (46,087 world religions course enrollments per year; 339,132 students eligible to enroll per year) and used to compute the final result, which was 13.6%. Note that this analysis assumes that the number of students who enroll in a world religions course in either their Grade 11 or Grade 12 year remains roughly constant year over year, as well as that students who do take world religions at some point in their secondary school education enroll in only one of the two available courses (not both). Raw enrollment data was obtained via the Ontario Open Data Catalogue (<https://data.ontario.ca>) and is licensed for public use under the Open Government Licence – Ontario (<https://www.ontario.ca/page/open-government-licence-ontario>).

However, one of the realizations I came to over the course of my graduate education was that the study of RE requires a mastery of the academic literature and methods associated with two functionally separate fields of academic research – religious studies and education. Having arrived at my course of study with no formal training in either field, I focused my attention on building up an expertise in that body of knowledge which was most easily accessible to me; that associated with my degree program in education. The pursuit of any future academic research on religious education would demand that I fill in the gap in my knowledge on religious studies as quickly as possible, in order to enhance my independence as a scholar and to widen the scope of possible research studies that I would be equipped to undertake. However, given that the present study was to be undertaken as a master's thesis, it was my sense that the most prudent course of action would be to work within my existing limitations as a scholar and to lean on the advice of the store clerk who sold me my first (and, as it turned out, only) bass guitar – “Remember, Rome wasn't built in a day.”

CHAPTER THREE: INITIAL REVIEW & QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

Term Selection and Curricular Structure

After reading through the selected curriculum documents twice and making appropriate notes, I determined that the following search terms would be used to perform my quantitative analysis (as well as to inform the subsequent thematic analysis):

- "Religious"
- "Religion(s)"
- "Belief(s)"
- "Spiritual"
- "Spirituality"
- "World view(s)"
- "Spirit(s)"

It should be noted that there were instances within the curriculum where none of the above terms were present, yet religion was clearly being discussed. In such cases, the nature of the discussion might be signaled by the presence of terms such as "Catholic", "Sharia law", "animism", "social gospel", or "prayer", which occurred too infrequently or were too context-specific to justify including in a general term search of the curriculum documents. While omitting such terms did leave open the possibility that some relevant data would go unnoticed (and therefore not be included in the analysis), my observation was that for the vast majority of discussions of religion within the selected documents, one or more of the terms in the list above could be found in the surrounding text.

The terms "religious" and "religion" are obvious enough choices; the others included in the list, however, require some justification. While reviewing the curriculum documents, I came

across a few language-related difficulties that needed to be addressed in the selection of the search terms. The first was the way in which, within the selected documents, the term "belief" was sometimes used to refer to religion-adjacent concepts and topics (e.g. theological beliefs, beliefs related to spirituality), while in other contexts it referred to items which might have no immediate or necessary relationship to religion at all (e.g. political ideology, beliefs about the environment). The inclusion of this term in the term search was therefore likely to produce a host of false positives. At the same time, there were clearly some instances within the curriculum documents where occurrences of the word "belief" signaled the presence of a religion-related discussion in the absence of any other obvious indicator. In the interest of obtaining the richest possible data set for the analysis, I chose to include the word "belief" in the list of search terms. False positives (i.e. instances of "belief" where religion was clearly not being discussed within the surrounding text) would be filtered out from the total word count retroactively, through a subsequent examination of the text surrounding each occurrence of the term within a curriculum document.

The second issue involved the complicated and (in my experience at least) ambiguous relationship between spirituality and religion. While religious traditions offer many resources for the exploration and practice of spirituality, it is also the case that the two concepts do not necessarily have anything to do with one another. Indeed, the desire to find sources of meaning and self-transcendence beyond those offered by religious traditions is hardly novel³³, albeit not something that I would have understood when I first began to think about composing this thesis.

³³This is a prominent theme of the original Humanist Manifesto that can be seen in its subsequent editions as well, although expressed using quite different language (American Humanist Association, n.d.). More recently, prominent atheist and American public intellectual Sam Harris has written on the value and practice of spirituality without religion (Harris, 2015). The topic has also been discussed by American cultural critic James A. Lindsay (2015), who argues that faith in supernatural entities (i.e. God) serves largely as a means for religious believers to satisfy (or distract from) legitimate psychological and social needs that they don't otherwise know how to meet.

And that lack of understanding on the part of my past self is precisely why I thought it important to examine mentions of spirituality and the spiritual in this analysis.

Early in my graduate studies, while I was working in student affairs at the University of Ottawa, I attended a professional development workshop on understanding different personality types in the workplace. During a break in the session, I had a conversation with the facilitator about the teaching work he did in association with a local Roman Catholic organization. He explained how he taught material that was focused on spirituality and felt the need to assure me that what he did had nothing to do with the more formal, ritualistic, or institutional aspects (the “business end”, as he described it) of the Church. Still considering myself a Pentecostal Christian at the time, I expressed to him that the idea of a separation between spirituality and religion sounded quite odd to me, as in the tradition I had grown up in, the two concepts were blended so as to be effectively indistinguishable from one another. From the somewhat quizzical look he gave me at that point in the conversation (one tinged with caution and perhaps a touch of disappointment at my inability to relate), I got the sense that finding a source of spirituality outside of established forms of religion was something of personal significance to him.

I share this anecdote simply to point out that while terms like “religion” and “spirituality” might not mean the same thing, they can be used to refer to similar ideas and experiences depending on the context. What some people speak of as being “religion” might be thought of by others in terms of “spirituality”, sometimes due to a genuine difference in perspective and in other cases out of a desire to avoid various kinds of historical/institutional baggage associated with the former term. Depending on one’s background and experience, the two terms might turn out to mean very much the same thing, which is to say that conversations about religion can easily arise out of conversations about spirituality (and vice versa). While respecting that

spirituality and religion do not have to be connected, the fact that they so easily can be justified the inclusion of “spiritual” and “spirituality” in my analysis as religion-adjacent terms.

A third complication concerned those sections of the curriculum that are focused on the culture and history of Canada’s Indigenous peoples. These areas, in particular the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (2019) curriculum, have a distinctive way of discussing beliefs and practices with identifiably supernaturalistic and/or metaphysical associations to them. Despite the fact that words like “religion” and “religious” would quite commonly be used to speak about such subjects in other contexts, those terms are hardly ever used within the Ontario secondary school curriculum to describe elements of Indigenous societies and cultures. Of particular note is the use of the term “world view” to describe distinctive ways of understanding and relating to reality, which is employed in abundance within the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (2019) curriculum and hardly anywhere else across the other documents that were selected for this study.

Finding the term "world view" mentioned regularly within a part of the current Ontario high school curriculum was an interesting experience for me, as it is a notion with which I had some pre-existing familiarity (albeit in a very narrow sense). As historian of American religion Molly Worthen (2017) has explained, "worldview" is a ubiquitous phrase in contemporary evangelical Christian intellectual discourse. In that context, the term refers to a collection of foundational beliefs and assumptions (i.e. presuppositions) that are presumed to animate each individual's overall approach to thinking about the world. When paired with adjectives such as "Christian" or "biblical" (i.e. a Christian worldview, a biblical worldview), the term is widely used by evangelical organizations as a means of signaling orthodoxy. To my ears, therefore, the term "world view" almost necessarily had quasi-religious undertones, even though that may not

be what the curriculum writers had intended to convey at all in any given instance of its use within the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (2019) curriculum.

As both a graduate student and a Canadian citizen, my knowledge of Indigenous issues is woefully inadequate; a deficiency that I look forward to ameliorating over the coming years³⁴. As such, I could only guess at what prompted the curriculum writers to select (as well as to avoid) certain kinds of language when speaking about Canada's Indigenous peoples. What I could say is that within the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (2019) curriculum, there appears to have been a deliberate decision to talk about some Indigenous beliefs and practices in ways that avoid characterizing them as a form of religion. Though it was not my intention in the present study to critique what the curriculum writers were trying to accomplish in taking this approach, I did need to ensure that my term search was able to capture any curricular content that was relevant to the research question. That included content for which the label of "religion" might have been considered inadequate or inappropriate at the time of the curriculum's writing, but which nonetheless featured elements that were "religion-esque" in character. I did not know that any given instance of "world view(s)" found within the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies curriculum would reasonably qualify as a reference either to religion or to something religion-adjacent, but my past experience with the concept of worldview told me that some of them certainly could. As such, I judged it appropriate to include "world view(s)" (as well as the term "spirit") in my list of search terms, in order to account for the somewhat distinctive language and subject matter content found within the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies curriculum.

³⁴ Though it had little to do with my chosen topic of research, I am grateful to Professors Lorna McLean and Sharon Cook for impressing on me the importance of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Summary Report as essential reading for contemporary Canadian educators and education scholars. It is not acceptable for an educated Canadian not to know.

Regarding the structure of the curriculum documents (henceforth referred to individually as a curriculum), I found that they could each be broken up into three parts:

- An introductory section that describes that curriculum's vision, overall program, and guiding principles, as well as considerations concerning assessment, evaluation, and program planning
- A detailed description of each course contained within that curriculum, including the all-important curriculum expectations that define what teachers must teach and students should learn
- One or more appendices and a glossary

Each course is organized around a series of (usually 4-6) themes called “strands”, the first of which is typically related to students’ acquisition of research skills and the others being specific to the content of a given course. The curriculum expectations themselves (that is, the set of knowledge and skills that students are expected to be able to demonstrate by the end of a given course) are broken up into overall and specific expectations, which are particular to each strand. Accompanying each specific expectation is a series of examples and sample questions³⁵, intended to provide teachers with clarification on the meaning of each specific expectation and to illustrate possible avenues for instruction.

It is important to note that the mandated curriculum (i.e. that which teachers are required to teach and evaluate students on) consists solely of the text of the overall and specific expectations in each strand. This does not include the accompanying examples and sample questions – these exist to support teachers in their teaching and not to tell them what to do. As

³⁵ In the Social Sciences and Humanities curriculum, sample questions are referred to as “teacher prompts”, a distinction which may be due to the document’s age (having been published in 2013, it is the oldest of the four curricula that were examined in this study).

such, mention of religion or a religion-adjacent topic in an example or sample question could not be taken to imply that the subject would actually be discussed in the classroom, simply because it does not have to be. While it might be fair to say that the curriculum encourages teachers to talk about the subject in such instances, it cannot be said that it requires them to. It is only when a topic was included in the main text of an overall or specific curriculum expectation that I could presume (though still not without some uncertainty) that students would be exposed to it.

Distribution of Terms Across the Selected Curricula

The distribution of the selected search terms across the relevant structural features of each curriculum³⁶ is presented below in Tables 2-7. However, before discussing any numerical information, there are two contextual observations that should be noted in order to appropriately frame the analysis. First, it must be said that out of the four curricula under examination in this study, only Canadian and World Studies 9-10 contains courses that are mandatory for Ontario high school students to take³⁷. While courses found in the other three curriculum documents can and do contribute towards students earning their Ontario Secondary School Diploma, they do so by helping to satisfy the requirement that students obtain a certain number of credits from within a specified range of optional courses. There is no course within any of Canadian and World

³⁶ The NVIVO 12 Query Wizard function was used to produce the term distributions presented in this study, with an exact match having been sought for the following combination of terms/phrases with associated Boolean logic operators: religious OR religion OR religions OR belief OR beliefs OR spiritual OR spirituality OR “world view” OR “world views” OR spirit OR spirits. It was determined that using this combination of settings, the search function would not double-reference (i.e. it would not read the word “religions” as an instance of both “religion” and “religions” if both were put forward as search terms) and would ignore capitalization (i.e. it would count both capitalized and non-capitalized variants of a matching word). It should be noted that references of the term “belief(s)” are presented in all tables with evident false positives already filtered out. Also, the category of “Other areas of the courses section” should be understood to contain references found within course-specific content that is neither an overall/specific curriculum expectation nor an associated example/sample question; this may include segments that elaborate on various aspects of the course strands (i.e. “big ideas”, framing questions) and serve to complement formal statements of the overall and specific curriculum expectations.

³⁷ This curriculum contains 5 courses in total: 2 geography courses (of which students must take 1), 2 history courses (of which students must take 1), and 1 politics course (which is mandatory for all students).

Studies 11-12, Social Sciences and Humanities 9-12, or First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Studies 9-12 that students are required to take in order to graduate from high school in Ontario; these curricula are essentially catalogues of optional courses that students can choose from according to their interests. Second, there are substantial differences in the size of each of the four curricula³⁸, which must be kept in mind when contrasting the number of religion and religion-adjacent term references found in one document relative to another. With these points in mind, some general observations are in order.

Table 2
Cumulative Distribution of Selected Terms by Structural Element across all Curriculum Documents

	“Religious”	“Religion(s)”	“Belief(s)”	“Spiritual”	“Spirituality”	“World view(s)”	“Spirit(s)”	All terms
Introductory section	17	6	8	5	0	10	13	59
Curriculum expectations (overall and specific)	17	27	27	14	17	83	2	187
Examples and sample questions	185	108	63	90	20	77	29	572
Other areas of courses section	9	8	2	8	2	47	0	76
Appendices and/or glossary	20	14	12	23	3	5	15	92
All sections	248	163	112	140	42	222	59	986

From Table 2, it is clear that across the examined curricula, the vast majority of term references were found to be located within examples and sample questions. These elements, it should be remembered, consist of non-mandatory content that serves to assist (but not instruct) teachers on how to approach the teaching of a given section of the mandatory curriculum. The

³⁸ Social Sciences and Humanities 9-12 is 375 pages and contains 28 courses (401 pages and 30 courses when content associated with religious studies is included); First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies is 294 pages and contains 10 courses; Canadian and World Studies 9-10 is 194 pages and contains 5 courses; Canadian and World Studies 11-12 is 572 pages and contains 27 courses.

area with the second largest number of term references overall was the overall/specific curriculum expectations, which represents the only part of each curriculum that teachers are actually required to teach.

Table 3

Distribution of Selected Terms by Structural Element within Canadian and World Studies 11-12

	“Religious”	“Religion(s)”	“Belief(s)”	“Spiritual”	“Spirituality”	“World view(s)”	“Spirit(s)”	All terms
Introductory section	6	2	3	1	0	0	1	13
Curriculum expectations (overall and specific)	7	20	4	2	15	0	0	48
Examples and sample questions	108	73	18	26	13	0	0	238
Other areas of courses section	5	7	1	1	0	0	0	14
Appendices and/or glossary	4	4	1	1	1	0	0	11
All sections	130	106	27	31	29	0	1	324

An examination of Tables 2 and 3 shows that the Canadian and World Studies 11-12 curriculum contains over 40% of all term references found in examples and sample questions, as well as nearly 60% of direct references to religion overall. While this curriculum was the largest out the four (accounting, it may be argued, for at least some of the high term reference volume simply by virtue of its page count), there did seem to be a significant number of opportunities to discuss religion and adjacent subjects within this particular collection of courses.

Table 4*Distribution of Selected Terms by Structural Element within Canadian and World Studies 9-10*

	“Religious”	“Religion(s)”	“Belief(s)”	“Spiritual”	“Spirituality”	“World view(s)”	“Spirit(s)”	All terms
Introductory section	5	1	2	1	0	1	3	13
Curriculum expectations (overall and specific)	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
Examples and sample questions	3	1	0	0	0	2	0	6
Other areas of courses section	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Appendices and/or glossary	5	3	0	5	1	0	1	15
All sections	13	5	4	6	1	3	4	36

In contrast to its upper year counterpart, the Canadian and World Studies 9-10 curriculum (Table 4) contained the fewest number of references overall and was the only curriculum under examination which deviated from the pattern of overall/specific curriculum expectations being the second largest category with respect to number of term references (there were only 2 in that area here, out of a total of 36 across the document as a whole). While this curriculum was the smallest out of the four, the magnitude of the difference between its term reference counts and those associated with the other three curricula is still rather striking. This contrast between the lower and upper year Canadian and World Studies curricula reinforced an intuition that I had been developing over the course of this research project, which I will return to later on - that the standard Ontario high school curriculum does indeed provide education about religion, but for the most part only to students who deliberately seek it out or otherwise go out of their way to specialize in the study of human social life.

Table 5
Distribution of Selected Terms by Structural Element within First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies 9-12

	“Religious”	“Religion(s)”	“Belief(s)”	“Spiritual”	“Spirituality”	“World view(s)”	“Spirit(s)”	All terms
Introductory section	2	2	2	2	0	8	7	23
Curriculum expectations (overall and specific)	0	0	13	8	1	83	2	107
Examples and sample questions	7	1	28	61	6	74	27	204
Other areas of courses section	1	0	0	6	2	47	0	56
Appendices and/or glossary	2	1	7	17	1	4	13	45
All sections	12	4	50	94	10	216	49	435

Table 6
Distribution of Selected Terms by Structural Element within Social Sciences and Humanities 9-12

	“Religious”	“Religion(s)”	“Belief(s)”	“Spiritual”	“Spirituality”	“World view(s)”	“Spirit(s)”	All terms
Introductory section	4	1	1	1	0	1	2	10
Curriculum expectations (overall and specific)	10	7	8	4	1	0	0	30
Examples and sample questions	67	33	17	3	1	1	2	124
Other areas of courses section	3	1	1	1	0	0	0	6
Appendices and/or glossary	9	6	4	0	0	1	1	21
All sections	93	48	31	9	2	3	5	191

The First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies curriculum (Table 5) stood out amongst the examined curricula for at least two reasons: that it contained almost all instances of the term “world views(s)” found across the full set of documents under examination and that it had the

fewest direct references to religion. This was less an indicator that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies is not concerned with religion (a reasonable supposition at first glance) than that this particular curriculum makes use of a distinctive vocabulary for discussing matters which might otherwise be considered either religious or quasi-religious in nature. The document contained many discussions of Indigenous spiritual practices, mythologies, and beliefs referencing the supernatural, yet Indigenous Canadians were not spoken of as having any kind of religion (whether one or many). Rather, they are portrayed as having "beliefs" and "practices", some of which may be identifiably "spiritual" in nature, as well as one or more distinctively Indigenous "world views". To state the matter more bluntly, there are no direct references to Indigenous Canadians having or practicing a religion in Ontario's First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies 9-12 curriculum³⁹. While the term "religious" is used in reference to non-Indigenous groups living in Canada (both historically and in the present day), as well as in one instance to Indigenous peoples living in other parts of the world, the relative absence of "religion" and "religious" as terms of description is quite striking. I found myself having great difficulty not interpreting this phenomenon as the product of an intentional avoidance of those terms on the part of the curriculum developers.

³⁹ An apparent reference is made on page 72 of the curriculum, where a teaching example suggests discussing how "the Indian Act amendment of 1885 prohibited religious ceremonies and dances for Indians as defined by the Act". This does not, however, imply that the cultural practices which the amendment sought to ban were religious in nature; only that the amendment itself labeled them as such.

Table 7
Distribution of Selected Terms by Curriculum Document

	“Religious”	“Religion(s)”	“Belief(s)”	“Spiritual”	“Spirituality”	“World view(s)”	“Spirit(s)”	All terms
Canadian and World Studies (Grades 9 and 10)	13	5	4	6	1	3	4	36
Canadian and World Studies (Grades 11 and 12)	130	106	27	31	29	0	1	324
First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (Grades 9-12)	12	4	50	94	10	216	49	435
Social Sciences and Humanities (Grades 9 to 12)	93 (138)	48 (222)	31 (238)	9 (28)	2 (3)	3 (4)	5 (7)	191 (640) ⁴⁰
All curriculum documents	248	163	112	140	42	222	59	986

My initial observations with regard to the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies curriculum served to illustrate an important point, which was that I could not assume that the four curriculum documents under examination would make use of any of the selected terms in exactly the same way. Not only is each document concerned with a different set of curricular subject matter, but they were published in different years. They could therefore be understood as the products of separate development processes that were (potentially) subject to different sets of political pressures. Consider, for example, the term "belief(s)". In the Social Sciences and Humanities 9-12 curriculum (published in 2013 and represented in Table 6), the world religions

⁴⁰ The term reference totals in Tables 2, 6, and 7 do not include terms located within the Social Science and Humanities curriculum's two World Religions courses, as the curricular content of those particular courses was not examined in this study (see p. 53-55 for the rationale behind this decision). However, there is value in providing readers with a sense of the relative incidence of various religion-related terms within the World Religions course curricula as compared with the rest of the material under consideration. As such, in Table 7, next to the standard term reference totals for the Social Sciences and Humanities 9-12 curriculum I have included in brackets a series of alternative totals that include the references found within the World Religions course curricula. Unsurprisingly, this increases the size of the cumulative term reference totals for the Social Sciences and Humanities curriculum by several times, mostly due to the regular use of the terms "religion(s)" and "belief(s)" within World Religions course material.

courses are titled as "World Religions and Belief Traditions", implying both that they encompass more than just a strict focus on religion and that there is some association (even if only by convention) between "religion" and certain systems of "belief" which may themselves not be best understood as religions. In this same curriculum, I noted that the Grade 12 World Cultures course discussed both religion and beliefs as elements of culture, presenting the three concepts as being related in some way (at least indirectly; more on this later). In contrast, the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies curriculum (published in 2019) appeared to avoid associating the concept of religion with the cultures and belief systems of Indigenous Canadians, even in cases where it might seem rather natural to do so (e.g. discussion of beliefs regarding supernatural entities and their relationships with Indigenous peoples; mythology concerning the creation of the world). To properly understand how religion is represented in the Ontario high school curriculum, therefore, an examination of how selected term references were being used within each text (and not just how often they appeared) would be required. This brought me to the next stage of the study - a thematic analysis of term references appearing in overall and specific curriculum expectations (i.e. the part of each curriculum that teachers are required to teach and use as the basis for evaluating student learning).

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF MANDATORY CONTENT EXPECTATIONS

An analysis of the key term references found inside each overall and specific curriculum expectation (as opposed to those found within examples, sample questions, or other parts of the curriculum documents) was conducted in the following way. Each site was coded for the concepts, ideas, and topics in relation to which religion or a religion-adjacent subject was being discussed. Information located within curriculum examples (which are integrated into the same text as the specific curriculum expectations and distinguished from them by the use of italics) was taken into consideration during the coding exercise, which is in keeping with their purpose of clarifying the requirements embodied in each expectation for teachers. Each site was coded twice, with the first run-through of the documents serving as a test and the second run applying the lessons learned from the first⁴¹. Codes generated from the second run were reviewed to determine if they accurately represented what was found in their associated sites (i.e. validity), as well as modified and/or combined with one another as seemed appropriate. This process generated a series of themes that I judged to be representative of those ideas, concepts and topics in relation to which religion and religion-adjacent topics are most commonly discussed within the curriculum expectations of the selected documents.

General Observations

There were 58 general or specific curriculum expectations which, upon close inspection, exhibited some identifiable relation to either religion or a religion-adjacent topic⁴². Readers may

⁴¹ I initially experienced a great deal of difficulty in examining each key term reference site as if it were sui generis; as I worked through the documents, the way in which I had coded earlier sites seemed to color the way I looked at the later ones. To compensate for this, I performed the second coding run by going through each curriculum document backwards and set aside any coding categories that had already been generated in one document before moving on to the next.

⁴² Out of these 58 curriculum expectations, 21 were found to either refer to or involve direct discussion of a religious or spiritual tradition.

note that this total is significantly less than that of the 187 key term references previously identified as being located within curriculum expectations. There are two reasons for this discrepancy. First, there were multiple instances in which more than one key term was found within a single curriculum expectation, such as in the phrase “religious/spiritual beliefs”. The second has to do with term references which, upon examination of the site and its surrounding text, exhibited no identifiable connection to a discussion of religion or a religion adjacent topic within a particular curriculum expectation. This second category accounted for over 70 term references, all but one of which were located within the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies 9-12 curriculum. Further, the overwhelming majority of such references were instances of the term “world view(s)”. None of these “invalid” term references were considered in the thematic analysis.

Table 8 presents the number of valid term references found within the content expectations of each curriculum, along with a reminder of each document’s relative size and the number of courses they contain.

Table 8
Incidence of Selected Terms Located within Mandatory Content Expectations by Curriculum

	Number of content expectations that engage with religion or a religion-adjacent subject	Number of pages in the curriculum	Number of courses in the curriculum
Canadian and World Studies 11-12	21	572	27
Canadian and World Studies 9-10	2	194	5
First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies	19	294	10
Social Sciences and Humanities 9-12 ⁴³	16	375	28

⁴³ The page and course counts presented here for the Social Sciences and Humanities 9-12 curriculum do not include material associated with that curriculum’s World Religions courses.

The first thing to note about the data in Table 8 is that only two references were found within the content expectations of Canadian and World Studies 9-10. While this may not be surprising given the relatively small size of the document, it is nonetheless quite significant because Canadian and World Studies 9-10 contains the only set of mandatory social studies courses in the entire Ontario high school curriculum. Ontario high school students are not required to take any social studies courses beyond those contained in this document, meaning that the way that Canadian and World Studies 9-10 represents religion can itself be taken as an indicator of the minimum level of education about religion that Ontario public high schools can be expected to provide to their students. This minimum standard appears to be essentially none at all⁴⁴.

It must be remembered that the validity of the preceding statement rests on the assumption that the parts of the Ontario high school curriculum that were not under examination in this study (e.g. English, Science, Mathematics) do not mandate any meaningful discussion of religion in the content expectations of their mandatory courses. As noted in earlier discussion of the present study's methodology, limitations of time and the sheer size of the complete Ontario secondary school curriculum prevented me from properly verifying this assumption. I have also made note of my sense that there is likely to be some classroom discussion of religion in English literature courses; one of the most memorable English assignments from my own Ontario high school experience was reading Chaim Potok's *My Name Is Asher Lev* (1972), a novel about an artistically gifted Hasidic Jewish boy whose coming of age is marked by tensions between his

⁴⁴ Readers should note that whatever conclusions may be reached in this study about the nature of education about religion in Ontario high schools, the absence of any examination of the Ontario elementary (primary) school curriculum here prevents me from commenting on what students might learn over the course of a full Ontario public school education. I may reach any number of conclusions about what is and is not taught in Ontario secondary schools, but I cannot say with what knowledge of religion students may enter those schools, and therefore also presumably leave them with.

developing talents and his family's interpretation of their religion. That being said, I see no reason to expect that there would be any mandated discussion of religion (or adjacent subjects) in English literature courses, as they tend to revolve around making sense of whatever piece of literature is under consideration at a given moment in time. It is also the case that as religion is a social phenomenon, discussion of religion seems unlikely to be mandated (as expressed by its inclusion in overall/specific curricular content expectations, rather than in examples or sample questions) except in courses which are principally concerned with the examination of human society. All such segments of the Ontario secondary school curriculum were examined in the present study, which in my view makes the aforementioned assumption a reasonable one.

The two references found in Canadian and World Studies 9-10 are located within the Grade 10 Politics course (officially titled "Civics and Citizenship") and were flagged during the analysis as being questionable in nature. This means that while an identifiable connection to discussion of religion or a religion-adjacent subject was found, its significance in relation to the principle thrust of the associated content expectation was debatable. In this particular case, it was easy to see how, depending on the way in which the content expectations in question were interpreted by a teacher, religion might end up not being mentioned in classroom discussion at all. I invite readers to judge for themselves whether the following specific content expectations necessitate a discussion of religion, keeping in mind that only the non-italicized portions of the text represent content which teachers are required to teach and on which students are required to be evaluated. In Canadian and World Studies 9-10 it is stated that, by the end of the Grade 10 Politics course, students will:

“**B1.4** communicate their own position on some issues of civic importance at the local, national, and/or global level (*e.g., equitable availability of extracurricular activities in*

schools, a local land-use conflict, poverty or violence in the local community, electoral reform, the debate over Sharia law in Ontario, the level of Canada's contribution to international development assistance, food security, Aboriginal land rights), explaining how their position is influenced by their beliefs/values" (p. 161)

"C2.1 analyse ways in which various beliefs, values, and perspectives are represented in their communities (e.g., with reference to different racial, ethnic, and/or religious groups; people with various political beliefs and/or social values; people from different age groups; men and women; First Nations, Inuit, or Métis people; people in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender [LGBT] communities; environmentalists; people with disabilities; people from different professions and/or economic circumstances; recent immigrants and new Canadians; business people), and assess whether all perspectives are represented or are valued equally" (p. 165)

While the references to religion in the above content expectations may not appear to be very substantive, they nonetheless offer up a great deal more than what can be found in the Canadian and World Studies 9-10 curriculum's History course⁴⁵. Entitled "Canadian History since World War I", Grade 10 History is the only mandatory history course in the Ontario secondary school curriculum. It therefore constitutes the most advanced formal study of history which those not otherwise interested in the subject are likely to undertake, at the very least prior to graduating from high school and perhaps ever. The curriculum for Grade 10 History does not

⁴⁵ Readers should note that Canadian and World Studies 9-10 contains not one, but technically two Grade 10 History courses. Both have the same title and cover much of the same content, with one being designated as "academic" and the other "applied". These labels signify the stream to which each version of the course belongs, with "academic" type courses being taken by students who are university-bound (or wish to be) and "applied" type courses by those who expect to attend community college after graduation. Many courses in the Ontario high school curriculum are structured in this way and students generally enroll in only one version of a given course. For the purposes of this study, courses that are split in this manner will be spoken of as if they were a single course, unless otherwise noted.

mention religion or any of the related search terms selected in this study in any of its content expectations or examples (which, it should be remembered, exist to clarify the meaning of the mandated content expectations). While two instances of the term “world view(s)” can be found, they are located within sample questions (which teachers are not required to make use of), occur specifically in reference to Canada’s Indigenous peoples, and bear no obvious relation to anything that could be dubbed religious, spiritual or quasi-religious.

Reading through the content expectations of the Grade 10 History course, one could be forgiven for thinking that nothing of any importance happened in the sphere of religion over the course of contemporary Canadian history. Of particular note is the course’s portrayal of the Quiet Revolution, which is mentioned in a few places but is given its most developed treatment in the following way. By the end of Grade 10 History (academic stream), students are expected to be able to:

“**D3.4** describe the main causes and consequences of the Quiet Revolution and of some other key events that occurred in or affected Quebec between 1945 and 1982 (*e.g., with reference to the leadership of Maurice Duplessis, Jean Lesage, and René Lévesque; the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism; “Maître Chez Nous”; the October Crisis; the formation of the Parti Québécois; Bill 101; the patriation of the constitution; the 1980 referendum*), and explain the significance of these events for the development of identities in Canada

Sample questions: “What were the intended and unintended consequences of Charles de Gaulle’s ‘Vive le Québec Libre’ speech in Montreal in 1967? What was the significance of the speech for French Canadians? For English Canadians? For Ottawa?” “What factors contributed to the failure of the 1980 referendum on Quebec sovereignty? How did First

Nations individuals and communities in Quebec tend to view the referendum? What do these views suggest about the identity of First Nations peoples in Quebec? How did First Nations individuals and communities in the rest of Canada view the referendum?” (p. 123-124)

Notice how the curriculum expectation and sample questions above depict the Quiet Revolution and associated events in entirely political terms. While there is certainly room to talk about non-political developments that occurred during this period (the non-italicized text of the expectation, reflecting its mandatory portion, certainly leaves room for that), the italicized examples clearly indicate to the teacher that the relevant items of discussion are political in nature. As someone whose formal education on contemporary Canadian history did not extend past this very course (which I took in 2005, under a past edition of the curriculum), but who nonetheless has what I consider to be a passing knowledge of the history of Quebec, the absence of any mention of religion here is concerning to me. Political developments during this period of history of course matter a great deal, but they were accompanied by (and in some respects consisted of) a profound transformation of the province’s relationship with organized religion. Prior to the Quiet Revolution, Quebecers lived out their lives in a society permeated by the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, which (among other important avenues of influence) ran the province's health care and education systems. Quebec’s experience of rapid, dramatic secularization during the middle of the 20th century is a key component of contemporary Quebec history and cultural identity; it seems absurd to expect anyone to understand the province (and especially its politics) without some knowledge of it⁴⁶. Through its disregard of religion both

⁴⁶ The fact that the “church-based education system was reformed” is mentioned in the curriculum glossary entry for “Quiet Revolution”. However, this single phrase represents the only connection made between the Quiet Revolution and religion within the whole of Canadian and World Studies 9-10.

generally and when discussing matters where the subject is clearly pertinent, Ontario's Grade 10 History curriculum represents religion as having played no meaningful role in Canadian society for over a hundred years⁴⁷.

Another notable aspect of Table 8 (see p. 71) is how the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies curriculum contains a disproportionately large number of content expectations that engage with religion or an adjacent subject relative to its size. This is largely due to a Grade 11 level course entitled "World Views and Aspirations of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Communities in Canada", which contains more than half (10/19) of the relevant term references that were found within curricular content expectations⁴⁸. All but one of these 10 content expectations are located within strand B of the course content. Entitled "Understanding and Respecting World Views and Cultural Diversity", this strand is described in the course introduction as follows:

In strand B, students explore the concept of world view and the role of a world view, or belief system, in daily life. By examining the elements, purposes, and functions of a world view in the context of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, students learn to identify distinct and common elements and develop their appreciation of both cultural uniqueness and shared humanity. Students deepen their understanding of how language, culture, and the relationship between people and place shape and reflect First Nations, Métis, and Inuit world views, identifying key elements of the beliefs, values, and customs of diverse cultural groups. Students gain an understanding of and respect for the diversity

⁴⁷ A line-by-line read through of the curriculum for this course revealed no mention of religion or any religion-adjacent topic which might have conceivably slipped past the term search.

⁴⁸ This is between the course's two versions/streams, one of which is "College Preparation" and the other "Workplace Preparation" (i.e. designed for students who have no intention of pursuing a post-secondary education).

of cultural protocols, traditional values, and belief systems. Students also learn to use cultural awareness skills and strategies appropriately when exploring First Nations, Métis, and Inuit ways of knowing, world views, and contributions to society. (p. 214)

Despite its centrality to this strand of the course and its ubiquity within First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies overall, no definition of “world view” is ever provided by the curriculum, not even in its glossary⁴⁹. However, an understanding of what is meant by the term can be pieced together from the way it is discussed in various places. Consider content expectations B1.1 and B1.2, presented below in variations from both versions of the “World Views and Aspirations” course. By the end of the course, students are to:

B1.1 identify and make connections between various elements of a world view or belief system (*e.g., beliefs about the existence of a deity or deities, shamanism, the origins of the universe and of humanity, the relationship between humanity and the natural world; family or kin relationships and responsibilities; concepts of time; rites of passage; expressions of gratitude; values governing human interaction; commitment to the transmission of knowledge from generation to generation; beliefs about fairness, economic justice, prosperity, and wealth*), suggesting some factors that shape world views (p. 220, college preparation course version)

B1.1 identify several different elements of a world view or belief system (*e.g., beliefs about creation, the relationship between humanity and the natural world, existence after death; ways of giving thanks; kinship and family structures; rites of passage; forms of*

⁴⁹ A definition of “world view” cannot be found in the glossaries of any of the curricula under examination in this study. Interestingly, the only glossary containing a definition of religion is that of Social Sciences and Humanities 9-12, which defines it as “the belief in and worship of a supreme being or beings”. This definition is found in the portion of the glossary that is specific to the World Religions courses.

governance; criteria for community membership, approaches to economic sustainability and prosperity), providing examples from more than one culture (p. 233, workplace preparation course version)

B1.2 compare world views or belief systems associated with a few different cultures to identify common purposes and functions (*e.g., as a framework for thinking about the world, reality, and existence; as a set of principles on which to base decisions, aspirations, and actions; as the foundation of a sense of self and of individual and collective identity; as a guide to interactions and relationships with others*) (p. 220, college preparation course version)

B1.2 compare their own and at least one other world view to identify some common purposes and functions of a belief system (*e.g., as a framework for thinking about the meaning of life; a set of values on which to base decisions and behaviour; as the foundation of individual and collective identity; as a guide to interactions with others*) (p. 233, workplace preparation course version)

From the way “world view” is discussed and framed in the above content expectations, a few things can be said about the meaning of the term as it is used within the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies 9-12 curriculum. First, the term “world view” appears to be effectively synonymous with “belief system”. Second, if we use content expectation B1.2 as an indicator, there seem to be no inherently religious or supernaturalistic connotations to the concept of world view. Yet as the examples associated with expectation B1.1 clearly illustrate, any views which an individual may hold with respect to religion and/or the supernatural are quite likely to be reflected in that person’s world view. Third, world views are in some sense associated with particular cultures, although this should not be taken to imply that for each culture there is only

one corresponding world view. The association between world view and culture is consistent with the curriculum's glossary definition of "cultural awareness", which is the "consciousness of a culture's distinct values, traditions, beliefs, and world views".

A world view, then, can be understood as an abstract emanation of a particular culture that articulates and embodies a distinctive way of thinking about and interpreting reality (including one's place in the world and how to live in it). Though there may be other ways of understanding the concept of world view, this appears to be what the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies curriculum is referring to when it uses the term. Of the 10/19 content expectations identified as engaging with religion or an adjacent subject in the "World Views and Aspirations" course, all contained instances of either "world view(s)" or "belief(s)" which were in some way implicated in the engagement. See, for example, content expectation B2.4, which states that students will:

B2.4 analyse how a variety of locations that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities consider culturally significant reflect aspects of a world view (*e.g., the belief of Curve Lake First Nation members that spirits speak through crevices in the Kinomaage-Waapkong, or Teaching Rocks, emphasizes the connection between the natural and spirit worlds; the belief that Inuit land at Marble Island, Nunavut, is not only a traditional hunting area but also the historical site of a creation story indicates that the land has lessons to teach the people; the continued significance of Mica Bay as the site of a confrontation between Métis land defenders and non-Indigenous miners reveals the role of history in shaping Métis identity*), and make inferences about the continuing relevance of these sites in contemporary life (p. 221, college preparation course version)

B2.4 identify several different locations that are significant in the world views of various First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, and explain the beliefs and/or values that have been and continue to be associated with those sites (*e.g., members of the Hiawatha First Nation believe that the Serpent Mounds at Rice Lake play a role in directing the spirits of the dead; Inuit shamans of Nunatsiavut [Labrador] used to travel to the Torngat Mountains to communicate with the spirit world, and community members still go to these mountains to find a sense of self*) (p. 234, workplace preparation course version)

Note the references to a spirit world and communication with spirits in the italicized examples. These elements indicate that the content expectations above are to be interpreted as including discussion of aspects of Indigenous world views that quite plainly involve a belief in supernatural entities, as well as in the ability of human beings to interact with them. As mentioned earlier, however, there are many instances of “world view(s)” found within the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies curriculum where the term’s usage shows no obvious relation to anything that could be characterized as religious or religion-esque. This fact served to alleviate my earlier suspicion that the term, which is largely unique to the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies curriculum, represented some sort of politically motivated code for “religion-esque things relevant to discussion of Indigenous peoples that we can’t call religion without making certain people uncomfortable”. Rather than being some muddled mélange of religion, philosophy and culture, the term “world view” appears to offer the combination of flexibility and nuance necessary for the curriculum to achieve its goal of helping young Canadians develop an intimate

understanding of their country's First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples⁵⁰. The use of “world view” in this manner brings to mind a key question concerning non-confessional religious education in its broadest sense – when we do RE, what exactly is it that we are trying to teach?

A common objective of non-confessional RE in its various forms is to help students understand and appreciate the different ways that people think about life. However, the full range of life-views that exist and that are lived out by individual human beings across the world today is too diverse to be categorized according to religion alone. Secular points of view need to be accounted for, as does the reality that some may not find it easy to sort their particular ways of seeing things into one category or the other (i.e. religious or secular). For this and other reasons, Van Der Kooij, De Rutyer and Miedema (2017) have argued that academic discussion of RE could be substantially improved if, in some cases at least, conversation was made to revolve around the concept of worldview rather than religion. Not only does the notion of worldview encompass both religious and non-religious viewpoints, but the authors' distinction between “organized” and “personal” worldviews allows for a nuanced discussion of the differences (and interrelationships) between well-established systems of thought that are shared amongst a group of adherents (e.g. a Christian, Muslim, or Humanist worldview) and the possibly more idiosyncratic worldviews held by individual human beings. Models of religious education that are based around worldview are practiced in several European countries, including Finland (Åhs, Poulter & Kallioniemi, 2019) and the Netherlands (Miedema & Bertram-Troost, 2015). Although I can only speculate as to why the writers of Ontario's First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies curriculum elected to use the term “world view” in the way that they have, using this more

⁵⁰ It should be remembered that, as the present study is concerned with the Ontario high school curriculum's representation of religion and not with its representation of Indigenous peoples, the ultimate appropriateness of the term “world view” when discussing Indigenous peoples is not something I am in a position to judge with any authority.

inclusive term to discuss matters which might otherwise be labelled as religious or quasi-religious in character might in fact be a superior choice. If nothing else, the concept of worldview has the benefit of carrying none of the historical baggage often associated with religion in the Canadian context.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis uncovered 6 major ideas, concepts, and topics⁵¹ in relation to which religion and adjacent subjects are discussed within the content expectations of the curricula considered in this study. These are presented in Table 9 below, according to the number of content expectations (recall that there are 58 in total) found to be associated with each theme across the various curricula.

Table 9

Number of Mandatory Content Expectations Associated with each Identified Theme by Curriculum

	History	Culture	Identity	Politics	Environment	Art
Canadian and World Studies 9-12 ⁵²	18	2	4	5	1	0
First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies	3	13	3	0	8	4
Social Sciences and Humanities 9-12	2	9	0	0	1	0
All curriculum documents	23	24	7	5	10	4

⁵¹ For simplicity's sake, these will henceforth be referred to as "themes".

⁵² In view of the relatively small amount of material which Canadian and World Studies 9-10 contributes to this part of the analysis, I decided to combine the data from the two Canadian and World Studies curricula at this stage and refer to them from this point on as though they were a single unit.

To begin with, history and culture are clearly the most prominent (i.e. major) themes in relation to which religion and religion-adjacent topics are discussed by curricular content expectations. Only 6 out of the 58 total content expectations were found to involve a discussion of history and culture together, indicating that these two topics tend to be discussed separately where religion is implicated. By filtering out instances of overlap between these two themes, we can see that associations between religion and either history or culture account for over 70% of the relevant content expectations. In comparison, the number of content expectations associated with the next largest theme (Environment) accounts for only 17% of the total. Each of the five smaller (i.e. minor) themes exhibits some degree of overlap with history and/or culture, in that content expectations associated with a given minor theme are often also associated with one or both of the major themes. This is the case for more than half of the content expectations associated with each of identity, environment, and art, whereas for politics the overlap is 40% (2/5).

Major Theme – History

The bulk of the history-related references (18/23) were found within the Canadian and World Studies 11-12 curriculum, which contains most of the Ontario secondary school system's history courses. Of that number, 14/18 were concerned with analyzing the influence, impact, or role of religion and/or spirituality in shaping societies throughout history. Each of the history courses in Canadian and World Studies 11-12 contains at least one mandatory content expectation that is directly concerned with religion and/or spirituality, engaging with the topic in relation to a range of different time periods and societies. In World History to the End of the Fifteenth Century (Grade 11), for example, students are expected to analyze the role of religion in the flourishing, decline, and continuing legacy of various civilizations that existed in different

regions of the world, with three separate content expectations spread across three out of the course's five strands. In World History since 1900, Global and Regional Interactions (Grade 11), a strand entitled "The Cold War Years, 1945-1991" frames religion as being of notable social/political significance, with the expectation that students will:

D2.5 analyse the role of religion/spirituality in two or more regions of the world during this period (*e.g., with reference to Islamic theocracies; Sikh nationalism; the role of religion in conflict in the Middle East; liberation theology in Latin America; the position of religious institutions on social issues such as the role of women, birth control, civil rights, gay rights; the role of religious institutions in providing social services; the role of religious institutions in operating boarding schools for indigenous children in Canada, the United States, and/or Australia; the work of Oscar Romero, Desmond Tutu, or Mother Teresa; new religious movements such as Scientology or the Unification Church*) (p.363)

For the upper year history courses overall, there does appear to be a slight tilt towards talking about religion more in reference to the distant past than in relation to more recent time periods. World History since the Fifteenth Century (Grade 12), for example, is similar to its Grade 11 precursor in that it contains three relevant content expectations spread across three of its five strands. Each expectation addresses the role of religion as an influence in various societies over time, examining it in relation to the periods of 1450-1650 (strand B), 1650-1789 (strand C), and 1789-1900 (strand D). The course's final strand, however, which is entitled "The World Since 1900", does not contain any mention of religion or a religion-adjacent subject in its content expectations. There is some mention of religiously affiliated individuals and groups in this strand's non-mandatory segments, such as a sample question inquiring about the beliefs of

the Islamic revolutionaries in Iran and an example that makes note of Desmond Tutu and Mother Teresa in the context of the historical evolution of human rights. Nonetheless, by the time the course arrives at the contemporary historical period, it appears as though religion is no longer considered central to the plot.

This does not, however, necessarily indicate that discussion of religion in relation to contemporary history is being neglected. In the course *Origins and Citizenship: The History of a Canadian Ethnic Group* (Grade 11), students focus on a specific ethnic group (selected by the school) and examine their history before, during, and after emigrating to Canada. The sole content expectation that engages directly with religion is found in a strand called “The Ethnic Group in its Region of Origin” and states that students will:

B3.2 analyse some ways in which religious/ spiritual beliefs and practices in the country or region of origin contributed to the development of identity and culture in this ethnic group (*e.g., with reference to traditions of monotheism or polytheism; religious/spiritual rituals; celebrations and ceremonies related to the environment; religious art, architecture, and music; dietary rules and restrictions; spiritual/religious practices related to death; religious teachings about the roles of men and women*)

The course’s only mandated engagement with religion, therefore, concerns matters occupying the more distant (as opposed to recent or contemporary) end of the historical period under examination. That being said, religion is referenced in multiple examples and sample questions throughout this course. Although at first glance the distribution of these references still appears to emphasize events that took place prior to the selected ethnic group’s arrival in Canada (whenever that may have been), a careful reading of the course’s contemporary history strand (entitled “The Ethnic Group in Contemporary Canada”) reveals multiple instances where

religion-related matters are mentioned using language that does not employ any of the key terms selected for this study. Consider the italicized examples in content expectation E2.2, which requires that students:

E2.2 analyse various government programs or policies that support multiculturalism (*e.g., the establishment of Black History Month or Asian Heritage Month; the funding of ethnic festivals and museums; heritage language programs in schools; modifying uniform requirements to accommodate turbans and hijabs; practices regarding prayer in schools*), and assess whether they meet the needs of various ethnic groups, including the selected ethnic group (p. 348)

Although spoken about in cultural terms and presented as non-mandatory curricular content, the examples of “modifying uniform requirements to accommodate turbans and hijabs” and “practices regarding prayer in schools” both have clear religion-related subtexts. As such, while discussion of religion may not be required when examining the selected ethnic group’s more recent history in Canada, it may be said that the curriculum actively encourages teachers to engage with the subject if they determine that it is relevant to the discussion at hand. It should also be noted that the courses *Adventures in World History* (Grade 12) and *American History* (Grade 11) both have mandatory content expectations that engage with religion in relation both to the distant past and to contemporary history. While religion may not always be a central part of the story when Ontario’s upper year history courses examine the recent past, it is not treated as insignificant and is clearly represented as something that matters in the sweep of history overall.

The exception to this trend is the upper year Canadian history course, entitled *Canada: History, Identity, and Culture* (Grade 12). This university preparation course has one mandatory

content expectation that engages directly with religion, located in its strand on Canada during the period of 1774-1867. The expectation is that students will:

C2.5 analyse the role of religion/spirituality in Canadian society during this period and how it contributed to the development of Canada (*e.g., with reference to different religious groups in the colonies; the role of religious organizations in charitable work; the role of Roman Catholic priests and nuns in education and health care in Lower Canada/Canada East; the spiritual practices of First Nations*) (p. 379)

The fact that the course contains only one such content expectation is not itself an issue, as the same is true of some of the other history courses that have already been mentioned. Nor do I have any complaint about the substance of the expectation's engagement with religion, which appears satisfyingly serious. The way in which this course deviates from the pattern exhibited by the rest of the upper year history curriculum in Canadian and World Studies 11-12 is in its near total lack of engagement with religion when covering Canadian history from 1867 to the present. Strand D of the course (entitled "Canada, 1867-1945") contains the sole instance of a key term that can be found in material covering events since Confederation, a non-mandatory reference to religious minorities embedded in following content expectation:

D1.1 analyse some key social developments as well as dominant social attitudes and values during this period (*e.g., changes in numbers and origins of immigrants; the expansion of Native residential schools; urbanization; increasing participation of women in the labour force; increasing French-Canadian nationalism; changes in social mores; changing attitudes towards women's roles in society and politics; attitudes towards racial, ethnic, and religious minorities*), and assess their significance for the development of Canada, including the development of identity in Canada

Other than the above and another example-based reference in strand D to each of the social gospel⁵³ and Woman's Christian Temperance Union (both of which are discussed as social reform movements), a line-by-line examination of the course's curriculum showed no references to religion or a religion-adjacent topic in any of the context expectations, examples or sample questions dealing with history after 1867. In strand E (entitled "Canada since 1945"), there was no such content to be found anywhere at all. When this is considered in relation to what was found regarding the Grade 10 Canadian History course (which covers the period from 1914 to the present), this means that the Ontario high school curriculum does not mandate (and for the most part, does not even suggest) discussion of religion in the teaching of contemporary Canadian history.

It is important to note that this does not mean that Ontario high school teachers either cannot or will not discuss religion while teaching about the last 150 years of Canadian history. In a note on the intersection of program planning and equity and inclusive education, the Canadian and World Studies curriculum states that:

It is imperative that students see themselves reflected in the choices of issues, examples, materials, and resources selected by the teacher. When leading discussions on topics related to diverse ethnocultural, socio-economic, or religious groups or the rights of citizenship, teachers should ensure that all students – regardless of culture, religious affiliation, gender, class, or sexual orientation – feel included and recognized in all learning activities and discussions. By teachers carefully choosing support materials that reflect the makeup of a class, students will see that they are respected. This will lead to

⁵³ Defined on p. 570 of the Canadian and World Studies 11-12 glossary as "A movement, dating from the end of the nineteenth century, in which Christian ethics and ideas were applied to address social problems related to industrialization, including poverty, inequality, urban slums, and harsh working conditions. Social gossellers in Canada advocated temperance and child welfare, among other social reforms."

student understanding of and respect for the differences that exist in their classroom and in the multiple communities to which they belong. (p. 55 in 11-12, p. 49 in 9-10)

The above statement illustrates why examining the formal curriculum alone cannot tell us whether or not discussion of religion is being incorporated into classroom conversations in Ontario secondary schools. Teachers are given wide latitude in determining how best to approach a given topic in view of factors such as the backgrounds of their students. Even if religion or an adjacent topic is not explicitly mentioned in a group of content expectations, the teacher can still engage students on the subject if they deem it to be pedagogically useful. At the same time, one of the primary purposes of the curriculum is to direct teachers' lesson planning. It tells them what they need to focus on in the classroom and helps them to do it. If the curriculum is not providing teachers with any indication (whether directly through content expectations or indirectly through examples and sample questions) that religion is something they need to pay attention to in a particular context, then what is being communicated by the curriculum is that religion is not something they need to pay attention to in that context.

It is interesting to compare how the American History (Grade 11) and Canada: History, Identity, and Culture (Grade 12) courses handle the issue of developments in identity, citizenship and culture in each country after 1945. Both courses have a final strand (E) examining history from the end of WWII to the present (i.e. "Canada since 1945" and "The United States since 1945") and employ overall content expectations which, at this point, display considerable similarities. Though not identical (the two courses are in different grades and therefore employ different degrees of analysis, as well as framing, in their examinations of history), the overall content expectations that both courses label as "E3" come remarkably close:

E3. Identity, Citizenship, and Heritage: analyse how various groups, trends, and cultural developments have affected identity, citizenship, and heritage in the United States since 1945 (p. 314)

E3. Diversity and Citizenship: analyse how various individuals and groups have contributed to the development of identity, culture, and citizenship in Canada since 1945 (p. 385)

In *Canada: History, Identity, and Culture (Grade 12)*, the specific content expectations, examples and sample questions under overall expectation E3 do not make any discernible reference to religion or anything religion related, whether directly or indirectly. In *American History (Grade 11)*, however, we find under overall expectation E3 the following specific content expectation:

E3.2 explain the impact of religion/spirituality on the development of identity, citizenship, and/or heritage in the United States during this period (*e.g., with reference to the Bible Belt; African American churches and the civil rights movement; religious minorities such as Mormons, Catholics, Jews; spiritual practices of Native Americans; evangelical Christians and the power of the religious right in American politics; attitudes towards Muslims after 9/11*) (p. 316)

Here, religion and spirituality are clearly represented as being important to understanding the development of “Americanness” (both in terms of the lives of individual Americans and the character of the nation as a whole) over the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The inclusion of this specific content expectation is an unambiguous statement that when it comes to understanding recent American history, religion matters. In contrast, the absence not only of a comparable content expectation, but of even a single mention of anything vaguely religious in the equivalent

section of the Grade 12 Canadian history course, communicates the opposing message just as clearly. When it comes to understanding the development of Canada's national character in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, religion does not matter. While it is beyond the scope of this study to judge whether or not this is an appropriate way to frame Canadian history, I will say that the contrast between how religion is represented in contemporary American history vs Canadian history, as well as in contemporary Canadian history vs that of other parts of the world, is concerning to me. Subjectively speaking, it gives off something of a "religion is what other people do" vibe which, if true, does not reflect the way that many Canadians live their lives.

Minor Theme – Identity

Bridging the theme of History with the second dominant theme of Culture is the theme of Identity. There are significant overlaps between discussion of religion/spirituality in relation to identity and discussion in relation to history and/or culture. Of the content expectations which engage with both religion (or a religion-adjacent subject) and identity, 5/7 also discuss religion in relation to history and 4/7 in relation to culture. Most of the identity/culture overlaps (3/4) are also identity/history overlaps, which indicates that conversations about religion and identity within curricular content expectations, while frequently also associated with culture, are primarily discussed in a historical (rather than contemporary) context.

This should not, however, be taken to indicate that meaningful associations between religion and identity are represented as being strictly historical phenomena; as content expectation B3.2 of the Origins and Citizenship course (see page 76) illustrates, one of the purposes of studying history is to help us to better understand our present. Indeed, what is being examined in each of the associated content expectations (four in Canadian and World Studies 11-12 and three in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies) is the role of religion and/or spirituality in

shaping contemporary identities. The discussion may revolve around the influence of religion as exercised at some point in the past, but there is nevertheless an underlying sense that religion is of contemporary significance due to its impact (even if indirect) on individual/group identity in the present day.

The role of religion/spirituality in shaping identity is discussed in relation to a fairly broad range of societal backgrounds. As mentioned earlier, content expectation E3.2 of the Grade 11 American History course (see page 81) examines the role of religion in shaping identity in the United States from 1945 to present. In World History Since the Fifteenth Century (Grade 12), expectation C3.1 states in relation to the period of 1650-1789 that students will:

C3.1 analyse the role of religion/spirituality in different societies during this period, including how religion/spirituality contributed to identity and/or heritage (*e.g., with reference to indigenous spirituality, Hinduism and Islam in South Asia, Shinto and Buddhism in Japan, Islam in Africa; the role of religion in European colonies; Christian proselytization; new denominations; the role of religion/spirituality in the art, music, or architecture of some societies*). (p. 418, college preparation)

There are also several content expectations which directly reference the importance of spirituality in shaping Indigenous identity in Canada, both historically and in the contemporary period. Considering that two of the identity-related references found in Canadian and World Studies 11-12 are different versions of the same content expectation⁵⁴, it may be said that effectively half of the content expectations discussing religion and/or spirituality in relation to identity are discussions about the role of spirituality in shaping Indigenous Canadian identity.

There is also the aforementioned content expectation B3.2 (see page 76) in Origins and

⁵⁴ These are C3.2 (p. 400) in World History Since the Fifteenth Century, University Preparation, and C3.1 (p. 418) in World History Since the Fifteenth Century, College Preparation

Citizenship: The History of a Canadian Ethnic Group (Grade 11), which discusses the role of religion/spirituality in shaping the identity of a particular ethnic group whose members would later emigrate to Canada.

What is noticeably absent is discussion of the role of religion/spirituality in shaping the identity of Canadians who are neither Indigenous, nor first-generation immigrants, nor the descendants of individuals that immigrated to Canada within living memory. Let me begin by saying that this is something of an unfair judgment on my part. The course *Origins and Citizenship: The History of a Canadian Ethnic Group (Grade 11)* does not set any obvious limits on which groups can or should be the subject of any particular run of the course. The course's introduction states that it is the school's responsibility to determine which ethnic group will be the focus of the course and that, with the school's approval, teachers may allow some students to focus on one group while other students study a different group. In the case of the latter arrangement, one could easily see the class as a whole being exposed to the history of several Canadian ethnic groups through presentations given by multiple groups of students in turn, all over the course of a single semester. Seeing as how (with the exception of some Indigenous Canadians) everybody presently living in Canada who is not themselves an immigrant has an ancestor who immigrated here from another region of the world sometime in the last 400 years, no group of Canadians is technically excluded from the potential for examination of the relationship between their identity and religion/spirituality.

However, when I hear the phrase "Canadian ethnic group", what comes to mind (for the most part) are visible minorities. There are certainly exceptions to this (e.g. Ukrainians, Jews), but the fact is that we don't tend to talk about the descendants of the English, Scottish, Irish, or French settlers (whose ancestors are the focus of most of Canadian history up to 1900) as distinct

ethnic groups when discussing contemporary Canadian society and politics. While their ancestry may certainly hold some personal significance for individual members of these groups, to the general public, such people are simply “white” (or Caucasian, to use the more polite phrasing). As such, I find myself questioning whether the course *Origins and Citizenship* (Grade 11) would very often be used to cover the history (and therefore identity in relation to religion/spirituality) of one of these original settler ethnic groups. If one was to be selected for study, to what extent would the result be something other than a retracing of material covered in other Canadian history courses, with some additional details added here and there? I see that as being hard for a school administration to justify, given that there are plenty of ethnic groups (whose membership may constitute, on the whole, more recent arrivals to Canada) whose stories are worth being told and are less well known.

Therein lies my sense of a gap in the curriculum’s discussion of the relationship between identity and religion/spirituality with respect to, if I may be blunt, people like myself. My family has lived in this country for over a century, being English-speaking whites of predominantly Irish stock, as well as some French. All four of my grandparents were born in Canada, three in Nova Scotia/New Brunswick and one in Ontario, and just about all I know of the generation before theirs is that my great-grandfather on my father’s side (Harold Cassidy) was a World War I veteran from the Atlantic coast. We have been Canadians since as far back as I can speak to and religion has certainly been a significant factor in shaping our identities. My grandmother on my father’s side (with whom I was very close as a child) carried a considerable amount of fear and shame in her heart in relation to her Catholic faith, brought on (it would seem at least in part) by social stigma from failing to live up to the Church’s teachings in small town Quebec. My

grandmother on my mother's side was a devout Catholic raised in the pre-Vatican II⁵⁵ era, which contributed to significant tensions (and a whole lot of unnecessary drama) between her and my mother over my parents' decision to attend a Pentecostal (i.e. Protestant) church. Roman Catholicism also featured regularly in the sermons and bible studies of my youth, its supposedly flawed understanding of the relationship between faith and good works in effecting believers' salvation being held up as a point of negative contrast that reinforced (by implication) our identities as "real" Christians⁵⁶.

Tensions and clashes that were directly attributable to my family's relationship with religion (at one point or another of our lives) have had a meaningful impact on us, both in terms of how we have thought of ourselves and how others have thought of us. While I appreciate that my family's experiences may not have been significant enough to shape the direction of Canadian history⁵⁷, I do not believe that our story is unique. It is part of Canada's story, and I

⁵⁵ The Second Vatican Council (also known as Vatican II) took place in the early 1960s and was an attempt at the modernization of the Roman Catholic Church. One of its results was a transformation of the Church's attitude (as an institution) towards non-Catholic religions, which became substantially less prejudicial.

⁵⁶ In churches influenced by the Evangelical Protestant tradition, it is common to see believers be invited to publicly share their "testimony" (i.e. their personal story of how they became a Christian) as both an act of worship and to encourage the faith of the community. In the church that I grew up in, I recall on multiple occasions hearing adults testify to how they were raised Catholic, but then later "found the Lord" and became "a Christian" (the inclusion of the article "a" before the noun always seemed to lend such statements of identity a special significance). As odd as it may seem to those on the outside, "Catholic" and "Christian" were understood to be quite different things – "Can a Catholic be a Christian?" would have been considered a difficult but entirely comprehensible question to put forward for theological discussion.

⁵⁷ I say this tongue in cheek. However, it is worth noting that our experiences in relation to religion and identity have brought us into contact with at least one force that arguably can shape the course of Canadian history – politics. Though it can be irritatingly overblown at times, politically literate readers will be aware that a relationship exists between evangelicalism and certain varieties of right-wing politics in North America. Though politics was not a regular topic of discussion in the pulpit of my family's church, my recollection is that when it was present, it tilted to the right. Perhaps the most striking example of this was the Sunday morning when our guest speaker was none other than Stockwell Day, then leader of the Canadian Alliance party and one of Canada's most prominent conservative politicians. Years later, I would read in an autobiography of Preston Manning (one of the patriarchs of conservative politics in Canada) that Day actively exploited his identity as a Pentecostal Christian as part of his campaigning strategy, organizing speaking events in churches all across the country during the 2000 federal election campaign (Manning, 2002). On the other side of the political spectrum, my mother's family are for the most part staunch Liberals, which I have been led to believe is quite typical of Irish Catholics in Canada.

cannot help but see a gap in the Ontario secondary school curriculum's coverage of the relationship between religion/spirituality and identity that leaves out Canadians like myself. It needs to be said that this is not necessarily a problem – the curriculum has particular educational goals that it has been put forward to achieve, and it may be that referencing the relationship between religion and identity for Canadians of my background (which, it must be noted, I have not definitely proven that it fails to do) was not found to be especially conducive to achieving those goals. If that is the case, I can take no offense.

All the same, the fact that this subject would be discussed in mandatory content expectations in relation to Americans, Indigenous Canadians, and Canadians of specific ethnicities, but not in relation to the Canadian population as a whole (at least with respect to the contemporary period) strikes me as an odd omission. It brings to mind my earlier sense of the curriculum's discussion of religion in relation to contemporary Canadian history (or lack thereof). Religion/spirituality is represented as something that may be quite pertinent to people's identities elsewhere in the world, as well as in pockets within Canadian society. On the whole, however, the curriculum would appear to be saying that it's just not important to who we are as a country⁵⁸.

Major Theme – Culture (Environment and Art)

In contrast with the major theme of history, instances of mandatory content expectations where religion is discussed in relation to culture are more widely distributed across the examined curricula. Just over half (13/24) were found in the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies 9-12 curriculum, with much of the remainder (9/24) located in the Social Sciences and Humanities 9-12 curriculum (mostly within its Grade 12 World Cultures course). I have already discussed how

⁵⁸ I believe that many Canadians would not find this representation to be objectionable.

in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies, the concept of “world view” is employed to speak about distinctive ways of understanding reality which emanate from particular cultural groups. In several instances, this concept serves as a kind of stand-in for ideas which might reasonably be considered to be quasi-religious in nature (e.g. belief in the existence of a spirit world and/or supernatural entities with which humans may meaningfully interact), connecting the religious (or perhaps more accurately, the religion-adjacent) and the cultural.

This blending of concepts also shows up in other ways within First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies; more than half (7/13) of the content expectations that connect discussion of quasi-religious beliefs/practices with culture also connect it with other subjects that were found to be themes in their own right. This makes it difficult to speak about how religion is framed in relation to culture in isolation from other matters. There are, however, a few content expectations within First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies where this kind of overlap is not present. In the course English: Understanding Contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Voices (Grade 11), students examine how mythical figures from stories recounted in Indigenous oral tradition reflect aspects of a particular cultural group’s world view. In addition to content already mentioned regarding the concept of world view, World Views and Aspirations of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Communities in Canada (Grade 11) also discusses beliefs and customs related to spirituality side by side with those which have no necessary connection to spirituality at all. Consider content expectation B2.1, whose examples illustrate how religion/spirituality and culture exist alongside one another and may to some extent even blend together:

B2.1 identify a variety of common elements of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit beliefs and customs (*e.g., beliefs: about creation, the stages of life, the sacredness of the land; customs: acknowledging traditional lands, smudging and/or kullik lighting, the use of*

traditional medicines, prayers, sunrise ceremonies, gift giving, ceremonial songs and dances), and analyse the values reflected in these beliefs and customs (*e.g., with reference to environmental protection, intergenerational knowledge transmission, community relationships*) (p. 220)

The relationship between religion and culture is front and center in the Social Sciences and Humanities course World Cultures (Grade 12). The course’s opening description states that students will “explore world cultures, with an emphasis on the analysis of religious and spiritual beliefs, art forms, and philosophy” (p. 92)⁵⁹. This statement positions religion and spirituality as being in some sense a sub-set of culture, which accords well with the definition of “world view” that was derived earlier from the content expectations in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies. World Cultures content expectation B1.1 directly subordinates religion to culture, naming the former as an element of the latter:

B1.1 demonstrate an understanding of the elements of culture (*e.g., language, symbols, arts, literature, values, beliefs, traditions, ethnic origin, religion, social hierarchies, kinship relations*) associated with various definitions of the term (*e.g., the UNESCO definition; anthropological, sociological, humanist definitions*) (p. 95)

The positioning of culture as the more dominant concept may be nothing more than an expression of World Cultures’ primary area of focus as a course. Indeed, the sample questions for expectation B1.1 offer teachers a way to raise the issue of the relationship between religion and culture in a neutral fashion, asking “In what ways do religion and culture overlap? In what

⁵⁹ World Cultures is one of the only courses in the selected curricula to explicitly mention religion in its course description. The others are Adventures in World History (Grade 12, Canadian and World Studies) and, of course, World Religions.

ways are they distinct from one another?” (p. 95) However, the subordination of religion to culture is again expressed in content expectations C1.3 and C3.2, which state that students will:

C1.3 demonstrate an understanding of various religious or spiritual beliefs (*e.g., Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Aboriginal or tribal spiritual beliefs*) found within a specific culture and of how they relate to various aspects of that culture (*e.g., dietary laws; social hierarchies; attitudes towards gender roles and social inequality; ethics and mores; rituals/practices around birth, marriage, sickness, death; educational practices; practices such as meditation, powwows, pilgrimages, shamanism, t'ai chi ch'uan, voodoo*) (p. 97)

C3.2 assess the influence of the art, philosophy, and religious/spiritual beliefs or practices of one culture (*e.g., Grebo or Haida masks, yoga and meditation, t'ai chi ch'uan, salsa, hip hop, reggae, capoeira, Maori haka, Bollywood films*) on forms of cultural expression produced by individuals or groups from other cultures (p. 98)

The notion of religion being in some sense secondary to culture can also be found elsewhere in the Social Sciences and Humanities curriculum, in Equity and Social Justice: From Theory to Practice (Grade 12). In this course, expectation B1.4 implicitly asserts the primacy of culture over religion by referencing how cultural background can affect one's views on the place of religious/spiritual considerations in debates on broader social issues:

B1.4 analyse ways in which social and cultural belief systems can affect perspectives on and decisions relating to equity and social justice issues (*e.g., one's position on land development/ resource exploitation versus the preservation of sites sacred to Aboriginal people; Sharia and Halakhah law versus a single system of family law in Canada; individual versus social responsibility*) (p. 84)

Overall, there is a sense of religion and the religion-adjacent existing in attachment to specific cultural groups; of being a manifestation or element of particular cultures, rather than something that exists outside of or is transcendent of culture. While it is beyond the scope of this study to examine whether this is an appropriate way of framing the relationship between religion and culture, it is interesting to consider how well this approach would work when examining religious traditions with substantial followings spread across multiple distinct cultural groups (e.g. Roman Catholicism)⁶⁰. Whatever the case, speaking further about the Ontario high school curriculum's representation of religion in relation to culture will require moving into territory associated with some of the minor themes that were also identified in this study. Environment and Art, though each a theme in its own right, are wrapped up in the curriculum's wider engagement with religion/spirituality in relation to culture and with Indigenous cultures in particular.

Beginning with the theme of Environment, 6/10 of its associated content expectations overlap with Culture and 3/10 with History. Of the Culture overlaps, 5/6 are located in the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies curriculum, with three of these also being History overlaps. This means that of the curricular content expectations where religion (or an adjacent subject) is discussed in relation to the environment, fully half do so in the context of a discussion of Indigenous culture (whether historically or in the present day). In the Social Sciences and Humanities curriculum, the World Cultures (Grade 12) course contains one content expectation (C1.4, p. 98) stating that students are expected to “analyze the ways in which a culture's relationship to the environment is reflected in its art, philosophy, and religious/spiritual beliefs”. While making no direct reference to Indigenous peoples in the content expectation itself, the

⁶⁰ Readers are reminded that this study did not examine materials related to the World Religions courses in the Social Sciences and Humanities 9-12 curriculum, which may have shed light on this point.

accompanying examples and sample questions (of which there are four and two, respectively) include mention of “the Aboriginal medicine wheel” and “the Cree conception of Mother Earth”. A similar highlighting is found in Living in a Sustainable World (Grade 12, Geography) content expectation B2.1 in Canadian and World Studies 11-12 (p. 284), which mentions Indigenous peoples directly in its requirement that students learn about the beliefs of various people groups vis-à-vis the natural environment. Even in instances where the relationship between religion (or an adjacent subject) and the environment is discussed in content expectations outside of the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies curriculum, I found that Indigenous peoples were still being brought into the conversation in some way.

With regard to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies, each of the 8 content expectations identified under the Environment theme makes a connection between the natural environment (and/or the land in which Indigenous peoples live) and Indigenous spirituality. The course First Nations, Métis, and Inuit in Canada (Grade 10), which functions as a history course that is specific to Canada’s Indigenous peoples, provides three examples (B3.3, p. 95; C3.1, p. 98; D3.2, p. 101) illustrating this connection. Each occurs in relation to an overall content expectation titled “Identities, Culture, and Self-Determination” the details of which vary according to the strand in which the expectation is located (each is associated with a different time period and related historical theme). Despite their differences, the shared title of these overall content expectations implies that the specific expectations derived from them relate to meaningful elements of Indigenous culture and heritage. In this respect, the relationship between spirituality and the environment is presented as being crucial to understanding Indigenous Canadian identities. Consider the following specific content expectations and their associated examples, where the relationship is clearly laid out:

C3.1 compare beliefs and values of some Indigenous and European peoples about the relationship between people, the land, the spiritual world, and the environment during this period, and analyse the impact of the differences (*e.g., lack of respect among Europeans for Indigenous spiritual practices, resulting in attempts at conversion; conflicting ideas with respect to land ownership and stewardship; differences in the relationship between the environment and the spiritual world in Indigenous and Christian traditions*) (p. 98; strand C, which covers the period of 1500-1763)

D3.2 analyse how Indigenous beliefs about the environment, spirituality, and the land conflicted with the attitudes and/or policy of colonial/dominion governments, and explain how this conflict affected First Nations, Métis, and Inuit individuals and communities during this period (*e.g., with reference to government hostility to many Indigenous spiritual practices/traditions; colonial/dominion ideas about domination over the land versus Indigenous ideas about stewardship and the interconnectedness of humans and all other beings; colonial/dominion beliefs about land ownership versus Indigenous beliefs about occupation of traditional territories from time immemorial*) (p. 101; strand D, which covers the period of 1763-1876)

Though the representation of a relationship between religion/spirituality and environment in mandatory content expectations is frequent enough to speak of Environment as a theme in itself, it is nevertheless closely associated with discussions of Indigenous culture. The overwhelming majority of references associated with the theme of Environment are found in the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies curriculum (8/10), meaning that even those which do not mention culture explicitly are still in some sense components of a larger curricular conversation about Indigenous cultures in Canada. Environment can therefore be understood as a branch of

the larger theme of Culture, one in which the relationship between the natural environment and spirituality in Indigenous cultures is being given explicit focus by the curriculum. This is similar to what we see with the theme of Art.

Art is a minor theme that is associated with 4 content expectations in total. All are located within First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies, with 3/4 overlapping with Culture and 2/4 with Environment. Despite its small size, I found its content to be distinctive enough to be worth discussing here. However, readers should take note that whatever associations may be present between religion/spirituality, art, and Indigenous culture in this part of the curriculum, they should not be regarded as representative of how the subject of art is handled by the Ontario secondary school curriculum as a whole. The Ontario high school curriculum does contain a series of courses on art and the arts, but these exist as part of a separate section of the curriculum that was not included in this study. The reason that the topic of art appears in the present analysis is because there is a course on the subject that is part of the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies curriculum, entitled *Expressions of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Cultures (Grade 9)*. All content expectations that were found to reference religion or an adjacent subject (in this case, predominantly spirituality) in relation to art are located within this course.

Overall expectation A1 (The People and the Land) makes explicit that in Indigenous Canadian world views, there is understood to be a spiritual interconnectedness between Indigenous peoples, the lands in which they live, and various elements of the natural world. The attendant specific content expectations guide teachers in helping students to analyze how "spiritual and personal connections to the land are expressed through various art forms and arts disciplines" (p. 70). A little further on in the same strand (*Artistic Expression and First Nations,*

Métis, and Inuit World Views), the curriculum discusses the topic of spiritual identity, stating that students are to:

A2.1 analyse the role of spiritual identity in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit world views, drawing on evidence from several different art forms and arts disciplines (*e.g., Inuit drum dancing expresses the spiritual nature of the performer’s identity; beliefs about transformation between spirit forms, or identities, are embodied in copper and silver carvings of birds with human features; radiating lines incorporated in stone and bone carvings represent the connections between humans and spiritual forces, conveying the spiritual nature of humankind; a variety of art forms use circles to represent the interconnection of the human life cycle and other natural life cycles and to remind individuals to strive for spiritual balance in all aspects of their existence; symbolic spiritual helpers, such as the thunderbird, are depicted in the art forms of many cultures*)

Sample questions: “What is spiritual identity? How does your experience of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit art forms help you understand the concept of spiritual identity? Why do you think art is central to the expression of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit spiritual identities?” “Why is the circle a dominant symbol in First Nations cultural art forms? What other symbols represent the belief, prevalent in many First Nations world views, that all of creation is connected to a spiritual life force?” (p. 71)

Even though teachers are not required to make use of them, I found the sample questions to be particularly striking in this case, with their strong emphasis on spirituality and direct reference to something that is quite obviously quasi-religious (i.e. “spiritual life force”).

Although the focus of the course is an examination of artistic expression in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, what we see here is a conversation about art providing students with a window

into the importance of spirituality in and to those cultures. Expectation A2.1 thus serves as an example of how approaching a subject directly may not always be the best way to learn about it; looking at things through the lens of an adjacent topic (in this case, examining spirituality through art) may render the experience more accessible. As with Environment, the theme of Art is effectively a sub-theme of Culture, discussing the relationship between spirituality and art in the context of Indigenous Canadian cultural groups both when the topic of culture is referenced explicitly and when it is not. It highlights the way in which conversations about religion/spirituality, when examined in their particulars, can become wrapped up in conversations about other topics. There are quite clearly elements of Indigenous Canadian culture(s) which are quasi-religious in nature; or at least that are likely to be regarded as such when compared with ideas and practices associated with traditions that are commonly recognized as being religious in nature. At the same time though, it may be that discussing such matters in the context of a wider discussion about Indigenous cultures (rather than as exhibits in a discussion about religion/spirituality writ large) represents a more helpful approach, whether pedagogically or politically. Thinking in such terms may offer a wider range of options and opportunities for integrating RE into a curriculum.

Minor Theme – Politics

The last of the six themes that were uncovered in the analysis of mandatory curricular content expectations is the theme of Politics. Consisting of five references spread across four courses in Canadian and World Studies (9-12), it is a minor theme but one with some interesting features that are worth discussing. It is unique in being something of a standalone topic amongst the various themes – there are 2/5 overlaps with History and none with Culture, meaning that unlike the other minor themes, this one cannot be characterized as being in some sense an

extension (e.g. Environment, Art) or hybrid (e.g. Identity) of either major theme. The first two references, which are found in Civics and Citizenship (Grade 10), have already been discussed (see page 63-64). What is notable about these two content expectations is that they are structured in such a way that discussion of religion is possible, but not necessary; whether or not to engage with the matter is essentially left up to the teacher's discretion.

While the lower year curricular material connects religion and politics in a manner which can at best be described as oblique, the connections made in upper year Canadian and World Studies content expectations are much more direct. Though it has been mentioned before, specific expectation D2.5 in World History Since 1900: Global and Regional Interactions (Grade 11) is worth quoting again, as the undertone of politics in its examples (which are intended to help teachers interpret the content expectation) and sample questions is quite pronounced:

D2.5 analyse the role of religion/spirituality in two or more regions of the world during this period (*e.g., with reference to Islamic theocracies; Sikh nationalism; the role of religion in conflict in the Middle East; liberation theology in Latin America; the position of religious institutions on social issues such as the role of women, birth control, civil rights, gay rights; the role of religious institutions in providing social services; the role of religious institutions in operating boarding schools for indigenous children in Canada, the United States, and/or Australia; the work of Oscar Romero, Desmond Tutu, or Mother Teresa; new religious movements such as Scientology or the Unification Church*)

Sample questions: “What role did religion or religious leaders play in the civil rights movement in the United States during this period?” “What role did religion play in the Iranian Revolution?” (p. 363)

We also see religion and politics mentioned in the Adventures in World History (Grade 12) strand concerning events since the early nineteenth century, as well as the Canadian and International Politics (Grade 12) strand entitled “Political Foundations”. These two courses (in order) state that students are to:

D4.1: analyse the role that religion/spirituality has played in selected societies during this period (*e.g., the role of religion in government, education, culture; religion and social reform; religious conflicts; Islamic theocracies*) (p. 441)

B3.5: analyse how religion influences politics in and relations between various countries, including Canada (*e.g., with reference to the public funding of secular and religious schools, ideas about the separation of church and state, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the influence of religious teaching about gender roles, the role of religious fundamentalism in conflicts around the world*)

Sample questions: “How do religious differences between Muslim Sunni and Shia sects affect politics within and between countries?” “What are some ways in which religious affiliations/ identities can influence politics, even in an officially secular state?” “What is a theocracy? What impact can the religious affiliation of a theocracy have on its political policies?” (p. 535)

The content expectations associated with the Politics theme provide a helpful illustration of an issue that pertains not only to the representation of religion in relation to politics, but to the overall question with which this study is concerned. This is the relationship between the relevance of religion (and adjacent topics) to discussion of other subjects in the curriculum and the role of teacher discretion. The Politics theme exemplifies a trend that has become evident over the course of this analysis, that religion and/or adjacent subjects are often brought up in

contexts that are concerned with educating students about social realities of various kinds. Readers may recall that this was in some sense expected from the outset of this study and played a significant role in the selection of the curriculum documents that are under examination here. In many such instances, we see religion or an adjacent subject being mentioned as part of the main text of one or more content expectations, which is to say that discussion of the topic in the classroom is being mandated. Generally speaking, it is not difficult to see the relevance of religion to these kinds of subject matter conversations.

There are, however, educational subjects to which discussion of religion may be considered potentially relevant, but not necessarily so. It is not especially surprising to find, for example, that a course on Civics and Citizenship (Grade 10) would not mandate that religion be discussed in relation to that topic; Canada's formal political institutions are secular, even if our politics, culture and society are not always nearly as so. Likewise for Politics in Action: Making Change (Grade 11), a course on political engagement in the Canadian and World Studies 11-12 curriculum, where we do not see religion (or any of the other search terms selected for use in this analysis) mentioned in any of the mandatory content expectations. It is not that religion is irrelevant to discussions of civics, citizenship, or political engagement writ large, but rather that in relation to a society like Canada's, it isn't strictly necessary for it to be brought up. In the case of subjects such as these, it may not be possible to determine whether or not religion (or an adjacent subject) should be discussed solely on the basis of the primary topic of discussion considered in the abstract.

In such instances, the inclusion of references to religion in the examples and sample questions (as opposed to the main text of a given content expectation) gives teachers the latitude to determine whether or not to bring religion up in class. As mentioned earlier, Ontario high

school teachers are expected to "ensure that all students – regardless of culture, religious affiliation, gender, class, or sexual orientation – feel included and recognized in all learning activities and discussions" (p. 55, Canadian and World Studies 11-12)⁶¹. When teaching on subjects where the pertinence of religion to the discussion is latent or potential in nature, whether or not teachers mention or initiate a discussion about religion could end up being determined by the demographic composition of their class. Consider, for example, content expectation B1.1 from the aforementioned course on political engagement, which states that students will:

B1.1 identify some agents of political socialization (*e.g., the family, public education, religious institutions, the media, peers, personal experience, political/ social organizations*), and analyse how these agents affect their own personal political beliefs and engagement and the beliefs and engagement of others (p. 518)

The above content expectation does not in any way require that religion be discussed in relation to the primary topic of political socialization. However, the italicized examples make it clear that consideration of religion as an agent of political socialization is a perfectly valid avenue of exploration if the teacher happens to find it useful for engaging with their students on the topic. The theme of Politics, therefore, illustrates why we cannot judge the way in which Ontario secondary schools do or do not teach about religion strictly from an examination of the curriculum's mandatory expectations (i.e. those things that teachers are not given a choice about whether or not to teach). There is certainly a sense in which these content expectations establish the minimum of what we can (or at least should be able to) expect that teachers are teaching students. But they cannot be taken to constitute the full extent of what is being taught. Rather than mandating that teachers talk about religion in relation to a given primary subject, what we

⁶¹ Similar statements can be found in the "Equity and Inclusive Education" sections of each of the curriculum documents under examination in this study.

see in a great many instances is that the curriculum is teeing up the shot, leaving it to the teacher's discretion as to whether and how to engage with religion based on the exercise of their professional judgement.

The substance and regularity of such “optional” conversations about religion (and associated subjects) in Ontario high school classrooms is something which a study of the present kind can neither capture nor estimate. However, it does suggest something that is interesting and, for those who regard substantive, broad based pedagogical engagement with religion by public schools as a good thing, encouraging. Whatever the present study may conclude about how religion is represented by the Ontario secondary school curriculum, the integration of teaching about religion into the overall Ontario high school experience is likely to be more extensive than that in practice. The mandatory content expectations examined in this analysis set a kind of minimum standard for engagement with religion by teachers in the classroom, not a maximum limit. Other elements of the curriculum's design are clearly intended to facilitate conversation beyond that minimum.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Summary and Interpretation of Findings

This study began by asking the following research question: How is religion represented in the current Ontario secondary school curriculum? In addition, the following three sub-questions were put forward to guide the investigation:

1. In what subject areas, if any, are issues of religion (including faith and spirituality) represented?
2. What is the relative distribution of references to religion across the curriculum?
3. When religion is discussed but is not the primary subject of a course, how is it discussed and what relevance is it considered to have to the course topic under examination?

Given the results presented in the previous chapters, what answers can be given for these questions? Regarding the identification of subject areas in relation to which we can find matters of religion being represented in the Ontario secondary school curriculum, a straightforward response would be to state that we can find discussion of religion (or what has been classified for the purposes of this study as a religion-adjacent subject) mandated in the content expectations of courses concerned with the following broad subject areas: Geography, Politics, History, Art, English⁶², Indigenous Studies, Equity Studies, Cultural Studies/Anthropology, Philosophy, and Religious Studies⁶³. A more precise answer, however, is that across the mandatory content expectations of the various documents surveyed by this study and outside those courses which

⁶² I am referring here to the English courses contained within the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies curriculum, not the Ontario secondary school system's English curriculum (which was not included in the data set for this study).

⁶³ Readers are reminded that content related to the Ontario secondary school curriculum's world religions courses was not considered in this study.

are dedicated to the study of religion (i.e. world religions), the curriculum engages with religion and adjacent subjects primarily in relation to the topics of history and culture, with less frequent but still notable engagement in relation to identity, the environment, art and politics. The curriculum thus represents religion as being in some sense relevant to discussion of each of these six topics, enough that such engagement has been mandated at multiple points across the curriculum.

The relative distribution of references to religion and adjacent subjects across the examined documents, however, adds some important context to the above. The vast majority of references in the documents overall were found to be located in curricular examples and sample questions, which constitute non-mandatory (though hardly unimportant) content intended to assist teachers with their lesson planning. Though not examined in a detailed manner as part of this study, I can confirm that many of these example/sample question references are located in courses which were not identified as engaging with religion in their mandatory content expectations. The placement of a reference to religion in a curricular example/sample question does not in any way guarantee that a classroom discussion on the subject of religion will end up taking place, but it can be said to encourage that outcome; this is especially true for examples, which are intended to help teachers interpret mandatory content expectations. What this means is that whatever baseline of mandated classroom engagement with religion that the results of this study may be said to have laid out, the overall potential for classroom engagement with religious matters that the Ontario secondary school curriculum actively facilitates appears to extend well beyond that. Not only does the curriculum actively facilitate teachers mentioning religion more than they “have to” in a given course, but in several instances, it facilitates teachers mentioning religion in courses where they do not have to bring religion (or adjacent subjects) up at all.

With respect to the Ontario secondary school curriculum overall, therefore, we can say that the curriculum represents religion and/or religion-related matters as being decidedly relevant to the study of a range of different topics throughout the domain of social studies education. This stands in sharp contrast to what I expected to find when I first embarked upon this investigation. Assumptions born of my experiences as a student in independent Christian schools and my particular church community upbringing (among other influences about which I could conjecture) led me to believe a priori that Ontario public schools were deficient in their approach to teaching about religion. While the descriptive nature of the present study does not provide me with a solid basis for repudiating this belief outright, I see now that the Ontario high school curriculum cannot be fairly charged with an overt neglect of education about religion. In both world religions and several of the other course types that the curriculum contains, engagement with religion and related subjects is simply, unquestionably there.

Where exactly that engagement takes place, however, matters a great deal. As has been mentioned, the Ontario public education system does not require that students receive any social studies education past the Grade 10 level in order to graduate from high school. Within the framework of assumptions underpinning the selection of curriculum documents for this study⁶⁴, this means that the only mandated engagement which students are required to have with religion over the course of their high school education will be found within the courses that make up the Canadian and World Studies 9-10 curricular block. And that is precious little. With the exception of two debatable instances in the course Civics and Citizenship (see page 63-64), there is no engagement with religion or any adjacent subject in the mandatory content expectations of Canadian and World Studies 9-10. Further, the Canadian and World Studies 9-10 course

⁶⁴ These are 1) that education about religion is most likely to take place in the context of social studies and 2) that the documents selected for this study make up, functionally, the Ontario high school social studies curriculum.

Canadian History since World War I (Grade 10), which constitutes both the only mandatory history course in the Ontario secondary school curriculum and the highest level of history education that graduates of Ontario's public education system are expected to have received, does not engage with religion or any adjacent subject in any of its content expectations, examples or sample questions.

Insofar as mandatory teaching elements are concerned, the Ontario high school curriculum's broad-based engagement with religion may be said to take place entirely within courses that students are not required to take. As a subject of inquiry, therefore, the Ontario secondary school curriculum represents religion as a worthy but fundamentally optional element of a high school education. Furthermore, by its complete omission from curricula concerning the history of Canada as a nation since 1945, religion is represented as having no bearing on the principle thrust of Canadian history over the last three generations (at least). These two elements ("worthy but optional" and "effective irrelevance to recent Canadian national history") may be considered as core findings of the present study. Had this project gone the way that I expected it to, they would constitute the summary of its major results. There is, however, a third significant result which caught me completely by surprise, that being the curriculum's manner of engagement with quasi-religious matters in relation to Indigenous Canadian cultures.

When I decided to examine the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (2019) curriculum as part of this study, I did not expect that it would play such a substantial role in the analysis. I included it on a hunch, that being that since spirituality is a meaningful element of Indigenous Canadian cultures (to the extent that I was aware of them), there would likely be some discussion of matters that could be considered at least quasi-religious and that would therefore be relevant to my research question. I did this, however, for the purpose of rounding out my data set – I fully

expected Canadian and World Studies 11-12 and Social Sciences and Humanities 9-12 to provide the most significant contributions to the analysis by a wide margin. What actually happened was that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies provided some of the most thought-provoking information of all.

The manner in which religion-adjacent subjects are represented in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies raised questions about the boundaries of what constitutes religious education. Spirituality, as well as other matters which might reasonably be considered to be quasi-religious, are represented as being integral components of Indigenous Canadian cultures, with examination of multiple sites within the curriculum showing that the distinctive term “world view” is frequently employed as an analogue for such things. However, the use of “world view” was not restricted to this sense, with an examination of the term’s overall usage producing the informal definition that a world view is an abstract emanation of a particular culture that articulates and embodies a distinctive way of thinking about and interpreting reality. As employed within First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies, “world view” appears to be conceptually distinct from culture, religion, and spirituality, all the while being adjacent to (and, depending on the context, partially overlapping with) all three. In First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies, therefore, religion-adjacent topics are represented as important matters which are of a nature that, whether due to their substance or to the context in which they are being discussed (i.e. Indigenous Canadian cultures), renders the language of “religion/religious” unsuitable for describing them. With Indigenous cultures serving as the overarching topic of concern in this particular curriculum, religion-adjacent subjects are represented as being embedded in culture⁶⁵ and (whether on their own or

⁶⁵ Recall how in the Social Sciences and Humanities course World Cultures (Grade 12), religion was framed as being in some sense derivative of culture, and how similar thinking seems to be reflected in the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies curriculum’s use of “world view”.

through their relationship to culture) connected to subjects such as the environment and art. Indeed, the relationship between culture, quasi-religious matters, and the environment is represented as being of particular importance for Canada's Indigenous peoples.

Closely linked to the curriculum's engagement with Indigenous spirituality is the apparent foregrounding of discussion of religion and adjacent subjects when the curriculum is engaging with specific cultural identities (though not all such identities). This was found to be present in at least three ways. First is the Grade 12 World Cultures course, where there is an examination of religion and spirituality in the context of particular cultural groups from around the world. Second is the way in which religion/spirituality is discussed in relation to the development of the cultural identities of one or more Canadian ethnic groups (i.e. Grade 11 *Origins and Citizenship: The History of a Canadian Ethnic Group*), yet is strangely neglected in discussions of the contemporary history of Canada as a whole. Third, there is the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies curriculum itself, which represents an extensive engagement with the spirituality and quasi-religious beliefs/practices of a very specific collection of cultural groups. The frequent pairing of culture and religion, therefore, is not just a feature of how religion is discussed within the broader Ontario high school curriculum. There is also a sense in which the religions/spiritualities of some cultures (primarily First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, but also to a lesser extent those of non-Indigenous Canadians descended from ethnic groups other than those of the early Western European colonizers) are represented as being worthy of more curricular "airtime" than those of other groups.

One wonders why this might be and a possible answer is suggested by the cyclical and inherently political nature of curriculum development. Readers are reminded that the curricula examined in this study, while all in current use within the Ontario secondary school system, were

published over a six-year time span (the oldest being *Social Sciences and Humanities 9-12* (2013) and the most recent being *First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies 9-12* (2019)). They must therefore be assumed to have been influenced (at least potentially) by different sets of political pressures during their respective periods of development. The development of the current First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies curriculum (known in previous iterations as “Native Studies”) in particular was no doubt driven by the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission final report, which was published in 2015 and made clear that public education systems across Canada had a lot of work to do in order to better educate young Canadians about the histories, cultures, and lived realities of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. The overall curriculum’s heavy tilt towards engagement with spiritualities emanating from specifically First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures (over and above attention given to other cultural groups in this regard) may be due to the Ontario Ministry of Education’s need to respond to the political (as well as moral) demands of the moment vis-à-vis the TRC, rather than being evidence of a concerted strategy for how religion/spirituality should be treated across the Ontario high school curriculum as a whole. Whatever the case may be, this aspect of the present state of representation of religion by the Ontario secondary school curriculum must surely be thought of as more than a little ironic in view of the subject’s history. Prior to the Ontario Court of Appeal’s 1990 decision in *Elgin County*, Ontario public schools operated according to a policy of mandatory, confessional RE that privileged the religion of the province’s white, English-speaking majority (i.e. Protestant Christianity). Three decades later, the Ontario secondary school system’s policy of essentially optional, non-confessional RE appears, at least at the curricular level, to sideline that very same group, with the spiritualities of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples elevated (at least for now) to a position of noticeable priority.

With regard to the general literature on religious education reviewed in Chapter One of this study, what broad approach to RE might the Ontario high school curriculum's representation of religion be said to suggest? Recall that there are essentially two rationales for the practice of non-confessional RE in public schools – one regarding education about religion as a valuable means of facilitating students' intellectual and existential development, and another viewing RE as an important element of modern citizenship education. It is possible to construe the Ontario curriculum's engagement with religion as described in this study as a means of (or opportunity for) facilitating students' personal development, particularly if one thinks along the lines of Nel Noddings' (1993) model of using conversations about religion as launching points for discussing philosophical, existential, and social questions that are relevant to students' lives (see page 13 of the present study). I refer here to the plentiful references to religion and adjacent subjects found within the curriculum's examples and sample questions; there appear to be a lot of potential launching points on offer, though it must be remembered that such are being made available to teachers and not necessarily to their students. A much better fit for what has been found, however, is the notion of RE conceived of as citizenship education.

To begin with, the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies 9-12 and Canadian and World Studies 11-12 curricula (where a great deal of engagement with religion and spirituality takes place) both explicitly state that they are intended to be vehicles for citizenship education⁶⁶. In Canadian and World Studies 11-12, there is a clear effort being made to help students understand the way in which religion has shaped both contemporary global history and the historical development of Canada's closest and most culturally, economically, and militarily important neighbor. This would seem to align well with the argument for RE as a method for building

⁶⁶ References to the Ontario secondary school curriculum's citizenship education framework can be found on p. 10-11 of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies and on p. 12-13 of Canadian and World Studies 11-12.

students' social awareness, helping them to make sense of the influence of religion in areas such as global affairs (Sears, 2013), as well as with RE as a means of encouraging social toleration through the explicit acknowledgement of the significance of religious identity in many people's lives (Patrick 2015a; Sweet, 1997). In First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies, an emphasis on the detailed exploration of Indigenous spirituality and (in particular) world views brings to mind arguments made by Rosenblith and Bailey (2008) for RE as a means of building students' capacity for nuanced and empathetic understanding of the religious (or in this case, spiritual and/or cultural) other. The Grade 12 World Cultures course in Social Sciences and Humanities 9-12 could also be thought of as belonging in this vein, with its explicit emphasis on having students analyze religious and spiritual beliefs associated with cultures from around the world. Though none of the courses out of which these conversations take place are specifically about religion, engagement with religion and adjacent subjects with a mind towards shaping students' social sensibilities certainly does appear to be part of the point.

With regard to the political implications of the practice of RE in publicly funded schools (a public-school curriculum's approach to religion-related instruction itself being a statement by political authorities of how and whether religion should be thought to matter), the results of this study bring to mind the question of whether education about religion needs to exist as a dedicated program (with its own separate suite of courses) in order to be done well. Leaving aside the matter of how exactly the quality of a given curriculum's approach to religious education should be evaluated, the question of the appropriate level of integration of religion with publicly funded education is politically controversial. In Ontario, the present arrangement of permitting secular public schools to offer optional education about religion while allowing mandatory confessional religious education in Roman Catholic schools (which are also publicly

funded) appears to be acceptable to the general public, although the events of the 2007 Ontario provincial election may be taken to suggest that there is tension lying beneath the surface of public opinion on the issue of religion and education more broadly⁶⁷. Indeed, one wonders what the political reaction would be if the Ontario Ministry of Education reversed its stance on the optionality of education about religion and instituted a mandatory program along the lines of Quebec's Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) curriculum. In Quebec, having RE delivered even through strictly non-confessional means has proven to be a difficult pill to swallow for a substantial (or at the very least politically influential) segment of the population. Could there be some virtue, politically or otherwise, in keeping non-confessional religious education discretely embedded in curricula that are primarily focused on engagement with other subjects, such as citizenship education or social studies?

In suggesting this, I do not mean to imply that public schools should in any way hide the fact that they are teaching students about religion. I simply wish to point out that, as the results of the present study demonstrate, it is quite possible to educate students about religion without having to do so under the banner of a religion course. Further, as has been illustrated through excerpts from Ontario's First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies curriculum for Grades 9 to 12, it is possible to engage with what might be considered some of the substance of religion (e.g. philosophical outlook, spirituality, culture) under the banner of less historically loaded terms like "world view". In the presence of political ambivalence concerning the relationship between religion and public education at the institutional and/or curricular level, might it not be advantageous for education about religion to be pursued in a way that doesn't make a big deal of

⁶⁷ To repeat footnote #6 (page 5), the question of whether or not to extend public funding already provided to Roman Catholic schools to educational institutions operated by other religious groups (e.g. Protestants, Muslims, Jews) is widely regarded as having determined the course of the 2007 Ontario provincial election (Sears, 2007; Van Arragon, 2015b).

the fact that we are teaching specifically about religion? Whatever the answer to that question, the Ontario secondary school curriculum presents an example of RE being done in this way.

Opportunities for Further Research

The present study's findings suggest multiple avenues for further research. To begin with, there is a need to contextualize the representation of religion in the Ontario secondary school curriculum within a similar understanding of the representation of religion in Ontario's primary school curriculum. In most cases, students arrive in Ontario high schools having already completed 8+ years of primary school education; it seems reasonable to expect that the construction of the secondary school curriculum would consider what has already been taught in earlier years. Coupled with an analysis of the supplementary confessional religious education curricula in use by Ontario's publicly funded Roman Catholic schools, a study of the primary school curriculum would permit the development of a coordinated understanding of the representation of religion across the Ontario public school curriculum as a whole. With a comprehensive picture in hand, it would then be possible to ask more global questions, such as whether the representation of religion in the Ontario public school curriculum is adequate by scholarly standards of one sort or another, as well as how the Ontario system's approach compares (whether descriptively or critically) on a broader level to the approaches of other provinces, territories, and nations around the world.

Next, the limitations of the analysis of curriculum documents as a means of understanding how religious education is conducted in public schools (a point which has been articulated several times over the course of this study) would seem to call for a greater understanding, at least on the part of this researcher, of the relationship between curriculum structure/content and classroom teaching practice. What is the impact of the Ontario secondary

school curriculum's examples and sample questions relative to that of the mandatory content expectations on teacher lesson planning? How and to what extent do Ontario high school teachers adjust their teaching approach in response to the demographic composition (particularly with respect to religious diversity) of their class? While I expect that a wealth of academic literature has already been produced on more general versions of these questions, it would be interesting to examine them specifically in the context of education about religion⁶⁸.

A third opportunity would be to follow up on this study's findings with respect to the representation of religion in Canadian history courses. Is there something amiss, broadly speaking, about a curriculum discussing contemporary Canadian history without reference to the role/place/influence of religion? If so, is there necessarily anything wrong with religion not being mentioned in the official curriculum documents themselves when the topic could be referenced in supporting materials, such as textbooks? Is there perhaps something about the construction of history as a school subject (as distinguished from other areas of study with which courses outside the history curriculum may be associated), or the way in which material drawn from various sources of historical knowledge and expertise has been appropriated to construct the narrative of Canadian history presented by the Ontario secondary school curriculum, which biases the overall discussion away from engagement with religion? It would certainly be interesting to see, at a minimum, how Ontario's representation of religion in this context compares with that of comparable history courses taught in other Canadian provinces.

There is also the matter of the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies curriculum's engagement with quasi-religious matters under the banners of "spirituality" and "world view", which should be interrogated. This could be done with respect to the language itself, examining

⁶⁸ Though not precisely on this topic, articles on teacher professional education and practice in the context of religious education have been published by Margaretta Patrick (2017) and Mireille Estivalèzes (2017).

distinctions between religion and spirituality, as well as between those two concepts and that of “world view”. Studies could also be conducted to examine the appropriateness of the use of concepts such as “religion”, “spirituality” and “world view” when educating high school students about Indigenous Canadian cultures, taking into account all of the historical and political complexities associated with the study of these cultures and the education of Canadians about them. Given the revelations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and resultant recommendation that Canadian public schools educate about Indigenous spirituality as well as religious traditions more generally, this would seem to be an area in which religious education scholars could advance knowledge in their field while at the same time contributing to an issue of public concern.

Finally, underlying many of these suggestions is a more fundamental variety of research that has been overlooked in the present study. Due to it coming to my attention too late in the writing process to be given substantial treatment here, the present work neglects to contextualize and integrate its findings into the broader academic conversation concerning the socially constructed nature of school subjects (Goodson, 1987; Goodson, 2000; Siskin, 2013; Popkewitz, 2018)⁶⁹. By this, I refer to the way in which school subjects (e.g. history, literature, social studies) are not so much naturally occurring bodies of knowledge and study, but rather (or at least, in addition) “social artefact[s], conceived of and made for deliberate human purposes” (Goodson, 1987, p. 260). One might even go so far as to say that, although conceptual in nature, school subjects behave like social systems, competing with one another “for power, prestige, recognition and reward.” (Hargreaves, 1989, p. 56) It is a basic truth about ideas (and collections

⁶⁹ I was made aware of this area of academic literature by Professor Andy Hargreaves, who due to unforeseen circumstances joined my thesis advisory committee after I had already begun analyzing the selected curricula. By that point, the research proposal had been approved months before and the study’s literature review had already undergone an extensive rewrite.

thereof) that they become reconceptualized over time, changing their shape, content, and relationships with other ideas (including relations of status⁷⁰) in response to historical events and the influence of prevailing social/political discourses. An illustration of this reality with respect to RE as a school subject can be seen in the circumstances surrounding the implementation (as well as potential future abolition) of the ERC curriculum, as discussed in Chapter One.

The ERC curriculum was part of Quebec's transition away from a long history of denominational (i.e. religiously oriented) public schooling, a consequence of the Quiet Revolution's decoupling of the province's political institutions from religious authority and influence. Implemented under a Liberal government (which perhaps accounts for the program's cosmopolitan flavor) and in place for well over a decade at the time of this writing, we find that the ERC and education about religion generally are now under threat by the populist/nationalist (as well as avowedly secularist) government of the reigning CAQ (Coalition Avenir Québec) party. It is difficult not to detect an alignment between changes over time in the way religion was/is/could soon be understood and positioned within Quebec's public education system and the changing of the political guard. Should the CAQ government proceed with its intent to abolish the ERC (which it announced in early 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic began to monopolize its attention over the intervening period) and replace it with a curriculum which may contain no deliberate focus on religion at all, the status of RE amongst other school subjects in Quebec will have shifted from perhaps the highest point it could possibly reach (i.e. mandatory

⁷⁰ For evidence of this, one has only to think of the relative decline in social standing of the academic discipline of theology over the preceding centuries. Though once considered the "queen of the sciences" and unquestionably a hub of immense intellectual sophistication even today (to have pursued graduate studies in theology would, in my experience, mean having a solid understanding of both philosophy and history, as well as the ability to read in at least 3 languages), a theological education no longer confers a degree of social standing competitive with what one might enjoy from saying you are a medical doctor, lawyer, scientist, or civil servant (though probably still more than saying that you are a politician).

across all grade levels) to the ignominy of being labelled a relic of the past. If this transition occurs, it seems unlikely that it will be due to of any change in the “substance” of religion as a topic of study, in the sense of new information having been uncovered that forces a change in our collective understanding of religion as an objective social phenomenon. Rather, it will be because the positioning of RE as a mandatory (i.e. high status) school subject is no longer seen as useful to the powers that be, with the opposite in fact having become the case.

A key finding of the present study was the essential optionality of non-confessional RE within the Ontario secondary school system, a characteristic that speaks to the relative status of RE as a school subject within Ontario’s curricular ecosystem. The present curricular arrangement would seem to deliver RE a sort of backhanded compliment, implying that education about religion is worthwhile, but not to the extent that anyone need lose sleep over someone not receiving it. To properly understand the curricular and broader sociological significance of this stance, the integration of the present study’s findings into an historical understanding of curricular composition, construction and change in the province of Ontario (particularly with respect to RE as a school subject) is required. In particular, it needs to be understood just what a school subject being made either optional or compulsory really means, as well as what factors might have led the Ontario Ministry of Education to take the curricular stances that it did both in the aftermath of *Elgin County* and to the present time. Indeed, it would be interesting to examine the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies curriculum (both with respect to its representation of Indigenous spirituality/world view and in general) in light of this sort of understanding; in spite of the TRC’s recommendation that education about Indigenous peoples be made mandatory

across all grade levels, this particular collection of courses remains entirely optional within the Ontario secondary school curriculum⁷¹.

Conclusion

Of all that has been noted in this study on religious education in the province of Ontario, what is most clear to me now is that more knowledge is needed. Though I was far from unbiased in my perspective when I began this project (and cannot be said to be now, as I have wrestled with my assumptions and motivations continuously throughout the research and writing process), I have been careful to make this a descriptive rather than a critical study. My original desire was to pass judgment on the Ontario public education system for its neglect of a subject that I considered to be of paramount importance to life; I now see religion's importance, as well as the notion of its neglect in the Ontario high school curriculum, as being in essence questionable. I am also much less interested in judging and have come to believe that my investment in particular states of affairs (i.e. the desire to see reality conform to my preconceptions and biases) hampers my ability to think clearly. Indeed, I've become something of a partisan for dispassionate thinking, reminding myself regularly of the advice given to the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius by his tutor "not to become a Green or Blue supporter at the races, or side with the Lights or Heavies in the amphitheater" (p. 3, 2016). Such an attitude may leave me with fewer answers about which to pontificate, but it has made me a better thinker and, in the long run I hope, a better person.

⁷¹I refer here specifically to TRC Call to Action #62, which among other items calls on Canadian governments to "make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade Twelve students". In fairness to the Ontario Ministry of Education, it should be noted that at the time of this writing, the ministry's website indicates that both the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Studies 9-12 and Indigenous Languages 9-12 curricula are undergoing cyclical review; this is interesting, given that the most recent edition of the former has been in effect only since September 2019.

That is not to suggest, however, that I am of the view that learning about religion does not matter. To learn about religion is to learn about people, a study that is inherently worth pursuing. Religion is part of how many of us make sense of our lives; for many more, it influences our experience of life whether we want it to or not. In these ways at the least, religion matters and we should all take the time to learn something about it. To speak of learning about religion and religious education, however, is to speak of two different animals. In the context of primary/secondary education, RE is not reducible to a mere exercise in learning about religion; whatever its goals or methods, it constitutes a deliberate, structured attempt to shape the awareness and sensibilities of young people. It is therefore worthy of all the questioning, critical analysis and reflection we can muster, including on the foundational matter of whether publicly funded schools should be doing it at all. At the same time, we must also be willing to ask if it is really possible for public schools to deliver a good quality basic education without discussing religion (as well as related concepts such as spirituality or worldview) in a contextually appropriate fashion.

Whatever one thinks about the practice of religious education (in both its confessional and non-confessional varieties), the fact remains that Ontario's public education system is doing it. Ontario's public high schools offer a range of courses that educate about religion, both as a discrete subject and in relation to wider discussions of history and culture, while leaving it up to individual students to decide whether or not to take them. In Ontario's Roman Catholic high schools, students are given the same choice as in the public high schools while also receiving supplementary, mandatory religious education taught from a Roman Catholic standpoint (i.e. confessional RE). It does no good not to talk about any of this, as doing so leaves us ignorant of an area of public policy. And it does no good to talk about an area of public policy in ignorance.

The more that can be known about the practice of RE in Ontario public education (including the school system's engagement with notions of spirituality and worldview, whether Indigenous or otherwise), the better equipped all of us will be to answer one of the most important questions that can be asked by the citizens of a democratic country: are we ok with this?

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